

Travels

Photographs by Chris Porter

University Lutheran Church, Cambridge, MA

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Artist's Statement

As an avid hiker and outdoorsperson, most of my subject matter involves the natural world. I have progressed from traditional landscapes to an increasing focus on abstract elements such as rock, wood, and especially water. I am fascinated by the patterns found in nature and the power that these patterns can take when isolated. This exhibit focuses largely on my older, more traditional work, including landscapes from my travels in the American West and elsewhere. It also provides a glimpse into new directions that I am taking; in particular, applying the technique of inversion to transform nature's patterns into surprising and very different images.

A Brief History

I have been taking pictures ever since my grandparents gave me a Kodak Instamatic camera for Christmas at age 10. My first photographs were of the Christmas tree and the bleak winter landscape looking out the car window on the drive back from Minneapolis to Milwaukee.

I eventually graduated to a Vivitar 35mm point-and-shoot. In high school I acquired my first SLR – an Olympus OM-PC – which served me well in graduate school in California on frequent hiking trips around the state, and even into Utah and Canada. When this eventually wore out I replaced it with a Pentax ZX-5n. Late in high school I discovered the advantage of transparencies (slides) over prints in terms of image quality and control of dynamic range, and turned almost exclusively to shooting on this medium, primarily with Ektachrome and Fujichrome. Some of my best college-era photos are printed from transparencies via Cibachrome (Ilfochrome); this was a wonderful print medium but I slowly watched lab after lab go out of business or all-digital.¹ In the late 1990s I acquired a slide scanner and began taking advantage of digital post-processing and printing options myself.

I still have the Pentax and it is in mint condition. Regrettably though, after I acquired my second digital point-and-shoot in 2004 (a Canon S70) it fell increasingly into disuse. Despite the

¹ Ilfochrome resists fading under display conditions longer than any other known photographic color material and prints may last indefinitely in a light-tight environment. In 2011, Ilford announced its final production run of Ilfochrome Classic, although a few labs were able to stockpile a few years' supply from a final run.

limitations of the compact format, the S70 produced reasonably high quality photographs, didn't require the tedious work of scanning slides, and was easy to carry. I was not ready to jump into the DSLR world since I did not want to spend a lot of money on another technology that would be obsolete in a few years.

In 2010 I finally concluded that DSLR technology was where I wanted it. High-quality cameras were becoming available for under \$1,000 with substantial advances in pixel count, ISO range, image stabilization, and other quality factors. I purchased a Canon Rebel T1i and have no regrets. The technology was becoming mature; subsequent Rebel iterations have represented incremental rather than transformative improvements. I expect this camera to serve me well for a while longer.

The Rebel transformed my photography. As can be seen from the two large photographs from Utah in this exhibit, the 15-megapixel images can be printed at 20x30, and probably even larger, with excellent sharpness. The image stabilization means I am able to capture images of moving water at a shutter speed long enough to create sufficient blur (1/10 sec or less) to create smooth images. Furthermore, the high resolution means I am able to do substantial cropping. I think less now about getting the best photograph in the field, and more about capturing "material" that can be optimized later.

Because I usually combine photography with hiking, I like to be able to work quickly and travel light. I shoot with a single lens, a 15-85 mm (24 – 135 mm full-frame equivalent) Canon zoom. (With my film SLRs I used a combination 28-70/70-200 zoom, and then later a 28-200 zoom which unfortunately was not the best quality as I purchased it in grad school on a budget). I like to shoot at wide angles; for the few times that the long zoom is insufficient, I can crop. With the DSLR, the combination of image stabilization and the ability to shoot at ISOs of 800-3200 (I almost never carried slide film higher than 400) means I rarely need to carry a tripod.

I use Photoshop, and increasingly Lightroom, for post-processing, although I use only a small fraction of Photoshop's capabilities. I nearly always shoot in RAW format. There are many adjustments that can be made prior to converting from RAW to other formats, such as exposure, white balance, and tone curves. There is more flexibility editing the RAW source file than TIFFs or JPEGs. I spend time making these adjustments and the result is better images. Most of my printing is currently done at home on an Epson Stylus Photo R200 inkjet printer.

The Images

(Described counterclockwise, starting from the table by the main entrance.)

Superior Fall

7x4.5, Cibachrome prints (2)

1992

When I was attending the University of Minnesota, we were still on the quarter system and started classes very late – the end of September. One summer I took a week in mid-September and drove around Lake Superior. As it was after Labor Day, the campgrounds were practically deserted, and the fall colors were emerging. This pair of photographs was taken in the woods of Sleeping Bear Dunes Provincial Park. It is currently the earliest work that I have framed, and the only photo in this exhibit from my pre-graduate school years.

East Wall

Arch Canyon

7x4.5, Cibachrome prints (3)

1996

In 1993 I moved from the Midwest (Wisconsin, where I grew up in a suburb of Milwaukee, and Minnesota, where I spent four years at the University of Minnesota) to California to attend graduate school at the University of California at Berkeley. I soon got hooked up with the “Cal Hiking and Outdoor Society” (aptly named CHAOS) and spent many weekends and breaks hiking. In March 1996 I made my second spring break trip to Utah with CHAOS friends. This was also my last big trip out west as I had graduated and was to move to Boston in April. We hiked up Arch Canyon and camped at the junction of two arms of the canyon where the arch was located. Here, the setting sun illumines sandstone buttresses above our campsite.

North Wall

Cathedral Valley

30x20, inkjet (printed by Dorian Labs, Arlington, MA)

2010

After 14 years, I finally returned to Utah. This photograph was taken at sunset in the remote Cathedral Valley district of Capitol Reef National Park. We had spent three hours driving a sometimes rocky, sometimes sandy road and seen one other car the whole time. Before the

photograph was taken, we had been driving across the valley through the “walls of Jericho.” Our portion of the sky had been covered by a giant cloud but as the sun neared the horizon it emerged from underneath the cloud, casting the walls in an orange glow. This image was taken from an escarpment where our campsite was located. I developed the image at two different exposures – one for the sky, and one for the ground – and combined them in Photoshop.

Capitol Reef and Henry Mountains from the Burr Trail

30x20, inkjet (printed by Dorian Labs, Arlington, MA)

2010

This was also taken the Capitol Reef trip from the Burr Trail, one of the earliest routes through central Utah and now a (mostly unpaved) scenic drive. Printed at this large size it draws me in to the expansive, deserted landscape. It hangs on my bedroom wall opposite Cathedral Valley.

Cactus Garden

6.5x8.5, Cibachrome print

2000

This image was taken near the Kelso Dunes photos. A rich array of cacti – barrel, yucca, cholla, and others – was clustered amidst granite outcroppings near the base of the aptly-named Granite Mountains. I was camped near a spring and the night before had heard the braying of wild burros. A slight veil of clouds created ideal lighting conditions.

Saline Valley from near Telescope Peak

14x9, Cibachrome print

1993

This was taken on one of my first CHAOS trips – a Thanksgiving weekend trip to Death Valley. The view is looking west from the Funeral Mountains, which is the range to the immediate west of Death Valley.

Bristlecone

9.5x6.5, Cibachrome print

1993

This image was taken near the Saline Valley photograph, but looking towards Death Valley. We were on a hike to Telescope Peak, which stands at over 11,000 feet elevation – a dramatic

contrast to Death Valley. I was feeling winded and used this amazing old tree as an excuse to set up my tripod and take photographs while the rest of the group continued to the summit.

Canyon Deep

10.5x7.5, Inkjet print

1998

In October 1998 I went on a six-night backpack trip from the south rim to the north rim of the Grand Canyon and back. The hard-edged, angular schist in the inner canyon stands in sharp contrast to the horizontal sandstone layers of the outer canyon, and to the sediment-laden waters of the Colorado River.

Kelso Dunes

14x9, Cibachrome print

2000

In 2000 I attended a friend's wedding in Monterey, California, then rented a pickup truck and drive 2,000 miles around the deserts of southern California to visit some areas I missed in grad school. This image is from Kelso Dunes in what is now Mojave National Park.

"My World"

9.5x6.5, Cibachrome print

2000

I rose early and began the scramble up to the top of the dunes before sunrise, to get the best light. I found I was not the first living being to enjoy the view from the top of this one. Was the placer of these tracks enjoying the view as much as I was? Or just on the lookout for predators or prey?

Pacific Fog

6.5x4.3, Cibachrome print

1993

When I first moved to California I had the use of my parents' third car for a few months before the insurance ran out and I had to sell it. I took advantage by making explorations of my new home state. This image was taken in the fading evening light on a deserted beach in Redwood National Park.

Johnson Lake

8.5x6.5, Cibachrome print
1994

In August 1994 I spent two weeks in the Canadian Rockies with a few friends from CHAOS. We walked all the way around this picturesque lake, which is just east of the town of Banff.

Rockwall

6.5x8.5, Cibachrome print
1994

It was an unusually cold and wet summer in the Canadian Rockies, and there were times when we were snowed on. We hiked in to a campsite in Banff National Park in the shadow of the "Rockwall," a sheer escarpment extending for miles along the spine of the Rockies. Here, the lenticular clouds forming over the spine reflect the light of the setting sun, casting a glow on the snow-covered cliffs.

Icelandscapes

3.5x2, Inkjet prints (3)
2002

These were taken on a two-week bicycling trip across Iceland in July. The low sun angle, long daylight hours, and soft clouds combine to make for fabulous photography. This triptych highlights landscapes from the barren interior and snow-covered mountain ranges along the north coast.

Rift

10.5x7.5, Inkjet print
2002

This is a rare instance in which I have combined multiple images. The Arctic Ocean, as viewed from the north coast of Iceland, is superimposed by a crack in a field of lava rock a few miles away. The entirety of Iceland is a creation of the Mid-Atlantic Rift and the volcanic activity which it has spawned.

West Wall

Evening Reflection

8x10, Inkjet print (inversion)

2012

Inversion is a technique in which both the tonality of the print (light/dark) and the color (hue) are reversed. It is akin to a color negative from which a print is made, but can be accomplished with a simple command in Photoshop. To “reverse” the color, one can think of selecting the 180-degree opposite color from the color wheel. In this inversion, taken along the Midstate Trail in Ashburnham, Mass., I rotated the color space from blue to red instead of the default 180 degree rotation.

Night Falls

10.5x7.5, Inkjet print (inversion)

2010

Water and rock in the morning sun at the top of Thoreau Falls in New Hampshire’s White Mountains are transformed into a night-like image through the process of inversion.

Wapack Trail

7.5x9.5, Inkjet print (inversion)

2009

This image illustrates the ability of an inversion to completely transform an image. Here, the reddish November hues of scrubby foliage and a brown fallen oak leaf – taken along the Wapack Trail in southern New Hampshire – are transformed into a cool, soft image with hints of winter and spring.

Pitcher Plants

7x5, Inkjet print (inversion)

2010

While bushwhacking up a remote mountain in New Hampshire I stumbled through this bog, rich with pitcher plants. With the inversion, a glow appears to emanate from the depths of the bog.

Bristlecone Fire

8x8, Inkjet print (inversion)

2010

This is an inversion of a Bristlecone pine tree in Capitol Reef National Park in Utah.

Black Desert Rose

8x8, Inkjet print (inversion)

2010

This is an inversion of a desert primrose in Utah.

South Wall

Spring on Black Fork Mountain

8x10, Inkjet print

1999

In late April of 1999 I attended a friend's wedding in Kansas City and then took a week to explore the Ozarks and neighboring mountains in Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. In contrast to New Hampshire, where fellow hikers are frequently encountered, the trails in this part of the world are largely deserted. This image was taken in the Black Fork Mountain wilderness area in the Oachita Mountains (geologically distinct from the Ozarks) on the Arkansas – Missouri border.

Fall on Devil's Den Mountain

8x8, Inkjet print (inversion)

2012

This image was taken on the University Lutheran annual fall hiking trip to Gilmanston, NH. Devil's Den Mountain is an unusual granite formation; on the top you stand level with the upper reaches of the trees below the cliffs. In inverted the tonality of the image, but not the hues, keeping the autumn color palette.

“Stopping by the Woods”

8x10, Inkjet print
2010

This was taken on the Lost Farm Trail on Mt. Monadnock, descending from the summit on a New Year’s Day hike. It had been lightly snowing much of the day. While hiking I am always on the lookout – often subconsciously – for striking patterns in the woods.

Willard Brook

5x5, Inkjet print
2008

This image was taken on a cold day in January, in Willard Brook State Forest in central Massachusetts. It was one of the first times that I captured “traces” of sunlight in moving water, and it stimulated by interest in further attempts at doing so.

Ice-Tree

5x7, Inkjet print
2013

This was taken on a January hike up Mt. Cardigan. A recent storm had caused ice to build up on the lee side of the trees on the exposed summits, which now shone brilliantly in the sunshine.

Thoreau Falls (1 & 2)

7x5, Inkjet prints
2010, 2011

Thoreau Falls – a five-mile hike through Zealand Notch from U.S. 302 – is one of my favorite places in the White Mountains and I have returned to it many times. These images also capture one of the things I love most about the Whites – the clear, cold, tannin-tinged golden streams cascading through smooth, white granite.

Drip

8x10.5, Inkjet print
2010

This image was taken in Lower Muley Twist Canyon in Capitol Reef National Park. I think I call it “drip” because of the shape. It is completely dry, although the sandstone was shaped by moving water.

“Dangerous”

8x10.5, Inkjet print
2010

This image was also taken in Lower Muley Twist Canyon. Using Photoshop, I isolated the driftwood from the sandstone on which it was sitting and converted the sandstone to black-and-white to make the driftwood stand out. One of my colleagues commented that it looks like a museum piece. Another commented that it looks “dangerous.”

Mt. Auburn Beeches (1 & 2)

8x10, Inkjet prints
2010

These were taken while trying out my new camera in Mt. Auburn Cemetery. I enjoyed the rich texture of these venerable beeches.

Prices

Inkjet images are available for purchase, at the following prices (framed and archivally mounted):

Frame Size	Price
8x8	\$45*
8x10	\$55
12x12	\$65*
11x14	\$75

*Square images can be produced in any of three sizes – 8x8, 10x10 (\$55), or 12x12

20% of sale proceeds go to the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter.