

**Dynamic Landscapes of Abandoned Places**

by


Jerome Sturm

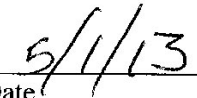
A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art

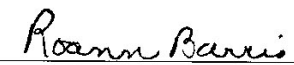
Thesis Advisor: Leah Gose


April 2013


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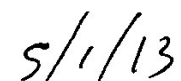
  
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William Ratcliffe  
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## **Abstract**

In my thesis I will describe the technological limitations landscape photographers have faced, look at the historical and contemporary influences on my work, examine the sources of my attraction to photographing abandoned places, explain the process of how my work is created, and evaluate the success of the photographs in the exhibition.

The exhibition serves to document the spaces of people who lived and worked in the scenes photographed, and it also raises the issue of the value we place on communities as they are abandoned. My work enables others to find the treasures we have abandoned, and it raises the question, “Can these places be reclaimed?” The highly stylized realities in the photographs are created by blending multiple-exposures, electronically painting in vibrant colors, and mimicking historical photographic methods of presentation.

The painterly quality in the matte prints creates a disconnection between contemporary glossy images and the content of my photographs. The work resembles the style of hand-coloring popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The light boxes in the exhibition are created using a multiple-layer process, emulating hand-colored lantern slides.

By using matte prints and light boxes, the work repackages the mundane into something new and different. It also shifts the sense of time in the photographs because the present is revealed using an obsolete method. The photographs explore the remnants of others and reshape the reality of what I see in my personal interpretation.

Jerome H. Sturm, MFA  
Department of Art, 2013  
Radford University

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Professor Leah Gose who has served as my mentor for the last two years. Her constant encouragement and guidance has helped me to more fully develop and expand my talents as an artist and explore even deeper the meaningful purpose of my photography.

Department Chair Roann Barris, taught me about the history of photography and how to effectively write about my work. She helped me understand the origins of photography and how it has changed so completely over time. Her extraordinary writing standards encouraged me to better communicate the process of how and why I create photographs.

Professor William Ratcliffe has always been willing to share his time and offer his assistance to me even if I was not in one of his courses. He has the unique ability to look at a series of photographs and give a simple and concise answer to solving a problem or creating an innovative solution. I truly appreciate his insight and wisdom

Professor John O'Connor taught me how to digitally paint in Adobe Photoshop. Without the skills I learned in his course, I could not have created the body of work for this exhibition. He gave me a new set of tools to utilize for my photographs.

I would also like to thank my best friend, John Humphreys, for his encouragement and always taking the time to listen to me talk about my challenges and concerns relating to life and school. You have been my best friend for most of my life, and we have both progressed and achieved so much since our childhood days in Verona.

Most of all, I would like to thank my wife Diane and my children for their support and encouragement during this, mid-life adventure of mine. Without their assistance and dedication

to my dreams and goals, I could not have been successful in this endeavor. I am truly blessed to be Diane's husband and the father of our children, Erica, Logan, Alex, Sarah, Christina, Josiah, and Elijah. I love you guys.

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## Introduction

*Dynamic Landscapes of Abandoned Places* is a photographic exhibition that recontextualizes abandoned places in an exploration of how our consumer culture has altered the landscape. Color archival prints on matte paper, along with semi-transparent images illuminated in light boxes are used to explore the beauty of the remnants of homes, factories, and other spaces. This body of work provides a glimpse of the shifting human landscape by investigating the countless artifacts left behind by past generations. The work questions why society squanders resources to build new places instead of reclaiming the resources we already have at hand. It also serves to document these unique spaces before they succumb to the elements and vanish forever.

The matte finish prints in the exhibition emulate the hand coloring techniques used in picture postcards from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. But, unlike works from that period, the photographs contain vibrant blue, green and gold tones used to create a new energy in the abandoned buildings, factories and homes captured in the photographs. The visual energy created by the shifted color palette adds a new life to these mundane places and creates a landscape where the abandoned becomes beautiful.

The second part of the exhibition consists of a series of Stratachromes.\* These multiple-layered image transfers break the photograph into different sections and are a newly constructed representation of the reality that existed in front of the camera. In the same way that multiple-images are used to create the final digital images, multiple-layers are used to create the final illuminated compositions.

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\* “Stratachrome” is any image or object developed or executed in multiple planes or layers of color. David Spriggs

I believe photography is seen as a medium designed to capture events in time. It is how people remember the places and things that were part of their lives. In my photographs time is captured, rearranged, and manipulated to create images that exist outside of the day-to-day sequence of life.

The photographs in the exhibition are made using a combination of multiple images blended together by a process called High Dynamic Range photography (HDR). Combining several images into a new single image results in a photograph with a greater tonal range and a more dramatic color range than the original subject matter contains. It is a manipulation of reality, reinventing the wasted landscape as a new vibrant space full of color and rich in detail.

Because I believe a single photograph only captures a slice of reality, and I use multiple slices to create my images, it is important for me to break the planes of the photograph into different pieces. My goal is to emulate the look of historical images, like hand-colored postcards and lantern slides, to further shift and recontextualize the sense of time in the photographs. The images in the exhibition create the feeling of today and tomorrow merging into a single space.

By taking on the appearance of hand painted postcards or lantern slides, this work reinterprets our sense of the present. The old is reanimated and becomes an artifact of the current. It becomes something more beautiful than the material that appears in front of the camera and brings into question the value of the places and things left behind by previous generations.

## Chapter 1 – Dynamic Landscapes and the Limitations of Photography

My MFA thesis body of work uses the process of High Dynamic Range (HDR) photography because it is an innovative way to conquer many of the obstacles photographers have faced in their pursuit of capturing the landscape. Generations of photographers have pointed their cameras at the landscape seeking to capture the scenic vistas before their lenses only to be disappointed by the results their cameras have produced. HDR photography is a new solution to this historic problem.

From the genesis of photography, landscape has been the subject of choice by photographers. Indeed, the first image created by Joseph Niepce's camera obscura in 1826, was the view outside of his window at Le Gras, France.<sup>1</sup> Niepce, like all of the photographers who followed, was limited by the sensitivity of the photographic materials available and could only capture a sketch-like representation of the view outside. It took his camera eight hours to record the image on his bitumen sensitized negative.

Since then, photographers have continually struggled to overcome the limitations of film and paper sensitivity as they sought to record the panoramas before their lenses. The problem they faced is that film does not have the dynamic range to record all the details of the landscape. Visual effects artist Christian Bloch explains. "Dynamic range is the highest overall contrast that can be found in an image"<sup>2</sup>. In the simplest terms, it is the ability to record shadow and highlight areas and the tones in between the two

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<sup>1</sup> Hirsch, Robert, *Seizing The Light A Social History of Photography* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Bloch, Christian, *The HDRI Handbook 2.0: High Dynamic Range Imaging for Photographers and CG Artists* (Santa Barbara: Rocky Nook, 2013) Kindle Edition.

extremes. Think of a black cat sitting on a white beach and the difference between the dark fur and sunlit sand and you begin to see the problem photographers face.



Figure 1. Gustave Le Gray, *The Beach at Sainte-Adresse, High Tide*, 1856, in Sylvie Aubenas, *Gustave Le Gray 1820 – 1884* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2002), 119.

A variety of techniques to extend the dynamic range in a photograph have been tried throughout the history of photography. Gustave Le Gray, in the early 1850's, overcame the limitations of his collodion glass negatives by combining two negatives, one exposed for the sky, the other for the landscape, into a combination print. Because one negative recorded the sky and the other recorded the landscape, his prints had greater

detail in both areas. His process of combination printing allowed him to record a dynamic landscape that could not be captured in a single exposure (see fig. 1).

Similarly, combining three, five or even nine separate exposures from a digital camera into a single image creates a HDR photograph. Because one image will record the detail in the darkest shadow areas of a scene and another will record the brightest highlight areas of the scene, the subject matter will retain detail in both areas when the separate images are combined. The exposures in between the two extremes will retain all of the middle-tones and fine details of the scene that would be lost in a single image.

The process allows me to create photographs of abandoned places with a dynamic range well beyond the capabilities of any other method of photography. It is important in my work because it allows me to capture the interior as well as the exterior of a building in a composite image. It also records the color values of the scene more extensively than a single photograph. This gives me greater and more vibrant colors to manipulate in the images. The technique follows in the tradition of Le Gray but goes further because it also overcomes the limitations of silver based photography.

The introduction of color film created new problems for photographers attempting to capture a dynamic landscape. Black and white film only records black, white and various shades of gray, but a color photograph must combine red, green and blue layers to recreate all the colors in a scene. The blending of these separate layers in the film emulsion and printing process is at best a compromise, resulting in a photograph lacking the range of colors the photographer intended.

But colorful landscapes were plentiful before the development and use of color films and prints. Black and white photographs often had color added by hand using a variety of materials and techniques.



Figure 2. Anonymous, *Experimental farm, Indian Head, SK, about 1923*, McCord Museum. <http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/scripts/viewobject.php?section=false&Lang=1&tourID=Landscape&sequence=5> (accessed March 14, 2013).

Daguerreotypes were hand-colored as early as 1839 and the creation of lantern slides in 1894 allowed color photographs to be displayed to larger audiences because they could be projected (see fig. 2). These 3 ½ by 4-inch glass plates were used for entertainment, personal enjoyment and academic lectures. Initially, the images were projected using limelight which is produced by burning oxygen and hydrogen on a pellet



of lime until the carbon arc lamp and, finally, the modern electric light bulb replaced the process. Schools, universities and theaters used lantern slides until the 1950's when Kodachrome 2 x 2 inch transparence films became popular.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 3. Jerome Sturm. *No More Wars*. 2013. Digital Ground image in a light box 18 3/4 x 12 3/4 x 3 inches.

My work in the exhibition also uses the process of hand coloring an image, but it relies on digitally painting in pixels instead of the application of color using dyes. It, like the historical process, allows my hand to touch the image and manipulate it in a method very similar to the impressionistic fashion used by colorists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The bright blue skies and brilliant green foliage I paint in by hand creates an unrealistic

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<sup>3</sup> The Library of Congress, *American Landscape and Architectural Design 1850-1920 Lantern Slides: History & Manufacture*.  
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/landscape/lanternhistory.html> (accessed February 23, 2013).

painterly portrayal of the landscape that does not match the reality of the subject matter in front of the camera. Digital painting allows me to create a new space (see fig. 3).

Additionally, the illumination of my layered Digital Ground prints in a light box requires very saturated colors. Because both my images and lantern slides are backlit transparencies, they vibrantly glow and attract the attention of the viewer. My work, like other hand-colored images, is an artistic interpretation of the landscape using a brightly oversaturated color palette to make the colors visible when the images are projected.

By embracing the manipulation of pixels instead of dyes or paints I move my work into contemporary methods of capturing the landscape but still create a photograph that feels like a composition from another era. Unlike traditional silver-based photography, digital photography today has the ability to record landscapes with greater detail and more accurate color reproduction than any other method of photography. Merging computers with cameras has revolutionized photography. And, I would argue, High Dynamic Range Photography is the next revolution in the medium.

High Dynamic Range (HDR) or High Dynamic Range Imaging (HDRI) is a digital photography technique that combines multiple exposures of the same subject and uses image editing software to create a more realistic or dynamic result. The combined exposures can display a wider range of tonal values than that which a digital camera is capable of recording in a single image.

The origin of the modern HDR process is traced back to Charles Wyckoff (see fig. 4). Wyckoff, following in the footsteps of Le Gray, used a multiple-layered film emulsion to record detailed pictures of nuclear explosions for the cover of *Life* magazine



in the mid-1940's. He combined three different layers of emulsion on a single film base to record the extreme contrast of the blast against the night sky.<sup>4</sup>

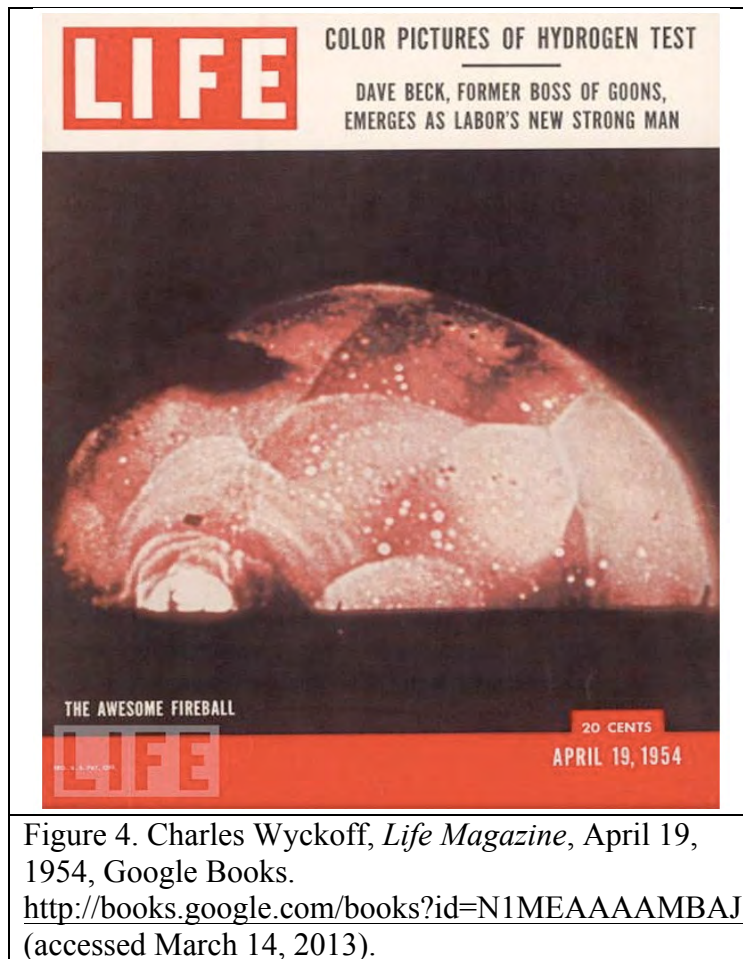


Figure 4. Charles Wyckoff, *Life Magazine*, April 19, 1954, Google Books.  
<http://books.google.com/books?id=N1MEAAAAMBAJ>  
(accessed March 14, 2013).

Paul Debevec, a computer graphic researcher, who created the first non-film based HDR image in 1993, followed him. Debevec is considered one of the founding fathers of HDR Imaging. Not that he invented HDR, but he's the one who tinkered with it first and figured out the practical applications.<sup>5</sup> Even though computers could create

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<sup>4</sup> Sweet, Tony, *Fine Art Photography High Dynamic Range* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2011), vii.

<sup>5</sup> Bloch, Christian, *The HDRI Handbook 2.0: High Dynamic Range Imaging for Photographers and CG Artists* (Santa Barbara: Rocky Nook, 2013), Kindle Edition.

HDR images twenty years ago, it was not a widely used process of photography because computers and cameras did not have the processing power to make it of practical to use by the landscape photographer.

It was not until 2005, with the introduction of the Merge, the HDR function in Adobe Photoshop CS2, that the combining of several digital files into a new composite image became possible for most photographers. Even then, cameras created small image files, performed poorly in low-light conditions and lacked the ability to accurately capture color well enough to make them practical for use in the HDR process. Also, because of the large storage requirements, few photographers made images using the camera's raw file format that captured the full image data created by the camera sensor.

Today, computer systems are faster, large volumes of storage are available and shooting raw files has become the industry standard. The pieces are now in place to create dynamic landscapes equal to the vistas seen by human vision. Using software to blend multiple raw digital camera files together results in a landscape that retains more detail and color than any other type of photography.

My body of work is created using this process for two reasons. First, I personally enjoy pushing the limits of computer and camera technology. Second, HDR photography allows me to reinterpret the subject matter in front of my camera into a new and unique form. Using these new and innovative photography techniques also connects my photography to historic pioneers like Joseph Niepce who pushed the boundaries of the tools available to him at the time he made his images.

## Chapter 2 – Moving From the Past to Pixels -- the Influence of Others

My understanding of how artists in the past overcame the limitations of the materials they used by inventing new methods to capture dynamic landscapes helped me to see that landscape photography is at a new crossroads. Professional photographer and advocate of HDR photography, Trey Ratcliff believes this style of photography goes beyond any other because it also captures his feelings about the landscape. “I think an (HDR) image is truly evocative— and different in sort of a mysterious way. Something that leaves an impression of a scene, that’s often more effective than the actual scene. It’s hard for me to wrap words around that idea.”<sup>6</sup>

Where Ratcliff sees the ability of cameras, computers and software to create a new dynamic landscape I see the technology as a first step in the creation of my body of work. By going beyond the image created in the software and mimicking historical techniques, like hand coloring or the layers in lantern slides, my new process allows me to manipulate the sense of time in my images and create a reality greater than what exists in the real world. For lack of a better term, my work could be called Hyper Dynamic Range photography because it starts as HDR photography and goes much further.

After looking at the style of images on Trey Ratcliff’s *Stuck in Customs* website, I knew I wanted to experiment with the High Dynamic Range photography he specialized in and promoted on the site. What I appreciated about his work was the incredible detail and tonal range contained in the imagery. His work is in the same vein of other landscape photographers like Ansel Adams. Adams, best known for his black and white images of

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<sup>6</sup> Bloch, 20.

Yosemite, used the Zone System to extract the maximum from the materials he used in his landscapes. Ratcliff achieves his with the manipulation of pixels by software (see fig. 5).



Figure 5. Trey Ratcliff, *Bamboo Forest Kyoto Japan*, 2009, Stuck In Customs.com. [http://stuckincustoms.smugmug.com/Portfolio-The-Best/your-favorites/10668747\\_nxsXfB#!i=742619345&k=rqtfDTH&lb=1&s=A](http://stuckincustoms.smugmug.com/Portfolio-The-Best/your-favorites/10668747_nxsXfB#!i=742619345&k=rqtfDTH&lb=1&s=A) (accessed April 1, 2013).

After purchasing the software and computer system in order to have the necessary tools to experiment in this new digital media, I set out to find the appropriate subject matter. Knowing that the pristine landscape Ansel Adams favored was beyond my means, I set out on a journey of discovery into the surrounding community. It was a very short trip.



Traveling on Water Street in Bedford, Virginia, I came across one of the first subjects of my new exploration of photography. In front of me were several rows of abandoned factories and warehouses standing as tall sentinels over empty parking lots. I felt a sense of excitement as I drove past the broken windows and antique brickwork. Something connected me with those vacant spaces.



Figure 6. Jerome Sturm, *Morning Glory*, 2011.

It was an unexpected encounter. Looking for abandoned places was not my initial intent. I was thinking about using the HDR process to photograph the scenic vistas at the nearby Peaks of Otter resort, but the idea of photographing those quiet empty factories from another era excited my creative mind.

A few days after taking the images, I worked with the blending of the files to create my new landscape. It took several attempts at my computer to create the tonality and color range in *Morning Glory* but, when I finished with the HDR process, the results were unsatisfactory. It needed more drama. The blank sky in the upper left hand corner was not very interesting. In Photoshop, I added swirling clouds to the skyline and blended in a dark blue-gray overlay. When it was finished, the impression of the building I wanted to create had appeared (see fig. 6).

Ratcliff was not the only contemporary photographer whose landscape work appealed to me and influenced the direction of my graduate studies. Steve Fitch searches the southern plains for abandoned homes, churches and factories and creates images of the spaces and things left behind by others. He uses a large format 8x10 view camera and long exposures to create his photographs. Speaking of his work he writes, “I realized that these were the ruins of my own generation and not from the hazy past of mythology. The plains were still being abandoned: the process was not finished -- it was ongoing.”<sup>7</sup>

My work photographing places like Bluefield, West Virginia, parallels Fitch’s work because it also documents the ongoing abandonment of an area. My process differs from his because he does not manipulate his photographs and he works in a documentary style to create very detailed images. My body of work is a reinterpretation of the abandoned places I encounter that purposefully manipulates the color and tonal range of the subject matter in order to divorce it from its surroundings.

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<sup>7</sup> Fitch, Steve, *gone Photographs of Abandonment on the High Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 9.

The final contemporary source of influence on the photography in my *Dynamic Landscapes Exhibition* is Chinese painter Xia Xiaowan. He creates large-scale 3D figures on multiple-layered glass paintings. The aligned sheets of glass create the appearance of a figure floating in space and, as the viewers move around the display, the appearance of the figure changes (see fig. 7).

Speaking about his work, Xiaowan says that, “I had many problems expressing space in flat paintings. I recognized that painting can never surpass its flat quality in a real space. Therefore, that made me crazy about the problem. Can painting be painted in a



Figure 7. Xia Xiaowan Untitled, 2011 *Don't Panic* April 4, 2011.  
<http://www.dontpaniconline.com/magazine/arts/xia-xiaowan> (accessed April 1, 2013).

totally space way? I began to practice associating painting with the theory of CT (CAT) scans in medical technology”.<sup>8</sup> His process is to create a series of sketches on paper and divide the image up before he paints and cuts the shapes into the different glass plates. It takes him one to two months to complete a painting.

After looking at the work of Xia Xiaowan, I became curious as to whether I could use some of his techniques to expand the depth of my photographs by breaking them into layered compositions. I experimented with several techniques, like Gel Medium Transfers and Lazertran Inkjet Transfers, before using Digital Ground Medium prints to create the light box compositions in my MFA exhibition.

Each of these three artists had a profound effect on how I thought about landscape photography and how I could interpret it. Ratcliff helped me discover the tools I would use for my body of work. Fitch helped me to think of my photographs as documenting an ongoing process of abandonment, and Xiaowan gave me the idea to break apart the HDR image and repackage it into a multiple-layered, illuminated photograph.

High Dynamic Range images create a painterly impressionistic sense of the landscape. My photographs are more like the recalling of a memory of a place than a straight documentary image of the subject. For the first time, my photographs are a reflection of my mental impressions from my encounters with these abandoned relics. They are the repackaging of pixels into a new representation of the deserted spaces I enter in my quest to create beauty from the remnants of former generations.

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<sup>8</sup> Laher, Yusuf, “Xia Xiaowan: Mind blowing 3D glass paintings,” *Don’t Panic* April 4, 2011. <http://www.dontpaniconline.com/magazine/arts/xia-xiaowan> (accessed April 1, 2013).



### **Chapter 3 – Hunt and Seek, My Quest for the Dynamic Landscape**

My photographs examine why our society abandons places and raises the question of our ability to revitalize communities. By visually exploring the legacy of the past and using creative methods to reinterpret it into something beautiful, my work returns a sense of value to these abandoned places. These new images invite the community to examine the empty homes, factories and buildings of the past in a new way. The photographs also serve to create a dialogue about reutilizing the places built by past generations to create new communities for the future.

I am, by nature, an explorer. As a child who grew up with the history of others surrounding me, I developed a deep respect of my predecessors. My wanderings into the abandoned places around my childhood home created in me a sense of connection with the remnants of others. This sense of exploration and encountering the past has stayed with me as an adult, and it helps to explain why photographing these places is so satisfying for me as an artist.

The photographs in the exhibition are a new story about the places left behind by others. They are a fictional narrative that embellishes these empty spaces and gives them a new spirit. A mystery is created. It invites the viewer to wonder why these places are abandoned. By using a new color palette and distorted sense of time, a mundane home, building or factory is transformed into an unexpected glowing energetic landscape. The ordinary subject matter captured by the camera vanishes and becomes a new reality.

It is replaced with a colorful new vibrant representation of the structure that contradicts the disregard of the value society has placed upon it. Something of the past seems to re-animate the corpse remnants of the decaying walls and vacant windows

overlooked by our throw away culture. There is a tension between the expected and what exists in the photograph that causes a re-examination of the space.

The vibrant blue sky and glowing green foliage in the images also creates a sense of movement in the photographs as they vie for attention against the crumbling buildings. The colors pull the viewer into the scene while the contents of the frame should repel them from engaging with the work. It is this tension that adds interest to the photographs and juxtaposes this new reality against the normal expectations people have when looking at old abandoned buildings.



Figure 8. Jerome Sturm, *Spring Will Come*, Bluefield, West Virginia, 2013.

In the exhibition, there is a stillness in some of the photographs that creates a sense of tranquility in what remains. My piece, *Spring Will Come*, of an abandoned home in Bluefield, West Virginia, glows with the soft light of evening and contains a vibrant green ivy vine clinging to the clapboards of the abandoned home (see fig. 8). The open

front door shows the crumbling interior and a slightly ajar red door. It seems this home is awaiting the return of its former residents. There is a sense that it was a place of happy times and it is just awaiting a new occupant to rekindle the joy that once existed inside its walls.

The real truth of the place is unknown to me. It could have been a miserable home full of poverty and violence. The reality is not important. What is important is the new sense of place created by my hand using my unique photographic talents. The use of color and lighting has made a new reality exist outside of the elements before the camera.



Figure 9. Jerome Sturm. *School's Out Completely*, 2013. 48 x 32 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Because I use the process of High Dynamic Range imaging to create my photographs, my prints retain detail in both the highlights and shadows. In *School's Out Completely*, the details in the boarded-up windows of the abandoned schoolhouse are

retained when they would have been lost in a single image (see fig. 9). The triangle-shaped shadow in the frame almost splits the building into two equal halves that pull the viewer from one side of the image to the other. The narrow skyline and vertical walls create a trapped space that implies more of the structure exists outside of the frame but the viewpoint denies the observer the chance to further explore the space. The viewpoint is enclosed in much the same manner as the sheets of plywood covering the school's windows enclose the school.

Color is again used to add a new energy to the space. The cool cyan and blue-green windows of the building contrast against the warm red hue of the bricks and yellow sidewalk on the bottom of the frame. The violet-blue sky peaking through the clouds also creates an unnatural-looking skyline that makes the image look more like a painting than a digital photograph. It also appears to be trapped by the looming structure in the foreground.

In a way, the trapped spaces in the photograph are a metaphor for my feeling that the residents of Bluefield, West Virginia are also trapped by their circumstances. In the town, the people depended on the production of coal. Now the coal economy is greatly diminished and the town is being slowly abandoned. The local high school, at one time the heart of the community, is now deserted.

But, there are traces of energy left behind by the past residents. The history of their energy is reanimated in my photographs before it is lost. Once the building is gone, the sense of place also vanishes. My work shows the vibrancy still remaining in the site and what does emerge when it is recreated by using the process of HDR photography combined with digital painting.



Another example of color being used to add energy to a space is my photograph of an old diner just outside of Radford, Virginia (see fig. 10). Glowing green and yellow vines are enveloping the hot-pink walls of the structure as the natural encloses the man-made. Because the vines were moved by the wind during the three exposures, there are sections where parts of the vines overlap and dissolve.



Figure 10. Jerome Sturm. *Done Diner*, 2013. 48 x 32 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Again, color is used to pull the viewer's eye into the composition and contrast with the abandoned structure. Details of the interior are visible through the broken windows and they invite a further exploration of the diner but, the viewpoint will not allow entry into the building. It is this tension of seeing something in a new way, but being limited on the amount that can be explored by the viewpoint, that increases the curiosity about the place photographed. It also mirrors my personal frustration of being

able to connect with a space photographically but not having the past history to explain the abandonment.

By showing the beauty of the abandoned places, my work raises the interest of people who can appreciate the presence of what remains, and it generates awareness of the places where the photographs were taken. It may also motivate them to reinvest in a community. As a photojournalist, the experience of documenting an abandoned mill town helped me realize the power images have to motivate people to take action.



Figure 11. Jerome Sturm, *Glenco Mill Village*, Glenco, North Carolina, 1997.

In May of 1997, I photographed Glencoe Mills hosiery factory and mill town in Glencoe, North Carolina, as an assignment for the newspaper. Over 32 homes had been abandoned in this 105-acre riverside community and the former hosiery mill factory was

now a decrepit, crumbling building. In home after home, there was little left except vandalized walls, broken windows and crumbling foundations (see fig. 11).

Unbelievably, our tour guide was talking about building a new community at the site and reinventing it as an artist community. Over the years, slowly, house-by-house, a community started emerging from the rubble. The dream of building a new community began to take shape as a new town arose from the remnants of the past.

Today, Glencoe Mill is a vibrant place. Brightly colored renovated mill homes line streets illuminated by old-style lampposts. There is an active arts and community association working in the large mill building. The place has been reborn and a new history is being written.

My experience at Glencoe Mills gave me an appreciation of how images can change the perception of a community. In part, this is why places like Bluefield, West Virginia, Danville, Virginia or Pocahontas, Virginia, were selected as subjects for my thesis exhibition. These are places where the towns are dying and there is potential for reshaping the perception of the neighborhoods. The buildings and infrastructure of these towns are crumbling. They are also places with colorful pasts and diverse histories that should not be forgotten.

Just like in North Carolina, the process of renovation is occurring in Pocahontas, Virginia, but sadly there are also larger barriers facing the town. It is in a remote location and there is a general apathy among the people in the town. It also has no great source of funding to provide the needed repairs to many historic buildings.

My work documents this town to create a record of these spaces before they disappear. Sadly, the front façade of the old company story has vanished since I started

photographing the town and only my impressionistic images of the structure remain (see fig. 12). It is sad to see another piece of the town's historic legacy vanish forever.



Figure 12. Jerome Sturm, *Sky Door*, Pocahontas, Virginia, 2012.

By re-animating these spaces and showing a new energy in these abandoned homes, factories and buildings, my work shows the value of the historic past of a community. By seeing the vibrancy and beauty that still remains in a community, my photographs can cause a re-examination of the value of these crumbling structures. The aspiration of my work is to show the beauty of abandoned places to others and raise the interest of people who can appreciate the beauty of what remains.

By creating an interest in a community or overlooked place, then perhaps my work will lead to action by others to venture into those spaces to see what remains. They will find the unique nature of the remnants of others by examining my photographs and will form their own opinions by their own explorations. Because of this, they become



motivated to examine and preserve the presence of the places before they vanish. At a minimum, my work will provide my personal interpretation of these spaces before they are gone and it will serve as a legacy to pass onto future generations.

## **Chapter 4 – Creating the Dynamic Landscape of Abandoned Places**

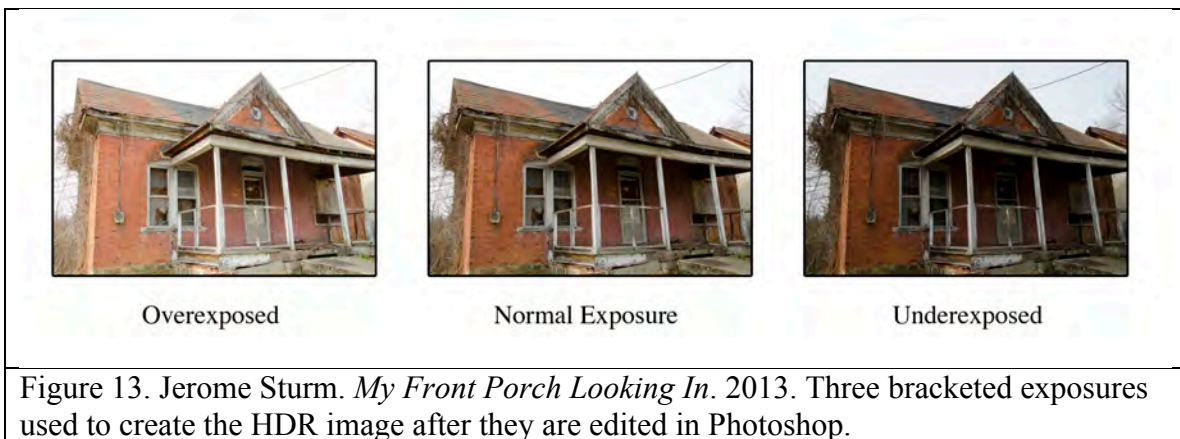
The process of creating the works in my thesis exhibition involves several steps. The first is the research and photography of the sites selected for the exhibition. The second is the manipulation of the digital files using a variety of computer software. And the third is the output of the photographs as matte prints or light box images.

Because my work involves locating abandoned places, the process starts by researching areas using the Internet. Search terms like “coal towns”, “abandoned places” or “economically depressed areas” are used to find potential sites. Once I find an interesting place, like Pocahontas, Virginia for example, I read about the history of the place, look at satellite views on Google maps, read comments on personal blogs and examine images posted onto websites to give me a sense of the town.

One of the first things I do upon arriving at the site is to explore the area around the building to see how the light plays over the home, business or factory. I also look for areas that include the sky, open doorways or windows, and any interesting objects inside the structure. Doing this helps me determine the elements to include in my composition, optimize the lighting, and choose the best camera angle.

The creation of High Dynamic Range images requires multiple exposures and makes the use of a tripod a necessity because it steadies the camera and makes the process of aligning multiple images easier. Bright colors are also an important part of this body of work so that areas of bright green foliage are included in my images. If it is windy, the motion of the foliage against moving clouds in the photograph creates a time-distorting, ghosting effect when the software combines the individual photographs.

Branches or vines enclosing the house or factory are also important because they show the merging of the natural with the decaying structures. Buildings with bright yellow, blue or red coloring are also chosen because they take on the tone and texture of buildings in antique hand-colored prints. For this series, because it was wintertime, areas of brambles climbing the side of a building were included because they could be painted a golden tone to contrast against the overcast blue-gray winter skies.



Photoshop, Photomatix Pro and Snapseed software were used to combine all of the images in my body of work. All HDR photographs in the exhibition resulted from the blending of three separate camera files. The first is a normal exposure, the second is one stop overexposed, and the third is one stop underexposed. The normal exposure best records the mid-tones, the overexposed image records details in the shadow areas, and the underexposed image records the details in the highlight details. Exposures are bracketed using the shutter speed and not the aperture because changing the aperture will affect the area of focus in the image (see fig. 13).

All of the photographs are captured as raw files on my Nikon camera because this gives me a large file to work with, and raw files capture all of the image data recorded by the camera sensor. The raw files are then opened in Adobe Photoshop. Adjustments are

made for color balance, contrast, and overall color saturation. These three digital negatives are the basis of the compositing process used for the HDR image.



Figure 14. Jerome Sturm. *My Front Porch Looking In*. 2013. The first HDR image after three photos are combined using Photomatix Pro software.

In the Photomatix Pro software, the three digital negatives are blended into a HDR composite. Using the program allows me to select any of several dozen blending options, set the gamma of the image, select black and white points and increase the overall color saturation. The single image created by the software is used as the starting point for the final photograph in the exhibition. The image is then saved and reopened in Photoshop. The photograph is now toned again, highlights and shadowed areas are adjusted, and tools like the clone stamp and healing brush are used to clean up any lens dust spots or remove any unwanted areas before saving the file again (see fig. 14).



Figure 15. Jerome Sturm *My Front Porch Looking In*. 2013. The image after using Photoshop to add clouds, retouch the image and paint in color.

After the image has been processed once, Photoshop is used to paint new colors over the existing foliage around the building. Many times the sky in the photograph is replaced by another image of clouds. By adding a new sky to the work, and painting in color, the photograph better emulates the look of hand-painted postcards from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The work looks like those images because of the similarity of its colors to the colors in the antique photographs (see fig. 15).

By the time the compositing step is completed the image will have several separate layers with different opacities and blending options. A copy of this file is saved with all of the layers and another image, with the layers flattened into a single layer, will



also be saved. This single-layer file is now ready for processing by the Snapseed software.



Figure 16. Jerome Sturm. *My Front Porch Looking In*. 2013. The image after using Snapseed software to enhance sharpness, add color saturation, and vignette the photograph and dodging and burning areas in Photoshop. The image is now ready to print.

In the software, the image will have the contrast adjusted, be electronically sharpened to aid in printing and have the saturation increased. The image may also have a vignette added and slight lens blur applied to create a sense of distortion on the edges in the final print. The edge distortion in the photograph mimics the effect of using older optics and makes the photograph look like an antique camera took the picture. The file is then saved again (see fig. 16).

The final step in my process is to reopen the file in Photoshop, change the resolution, adjust the tonality and color of the file, and selectively dodge and burn areas

of the image to increase contrast. The image is now ready to follow one of two paths. It will either be printed out as a matte print or re-edited and separated in order to output new layers for printing on transparent Mylar.

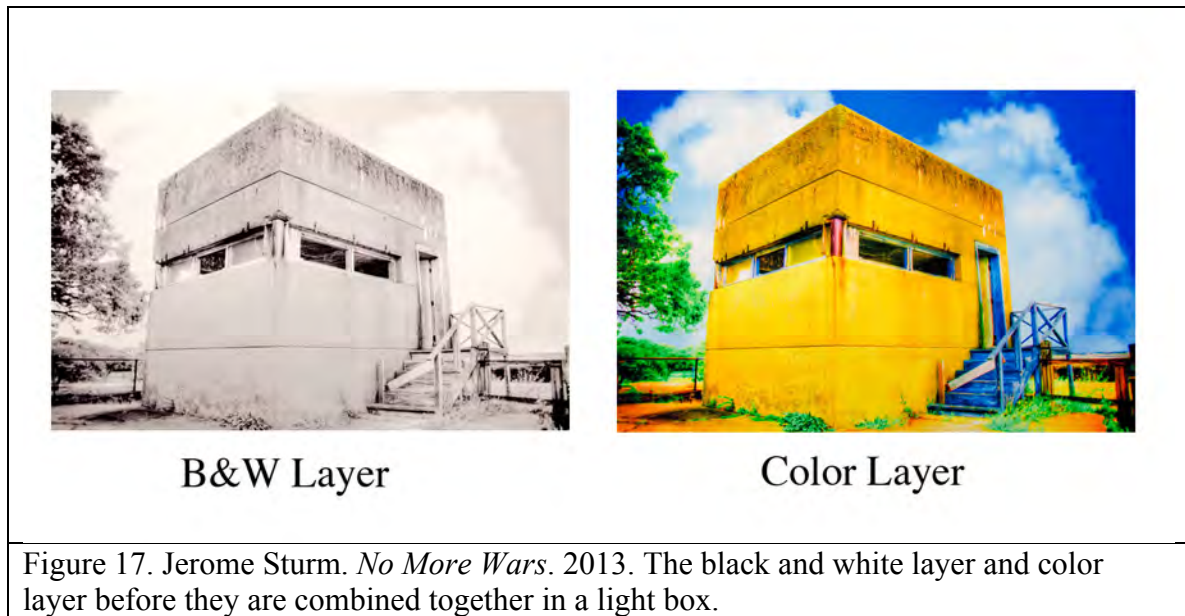
For the prints in the exhibition, a matte surface is used because it creates a painterly appearance in the photographs more reminiscent of images from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The photographs look like antique hand-colored images of a deserted space from the past when, in reality, they are contemporary images. My techniques also enhance the blending of the applied colors and they further divorce the prints in the exhibit from the reality of the places photographed.

For the illuminated work in the exhibition the image is reopened in Photoshop and the software is used to create two new layers. The first layer will become a black and white overlay printed on clear Mylar that will rest on top of the matte color layer. It is created by desaturating the image of all color and enhancing the contrast until it becomes a contrasty black and white image. When it is printed, the white areas are clear and the black areas help to define the structure repeated in the underlying matte color layer.

After the images have been created in Photoshop, the next step in the process is to coat the clear Mylar sheets with a transfer medium so they are ready for printing on an inkjet printer. A separate coating material is used for each layer. For the base black and white layer, two coats of Golden Digital Ground for Non-Porous Surfaces are applied and the material is allowed to dry.

The second layer will become the color layer and it will be printed on clear Mylar with two coats of Golden Digital Ground White (Matte) applied by a foam brush. The contrast will also be increased and the overall saturation of the image will be increased so

the colors will be vibrant when illuminated by the light box. Once they are edited, both images are ready for output onto their separate layers.



When the materials are ready for printing, the black and white layer is flipped in Photoshop and printed on the backside of the clear film. This step is taken in order to keep the print emulsion underneath the Mylar instead of on the surface, where it is easily scratched. The matte layer is not flipped and it is printed on the coated surface of the Mylar. After both sheets are completely dried, they are ready to be assembled into the final composite image (see fig. 17).

The matte color layer is placed onto a light box and is then covered by a sheet of Mylar that has not been coated. The black image is then placed on top of it to create a sandwich. This is done to separate the black and white layer from the color layer because offsetting the two adds depth to the image and it also helps to protect both emulsions.



The advantage of this technique is that it adds a great sense of depth to the illuminated image. Because the viewer looks through the top layer into another layer the eye has a sense of objects in the foreground being in front of objects in the background.



Figure 18. Jerome Sturm. *No More Wars*. 2013. The final image after the layers have been aligned and placed into a light box.

The saturation of color in the illuminated light box emulates the color palette of hand-colored lantern slides. It also reproduces the method used to create them because the original slides had a black and white layer onto which an artist painted in color. Also, by including the brush strokes in the image, the work takes on the properties of a painting instead of a photograph (see fig. 18).

## Chapter 5 -- Reflecting on My Work

*Dynamic Landscapes of Abandoned Places* is a photographic exhibition created to recontextualize abandoned places and explore how our consumer culture has altered the landscape. It questions why society squanders resources and it creates a dialogue regarding how the structures in the photographs became deserted. It also serves to document the ruins before they no longer exist. My long-term goal for this work is to use it as a forum to raise the question and awareness that these dilapidated places can be reclaimed instead of being forever wasted.

The photographs and light boxes in the exhibition have successfully created an interest in the places photographed for the project. The reinvention of the space does achieve my goal of creating a conversation about these relics and how they became deserted. It also raises an interest in the history of my subjects.

Because my work places the homes, buildings, and factories in a historical setting reminiscent of antique methods of photography, it changes the sense of time in the landscape and causes a re-examination of the subjects. The work successfully mimics the look of hand-colored postcards and lantern slides using new techniques. The images in the exhibition make the mundane, unattractive buildings appear as colorful, glowing structures inviting an exploration of the image by the viewer.

My photographs provide a glimpse of the shifting human landscape by using the new process of High Dynamic Range photograph. The use of HDR photography follows in the tradition of other landscape photographers who used new techniques and innovations to create better photographs of the subjects they encountered. Pushing the

limits of digital photographic technology also makes my photographs part of this historic tradition.

The blending of several photographs together to create the matte print images in the exhibition results in images with a greater tonality and a more dramatic color range than most contemporary landscape photography. I have successfully manipulated the reality of a wasted landscape into a new vibrant space full of energy and color. In the work, there is a feeling of today and tomorrow merging into a single space. The past and the present are co-existing.

By taking on the appearance of lantern slides, my work reinterprets our sense of the present. Because the images are illuminated and the brush strokes in the image are visible, it is further divorced from a contemporary photographic image. It does not look like the pictures displayed on numerous computer screens or cell phones so prevalent in our western culture. My photographs, unlike those images, have a human touch.

As a photojournalist my role was to be a visual historian whose legacy was to create a photographic record of the daily activities of my community. Now as a fine art photographer, my role is to use photography to create a new narrative of the places I photograph. My work does not just document the places, it creates a new reality of a rather mundane subject.

As an artist, I have been successful in developing new processes and rethinking my role as a visual artist. My new interpretations of the landscape have been well received and my images have been accepted for exhibition in several galleries. To me, this reaffirms the path I have taken during my tenure at Radford University.

By creating an interest in a community, or overlooked place, then perhaps my work will lead to action by others to venture into those spaces to see what remains. They will find the unique nature of the remnants of others by examining my photographs and forming their own opinions by their own explorations. Because of this, they may become motivated to examine and preserve the presence of the places before they vanish and no one will have known of their existence. At a minimum, my work will provide my personal interpretation of these spaces before they are gone and it will serve as a legacy to pass on to future generations.

Although the work has generated a dialogue about the abandoned places in the exhibition, I do not believe it has achieved my larger aspiration of re-examining the value of these derelict places. The communities involved in the restoration process face many financial, logistical and geographic obstacles before any renovations could become a reality. Just like the transformation of the Glenco Mill community has taken over twenty years to complete, any transformation of these areas will take at least the same amount of time. My hope is that my images will provide the genesis for a call to preserve these spaces from the past before they forever disappear.

I will continue my explorations of abandoned places this summer. I would like to venture up to Welsh, West Virginia and other coal towns to photograph these economically depressed areas. I also plan to explore using the process of gum bichromate printing as another way to divorce my images from the modern way photographs are printed. By merging High Dynamic Range Photograph with a 19<sup>th</sup> century method of printing, my new work will explore both the modern and the historic in a new and unique way.

The second area of personal development is a re-visitation of the construction of my stratachromes using my process of creating gel transfers and applying them to layered glass. The construction of the oak frames and multiple-transfers is an expensive, time-consuming process that fell outside the time allotted for my thesis exhibition. The new works will use backlighting to illuminate the frame and will be on a larger scale. They are also a new application of HDR photography that is very unique. I know this because artist and author Christopher James has asked to include a photograph of one of my works from my first series in his 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition of *The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes*.

My MFA work demonstrates the vibrancy still remaining in the communities and places I have photographed. It respects the spaces of past generations and allows us to re-examine the places they lived and worked before we decide to discard these places. If my work creates an interest in these communities, then perhaps it will lead to action by others to venture into these places to see and experience what remains, and incite a new spirit in the community to preserve and capture the past before it disappears forever.

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## Glossary

**bitumen sensitized negative.** The sensitized bitumen becomes hard when exposed to light. It is one of the earliest materials used in photography.

**camera obscura.** A darkened box in which objects from outside are projected onto a surface through a pin hole.

**Digital Ground.** A material that can be used to coat non-porous surfaces like plastic so they can be printed on with an inkjet printer.

**dynamic range.** The highest overall contrast range found in an image.

**gum bichromate printing.** A 19<sup>th</sup> century printing process based on the light sensitivity of dichromates.

**high dynamic range.** A digital file created by combining separate exposures to create a greater dynamic range in a photograph.

**lantern slide.** A glass plate based image intended for projection. They were usually hand colored.

**Photomatix Pro.** An image processing software used to combine several individual camera files into a composite HDR image file.

**Snapseed.** An stand alone application that allows the color, tone, and sharpness of an image to be modified. It also allows various filters, lens distortion and vignettes to be added to an image.

**stratachrome.** Any image or object developed or executed in multiple planes or layers or color.

### List of Images in the MFA Exhibit

Figure 1. Jerome Sturn. *School's Out Completely*, 2013. 48 x 32 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 2. Jerome Sturn. *Coal Shadows*, 2012. 48 x 32 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 3. Jerome Sturn. *Done Diner*, 2013. 48 x 32 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 4. Jerome Sturn. *Coca-Cola is Closed*, 2013. 48 x 32 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 5. Jerome Sturn. *A Real "Little Pink House"*, 2013. 24 x 36 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 6. Jerome Sturn. *Spring Will Come*, 2013. 36 x 24 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 7. Jerome Sturn. *Our House*, 2013. 36 x 24 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 8. Jerome Sturn. *My Front Porch Looking In*, 36 x 24 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 9. Jerome Sturn. *Stepping Past the Red and Blue*, 2013. 36 x 24 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 10. Jerome Sturn. *The White Trailer*, 2013. 36 x 24 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 11. Jerome Sturn. *No hsi e Movies*, 2013. 36 x 24 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 12. Jerome Sturn. *Art Deco Warehouse*, 2013. 36 x 24 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 13. Jerome Sturn. *Doorway 506*, 2013. 24 x 36 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 14. Jerome Sturn. *Yellow Warehouse*, 2013. 36 x 24 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 15. Jerome Sturn. *None for Dinner*, 2012. 18 x 24 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 16. Jerome Sturn. *Blue Trailer*, 2012. 24 x 18 x 1 inches, Archival Inkjet Print.

Figure 17. Jerome Sturm. ***No More Wars***, 2013 19 x 13 x 3 inches, Digital Ground Medium Print in a light box.

Figure 18. Jerome Sturm. ***Body Shop Blues***, 2013. 19 x 13 x 3 inches, Digital Ground Medium Print in a light box.

Figure 19. Jerome Sturm. ***Silence in an Empty Church***, 2013. 13 x 19 x 3 inches, Digital Ground Medium Print in a light box.



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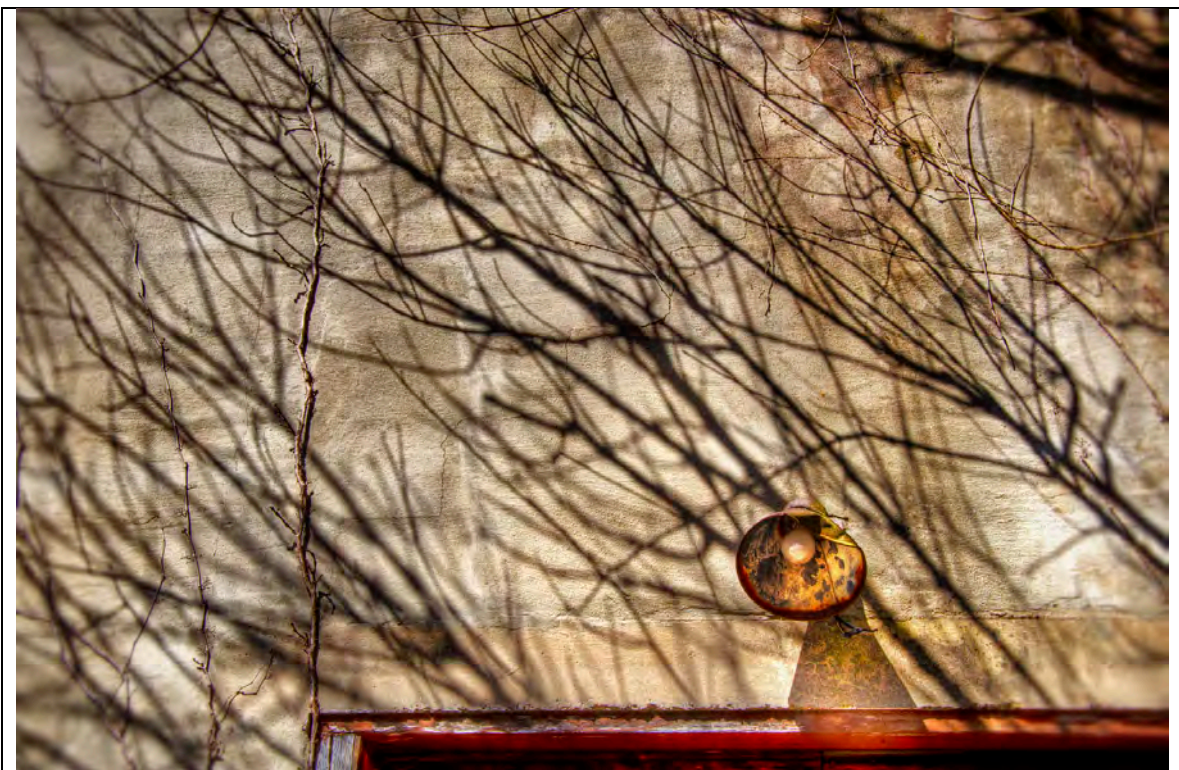


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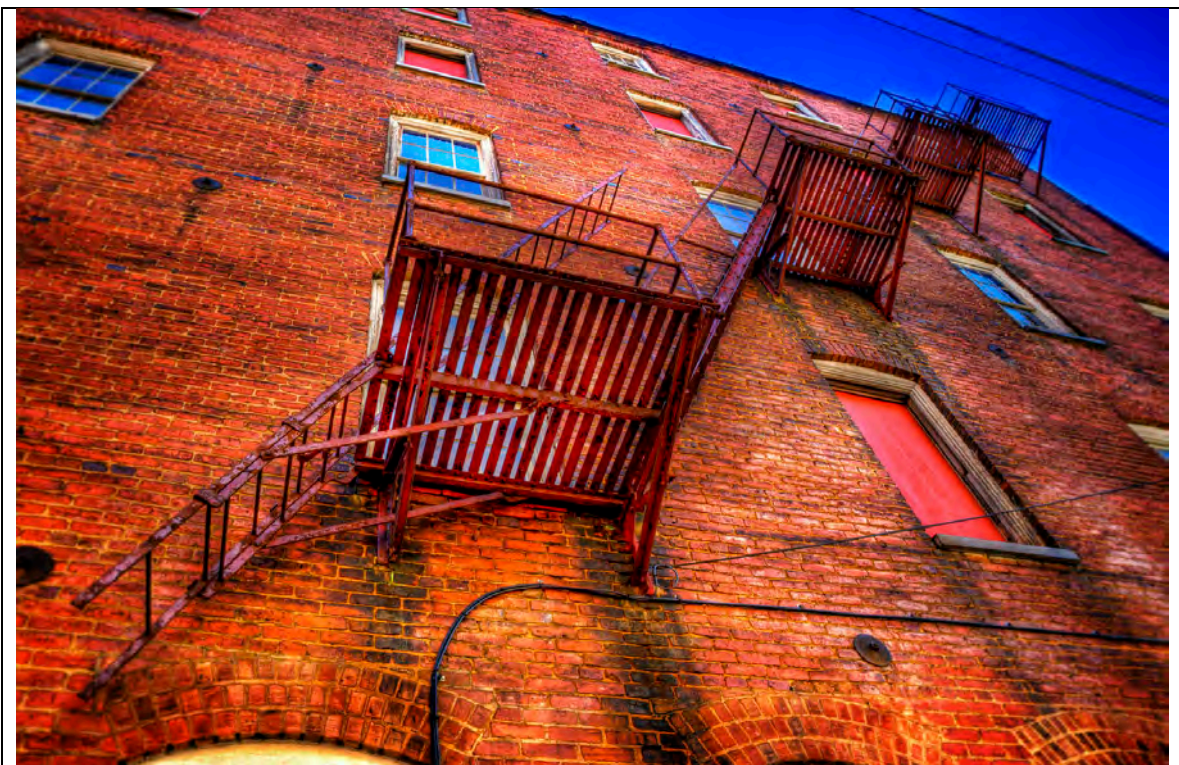


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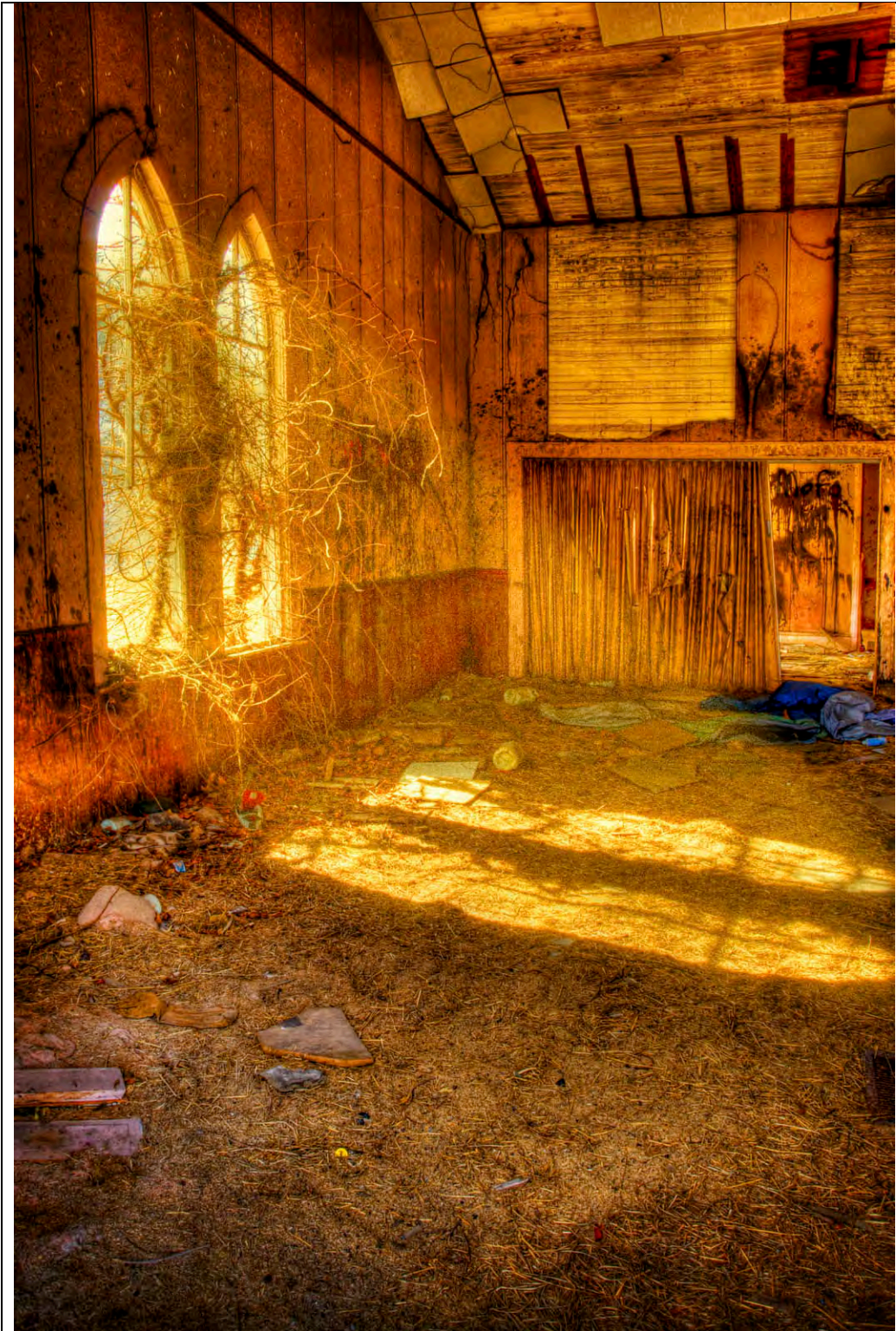


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