Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Interview: Poet and Photographer, Justin Hamm

Jeffrey Alfier · Wednesday, March 6th, 2019

Jeffrey Alfier: *You and I share the same aesthetic when it comes to photography, how we seek the abandoned, forlorn, rundown places, the rusted out and the broken-down. And yet, not everything that meets our cameras' eyes is in a state of deliquescence or twilight. I find similitude in what Larry Levis said in 'The Gazer Within' about landscapes and poetry. What he wrote concerning them was intensively visual. As with the poet, the photographer of solitary, silenced, abandoned, wayworn and defeated places finds that "an intimacy occurs, surely and obliquely," a connection with "human fertility within time," whereby "some delicate linkage is preserved between past and present." What do you feel about these connections, these linkages, when you are out seeking the kinds of things and places you've captured on camera?*

Justin Hamm: First, Jeff, let me say thanks for the chance to discuss photography with you. We do share deep similarities in our aesthetic, and it makes me curious as to what you're curious about. This idea of how past and present connect is one I puzzle over endlessly when I'm out stomping through the muddy Midwestern landscapes that end up in my photos. Now that I'm proficient with the camera and light and think less about the mechanics of what I'm doing, I find myself reacting to and wrestling with time and change at a gut level. There are so many layers of meaning and connection to consider. In one sense my subjects–old barns, cars, farm equipment, trains–are a testament to the sturdiness of the American past, a reminder of what we have lost over time. These aren't just material losses. They're losses of spirit. The artifacts that remain are soulful, strong, and sincere. They inspire through their refusal to fully rust through, collapse, or decay. Their mere continued existence preserves the million stories that live inside each of them. That's what I'm feeling when I'm out on a good shoot. I have to wonder what iconic artifacts from this era could ever stand up as these have.

But at the same time, there's always contradiction. The very stubbornness of the American past, and especially the American mythos, that makes these landscapes and objects seem so solemn and starkly beautiful, are often a hindrance to growth. Which is why I usually end up with more questions than answers after a long session out with the camera. I imagine you understand where I'm coming from?

JA: *Thank you, Justin. I believe that the wrestling with time and change, and the layers of meaning and connection are at the heart – indeed the depth of what we do — why we are out there in what are very often places most would consider austere or even boring. But for us, as you so aptly and succinctly put it, it is in such places we find artifacts soulful, strong and sincere. So much comes to*

mind when I reflect on what you've said here. I recall back in 2012, when I visited my daughter and grandson in Maryland, that on one particular day my daughter was driving me to my grandson's school to pick him up, and we made a turn by an abandoned wooden train station. I looked at it with incredulity – was I really seeing such a thing? – or was my daughter just waiting for it to fall within my view. We had to stop and get out. It was surrounded by a fence and had the shreds of a blue tarp over it but it thoroughly captured me. I thought of all the people who must have transited that station over the decades – those "million stories" you mentioned. I perceive the same thing when visiting old train stations in the South, even when many of them are no longer active train stations but markets and offices. But it's not just the stations; like you, the railroads and trains give me that sense of transience, or movement.

That rather ambient search for stories, the wonder that possesses us as not only photographers, but as poets, has always been with me. In high school, I recall the abandoned military installations in forests around where we lived in New Jersey, especially a WW II era base called Camp Kilmer, no longer there. I remember how you could walk for blocks on Kilmer and see rows and rows of empty barracks where thousands of men and women lived and passed through during the war years. In recent years, I've walked through the former Bethlehem Steel plant on Terminal Island, a few miles from where I live in Torrance, amazed how thousands of people worked the plant during the war, producing forty-some destroyers. But not just that plant – thousands also worked the Star Kist and other fisheries on the island at one time, this manmade island now sparsely populated. And again, the same kinds of wonder captured me wandering abandoned auto plants in Detroit. Like you, I sensed that loss of spirit. Nowadays, I feel the same material and spirit loss in the small towns I frequent in American deserts. You walk the main streets full of vacant businesses and few people.

Levis also alluded to the fact that through the momentary scrutiny of the camera, the universal resonates with the viewer. That is, a resonation exists between past and present, between a distant corner of a Midwest farm and, say, a similar scene for someone in central Europe. Perceptions overlap, meld; so much of the visual is transience loaded with subtexts. How do you feel your photos relate to the viewer?

JH: At one level, these are really personal pictures depicting the landscape where I grew up, and I'd be dishonest if I said I had a particular viewer in mind when I took them. They are always for me first a way to examine and relate to my home territory. But I believe these images carry within them ideas and emotions that should be immediately recognizable. A farm or a barn is usually going to call back to our shared agricultural past. A train will likely project a sense or arriving or leaving. An old dilapidated house implies a universal story of family struggle, perhaps even failure. Rust is going to bring to mind the immutable passage of time. Particular locations and subjects of these photos matter a great deal to me as a Midwesterner. But they are hinting at stories anyone can engage with as a human being because these kind of stories happen everywhere.

***JA:** Like you, I never have a particular viewer in mind, though I know that many of the things I've been fortunate enough to capture – the people too, like an old man by himself in a small town café – will be liked by Facebook friends and members of my family. Rarely do my photos concern my own past or family history, yet they are not far off. My parents and brothers moved to New Jersey from Virginia in 1968, and three of my brothers and my dad still live there. Yet it's only been in the last few years that I've sought to explore places and towns around where we lived, explore them*

for the same kinds of things I've captured elsewhere. A fishing shack on a Jersey coast backwater bears a striking thematic kinship with a shack I've found in the middle of the Mojave or Sonoran Deserts. An abandoned show factory in New Jersey has a similar evocation with a foundry in Detroit.

Photographer Jay Maisel, author of It's Not About the F-Stop*, counseled "Never go back. Shoot it now. When you come back, it will always be different." Is this something that enters you're thinking when you are out shooting photographs?*

JH: When the perfect combination of light and scenery come together, or if I am traveling somewhere I am not likely to visit again soon, then I stop no matter what. Road trips with me always have the possibility of turning into an impromptu photo shoot. Here's the thing: it might be an inconvenient detour or put you at a risk for tardiness, but if the ensuing picture turns out to be something that lasts, then you'll appreciate what you captured long after the silly little tasks of a single day cease to matter. I really believe that.

***JA**: I can certainly relate to those inconvenient detours, how they end up giving us a trove of photos, or even that single photo that makes the entire trip worth a long day on back roads – the money shot, as it were. As you say, what we capture proves salient in the ordinariness of a given day. We often ask ourselves, what the hell am I doing out here?, but our cameras give testimony through the images we've captured that it was all worth it.*

Oftentimes, I get angry with myself for not turning around and driving or walking back somewhere to capture a scene or a person I'd passed. Occasionally, there are legitimate reasons not to turn back, such as trying to take a photo of a rusted truck or classic car or a falling wooden barn because they are on peopled property. I often fear that someone will think I'm casing the joint. I'm especially careful when I'm out in the country. But that's why there are telephoto lenses. They certainly help. Before I go on trips, I research small towns and rural areas, especially with Google street maps, where I can scout-out the kinds of things we share an interest in. I find myself saying, "God, I hope that is still there!" – usually referring to a junk yard full of 50's trucks, or abandoned diners and gas stations, or railroad spurs that lead into open fields, especially like the one in the photo you so graciously let us have for the fall issue of San Pedro River Review.

JH: Jeff, one thing you touched on earlier that interests me is your photographs of people, especially in diners, bars, and places of this sort. I really admire the candids you capture. I am always left with the feeling I want to meet these people. I don't do portraiture or street photography myself because I am trying to isolate the Midwestern landscape and allow the viewer to provide the human element. Do you approach photographing people and landscapes or objects differently?

***JA**: Thank you for the good words on my capture of people, Justin. What I seek in photographs of people is their raw humanity, caught in a still, albeit fleeting moment. On your Midwestern photographs, I fully perceive how the scenes you catch allow the viewer to provide the human element. I've found myself providing this element when I view your photos on Facebook – especially the ancient farm buildings and the shot of the empty work glove: I think of who lived there, who persisted with the farm versus who left forever; on the glove, what attentive hand labored with what tool to perform which tasks.*

As for my approach to shooting landscapes and people, my approach is only technical: the landscapes are usually captured in paused and attentive moments, whereas the people are captured in a furtive manner, since most of the photos are taken with my phone, meaning that I pretend I'm making a phone call and can't hear, looking down at my phone while the photo mode is on, and I pretend to redial when I'm actually snapping the photo. This prevents an otherwise embarrassing moment of intrusion

JH: Jeff, it has been fabulous swapping ideas with you, my friend. I'll leave you with this private confession. Sometimes a backroads landscape can be so much like a character to me that I actually feel that sense of intrusion you hint at even without humans around. It is as if only ghosts are welcome in these places, and they spook me, not because I'm afraid of someone coming along and harming me but because the sense of history and haunting is so palpable that I feel sure I shouldn't be there. In those cases, I don't feel comfortable spreading out and doing a full shoot. I don't take leisurely shots of every architectural detail. Instead, I try to sneak in a few shots and move on.

Justin Hamm's latest book is a collection of photographs, *Midwestern.*, forthcoming from Spartan Press. He is also the author of two full-length books of poems, *American Ephemeral* and *Lessons in Ruin*, and two poetry chapbooks. Justin's photographs have earned a twelve-page, full-color feature in *San Pedro River Review* and the Inkslinger Award from *Buffalo Almanack*. His first solo exhibition took place in the fall of 2017 in Columbia, Missouri; further exhibitions are scheduled for the Mississippi River Gallery in Hannibal, Missouri, and Normal Public Library in Normal, Illinois.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, March 6th, 2019 at 8:59 pm and is filed under Photography, Poetry
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