

MANIFESTATIONS

By

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Abstract

Twilight, the brief passage of time during dusk and dawn, is a key factor when creating my photographs. Manufactured and natural forms of light mingle, and there is an unusual confluence of colors with a low intensity of brightness. Long camera exposures are required to capture this ethereal effect. By utilizing hand controlled light sources, I can paint the environment with light. I work freely within the space and isolate subject matter, so that other parts of the image remain in darkness. Some of the images include an apparition of the figure. These are created in a studio for a photomontage.

I visualize super-natural activity within the defunct spaces of the abandoned landscape. There are clear signs of human development and natural deterioration from erosion. The illuminated figures and objects reveal an association with the spirit world, which represents a transient phenomenon of the moment that points to a ritualistic past. This is a unique quality of photography, to manifest dualities of realism and surrealism, past and present, simultaneously.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Manifestations, is a culmination of over 27 years of field work, dating back to 1994, when I graduated from The Corcoran School of Art and Design, Washington DC. Although my knowledge at the time was limited, I was inherently drawn to abandoned spaces, where I could concentrate on creative techniques and ways of being physically involved in the environment of the photo shoot. The processes of scouting and exploring were just as important, if not more important than the actual moments of image capture. I frequented the back roads and industrial areas of Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland.

I chose the late evenings and the nighttime to experiment with lighting techniques, and I used long camera exposures to capture the time lapse of an environment in motion. I also used long exposure settings to capture the movement of a figure, which usually blurred into the landscape. Back then, there was no digital photography and no instant gratification. I had to use film, so the results were more accidental than methodical. I was comfortable with the idea of letting experimentation and spontaneity rule my creative process. The best of my work derived from the subconscious mind, unconcerned by the meaning until a later point in time. Eventually, the accidents led to more serendipitous results as my technical skills improved.

The way I work today has not changed fundamentally since those early days of experimentation. Digital capture allows me to experiment more efficiently, but I prefer an approach to environmental photography with a measured rhythm. I subscribe to a form of photo-meditation, immersing myself in the moment during picture making, not just visualizing the image. This is particularly significant when making my landscape photographs.

II. BACKGROUND

One of my primary influences from the beginning was Japanese photographer, Tokihiro Sato, b. 1957 (Fig. 1). His philosophy of being the subject of his own work and his use of lighting were critical to my way of thinking. Sato used long camera exposures to capture himself moving through the landscape with a hand-held source of light. In the daytime, he used a mirror to reflect the sun. At night, he used a candle or flashlight. Light was considered a recording agent of the past.¹ Regarding subject matter, it is the human experience that records the photo, the artist's physical nature concerning his activity and labor within the landscape. This is what Sato refers to as a photo-respiration, a scene of lights that seem to breathe.² This provided meaning to my work, but also a newfound desire for experimentation. I began using a flashlight to paint with light in the landscape, mostly at night (Fig. 2). Results were only visible after the film was processed. Because of this, failure was a regular occurrence, but I slowly learned how to manage the exposure. According to Elizabeth Siegel, curator of The Art Institute of Chicago, Sato's work "has a strong feeling of space, depth, and, through the artist's process of applying light, even a sense of time."³ I noticed my images began to look more three dimensional and I started to value more than just the light.

¹ Mark Haworth-Booth, "Photography and Time," *Aperture* (New York

² Elizabeth Siegel, Tokihiro Sato: Photo Respiration (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2005), 8.

³ Elizabeth Siegel, Tokihiro Sato: Photo Respiration (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2005), 15.



Figure 1: Tokihiro Sato. #170 Manji, 1992. Lightbox, 20 in. x 24 in., Haines Gallery.



Figure 2: David Christian Rehor, Brilliant Trees, 1998. Silver print, 16 in. x 20 in.

I quickly evolved into a period of romanticism with my work, which included influences by photographers such as Harry Callahan (1912-1999), Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1925-1972),

Clarence John Laughlin (1905-1985), Minor White (1908-1976), and Jerry Uelsmann (b. 1934), among others. There were many photographers that explored and glorified decay and ruins, but no better than Laughlin (Fig. 3). His work was the product of its time, a reaction to the rational, meaningless world of mid-twentieth century America. According to poet, Andrei Codrescu, “Clarence Laughlin must have felt keenly the despair of the various losses documented by the existentialists. He adopted their themes but chose surrealism.”⁴

⁴ Clarence John Laughlin, *The Haunter of Ruins* (New York, Bulfinch Press, 1982), 13.



Figure 3: Clarence John Laughlin. The House of Hysteria, 1941. Silver print, private collection.

Like Sato, Laughlin captured his surreal world as it happened in real time. The idea of the photographic image that portrayed an event as it were, even if it was distorted, was very appealing to me. In time I realized to achieve the effect I was striving for, I needed to use multiple camera exposures. First, I tried to photograph multiple exposures in the camera (Fig. 4), but eventually investigated the idea of creating them in post-production, which was in the darkroom at the time. I began to study the work of Harry Callahan, specifically, his Eleanor series (Fig. 5). Callahan aligned himself with the school of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) regarding experimentation and broke away from the popular realist documentarians of the mid-twentieth century in America.

Callahan was quoted as saying, “I know there are a lot of photographers who try to say something, some kind of literal, intellectual statement...a really good picture says it all without trying.”⁵



Figure 4: David Christian Rehor, Stone House Ruins, Harpers Ferry, 2017. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.

⁵ Britt Salvesen, Harry Callahan: The Photographer at Work (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 35.



Figure 5: Harry Callahan, Eleanor, 1951, Silver print.

At some point I focused on the work of Jerry Uelsmann, a true expert in the photo montage technique (Fig. 6). His silver gelatin work was a perfect marriage of technical precision and poetic visions from the subconscious. In the words of A. D. Coleman, “Uelsmann has elaborated an oneiric cosmology: an idiosyncratic, sometimes obliquely and sometimes directly autobiographical dream-world.”⁶ Uelsmann omitted titling the bulk of his work to avoid any grounded associations or specific themes. Personally, I executed creative license to document my dreams and felt no need to explain them. My attitude changed once I discovered the work from *The New Topographics* series of contemporary landscape photography.

⁶ A.D. Coleman, *Photo Synthesis* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1992), Forward.



Figure 6: Jerry Uelsmann, Untitled, 1986, Silver print photomontage.

After I saw the work of Lewis Baltz (1945-2014), Richard Misrach (b. 1949), Robert Adams (b. 1937), and others, I realized the world I lived in was changing and that human development was rearranging the landscape at an incredible pace. I felt the need to document my environment more directly and purposefully, but I had not completely abandoned my love for romanticism. I was intrigued by these photographers that used minimalism to exhibit the stark reality of a man-altered landscape. Misrach's *Cancer Alley* series (Fig. 7) had a profound effect on me and was coincidentally compared to Laughlin's work in the American South. Writer, Jason Berry stated, "Like Clarence John Laughlin before him, Richard Misrach captures the tones of a culture in spiritual twilight... now facing a darkness."⁷

⁷ Jason Berry, "Cancer Alley": A Photographic (New York: Rizzoli, 2001), 162, 2001), 32.

Additionally, from the influence of contemporary landscape photographers, I realized color was an effective means of expression. It was evident to me, the process of recording light was quite different with color photography versus black and white photography, especially with the use of color casts. The magic hour produced radical tonal changes within a narrow window of time. Up until that point, I strictly subscribed to the use of black and white photography when making my landscape and environmental portrait work. This was a watershed moment (Fig. 8).



Figure 7: Richard Misrach, Hazardous Waste Containment Site, Dow Chemical Corporation, Chromogenic print, 1998.



Figure 8: David Christian Rehor, Dream of the Red Shoes, 2010. Pigment print, 24 in. x 36 in.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. IN RELATION TO TIME

When I commenced the *Manifestations* project, I consciously chose to photograph during the twilight hours of the day. I purchased a large sensor, “medium” format digital camera for maximum resolution, sensitivity control, and color depth. My first photo shoots were planned in late November of 2020. The days were short, which was ideal for me to photograph both in the early morning and late evening. I continued shooting throughout the Winter and early Spring of 2021, almost every day. As summer approached, I shot less and less due to the longer days. I wanted to capture the light when it was dim and purposefully used long exposures. I entered the scene and carefully illuminated the landscape. I preferred to work in front of the camera rather than behind the camera.

The long exposures influenced the movement of the sky, water, and the effects of wind on foliage (Fig. 9). This time of day allowed me to work undisturbed. Working during the quiet hours was a meditative experience and the lack of human presence was something I desired. If there was any human activity, the long exposures made them invisible. I mounted my camera on a tripod and used a remote control to shut the camera on and off as needed. An exposure of the ambient light was calculated, then I worked within that period. In general, I set the lens to its “sweet spot” and used the lowest ISO setting to achieve the maximum time I could get. Sometimes a neutral density filter was required.

It was important for me to capture some energy in the scene. Some of the photographs exhibited both qualities of movement and quiet stillness (Fig. 10). I discovered an interesting balance between the opposite ends of the spectrum and began to exploit these characteristics. In

other images the movement was more subtle or non-existent. Time was seen through movement, but the subject matter was locked in time. Writer, Gretel Ehrlich explained, “The complexity is not only in the details of what can be seen in the frame, but also in the absences they represent: all of the past, all of the future. There is only the event of the instant.”⁸ A camera capturing the movement of time was an illusion. My camera had the capability to magically transcend the scenery which went far beyond what was plainly in front of my eyes. The images displayed a moment in time, but compressed time.



Figure 9: David Christian Rehor, Hidden Substation, Cook Drive, 2021. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.

⁸Gretel Ehrlich, “Joel Sternfeld: Oxbow Archive,” *Apert*



Figure 10: David Christian Rehor, River and Portal, 2021. Lightbox, 25 in. x 31 in.

B. IN RELATION TO SPACE

When I decided to scout locations to photograph, I made a crucial decision to focus on the industrial areas close to my home in Roanoke. This was for convenience and proximity's sake, but also because this was familiar territory. The reason I chose these locations was because they were the boundaries between development and an uninhabited environment. There was a territorial battle between the manufactured landscape and relentless erosion, a reclamation by nature. Writer, Dalia Azim, described these spaces as “borderlands, focused on the uninhabited areas at the edges of society, showing us landscapes in transition, melting into the stage of human activity.”⁹

I woke up early in pitch darkness and arrived at a location before the sun would come up. Then, I set up my equipment in the dimmest twilight. I manually focused the camera lens with the help of a flashlight. Since I preferred maximum depth of field, some calculations were necessary. Composing the photograph was done carefully with the monitor, though the twilight was incredibly low. I had very little time to adjust settings, because of the arriving sunlight. Due to the swift change in light and color, each photograph radically changed from exposure to exposure. In just minutes the sunlight was too bright and beyond my abilities to shoot the prolonged exposure I needed.

Making photographs during the evening was a different affair. It was convenient for me to set up the camera in full sunlight, but I had no idea what the image would look like under the shroud of darkness. I made last second compositional changes, or in some cases, I returned another evening to reshoot. Human activity was at its peak, in contrast to the early hours of the day, so the movement of human interaction would be recorded in the photographs (Fig. 11).

⁹Dalia Azim, “Eirik Johnson: West of Foundation No. 185, 2004,” 73. A p e r t u



Figure 11: David Christian Rehor, *North Cross Fence*, 2021. Lightbox, 20 in. x 24 in.

My initial images lacked the presence of a human figure. I illuminated parts of the image and separated subject matter, or in some cases, connected aspects of the subject matter, like the clouds and the walkway in *Footbridge to Railyard* (Fig. 12). Sometimes I focused on an object as the central subject (Fig. 13). These objects were in extensive decomposition. They lacked function and appeared isolated and discarded. This was a unique American brand of landscape photography, something romantic but repulsive at the same time.¹⁰ In other cases, man-made objects were curiously placed or located in what seemed like the primordial landscape (Fig. 14).

¹⁰ Andy Grundberg, *Crisis of the Real* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1990), 84.



Figure 12: David Christian Rehor, Footbridge to Railyard, 2021. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.



Figure 13: David Christian Rehor, Norwich Cube, 2021. Lightbox, 16 in. x 21 in.



Figure 14: David Christian Rehor, Vent Pipe, 2021. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.

C. IN RELATION TO LIGHT

There was no other artist that understood the organic and mysterious qualities of light more than James Turrell (b. 1943). I admired his work for many years, but his influence was not directly noticeable in my work until this project. Turrell aligned himself with the belief that light was an object itself, not just something that reflects off other objects.¹¹ Historically in art, light only rendered nature. Turrell believed that light was tangible, even malleable. I borrowed this philosophy of light and applied it to my method of figure illumination (Fig. 15).

To incorporate these figures into the landscape, I photographed them in a studio for a photomontage. This allowed me to illuminate the human form in a controlled environment. Great care was taken to ensure that the scale of the figures, their perspective and angle of view, were correctly integrated within the scene. I focused on the light itself rather than the actual identity of the individual. I used custom built flashlights and traced the body with light and outlined them from darkness. To create light patterns, I connected many small tactical lights together.

These illuminated figures appeared as apparitions. They were figures of light that represented an ephemeral glimpse into the spiritual realm, between the changing worlds of night and day (Fig. 16). The figures were alone and isolated, much like the painter, Edward Hopper (1882-1967) portrayed his subjects. This was also evident in the photography of Gregory Crewdson (b. 1962), who emulated Hopper. His subjects are isolated and nervously grounded in the harsh realities of their living space.¹² By comparison, I believed the world was full of

¹¹ Michael Govan, Christine Y. Kim, James Turrell: A Retrospective (London: Prestel Publishing, 2013), 13.

¹² Gregory Crewdson, "In Ape Eboniey" (New York, Aperture Foundation)

unexplainable and supernatural occurrences. Isolation did not have a negative connotation for me. This experience was essential for a meaningful connection with nature.

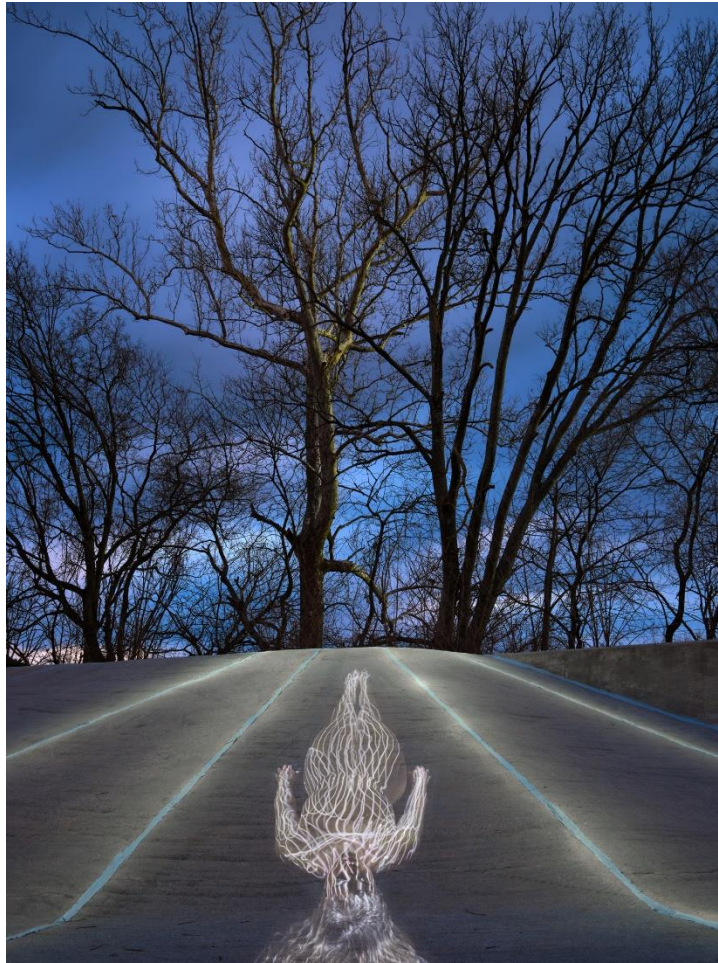


Figure 15: David Christian Rehor, Concrete Mound, 2021. Lightbox, 20 in. x 24 in.



Figure 16: David Christian Rehor, Green Fence, 2021. Lightbox, 25 in. x 31 in.

IV. CONCLUSION

I exhibit my work in large custom handmade light boxes. For me, digital capture, still or video, is best represented with back-lit media since it is created with a monitor. (Figures 17-29) catalog the remainder of work included in my thesis exhibition. As my experimentation process continues to evolve, I animate some of my apparitions with stop motion photography. These short stop motion films are presented by monitor or projection.

Manifestations represents a personal and spiritual documentation that illustrates the transitions within space, time, and light. Figures of light could be remnants, ghosts of transformation. Although these are meant to occupy the present, and may have drawn associations from a ritualistic past, the images impart a perception of timelessness. Their purpose is to find meaning within the foreboding spaces common in the modern American landscape.

In addition, I need to document the spaces due to rapid demolition. In too many cases, I find the landscape I once photographed completely altered just a few weeks later. There are strange similarities with the natural erosion of the environment and a modification of the landscape by human intervention. Human erosion is what I call it. Development seems like an ephemeral pursuit which is rarely commingling with nature.

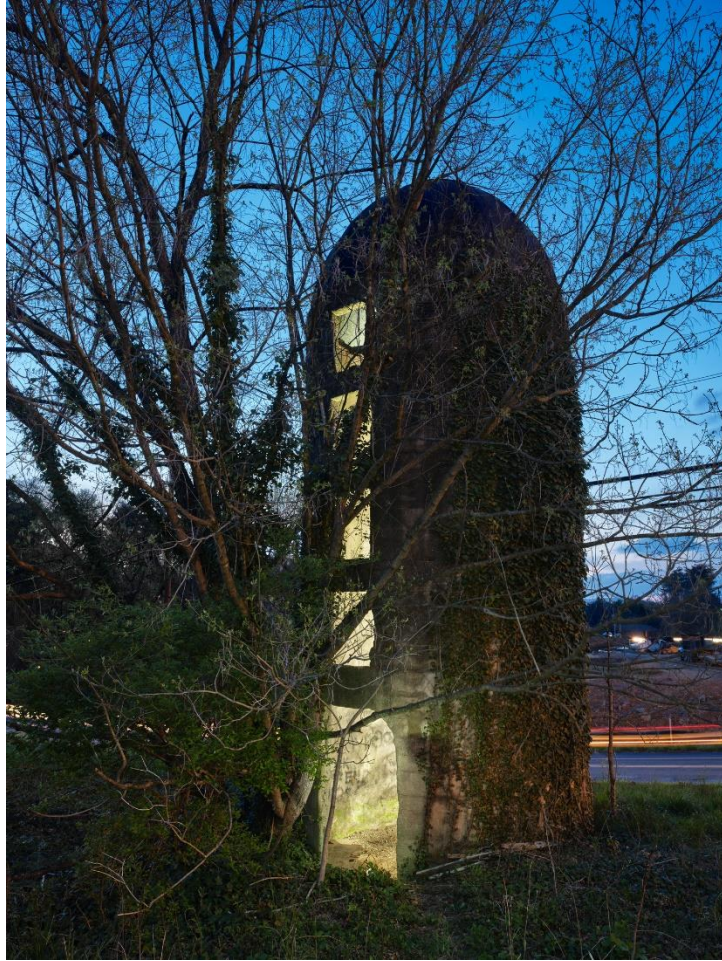


Figure 17: David Christian Rehor, Garst Silo, 2021. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.



Figure 18: David Christian Rehor, Norwich Warehouse, 2020. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.



Figure 19: David Christian Rehor, Depot, 2021. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.



Figure 20: David Christian Rehor, Plastic Wrap House, 2021. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.



Figure 21: David Christian Rehor, Kudzu Truck, 2021. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.



Figure 22: David Christian Rehor, Yeti, 2021. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.



Figure 23: David Christian Rehor, The Four Tunnels, 2021. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.



Figure 24: David Christian Rehor, Light Pollution, 2021. Pigment print, 16 in. x 20 in.



Figure 25: David Christian Rehor, Telegraph Line, 2021. Lightbox, 20 in. x 24 in.

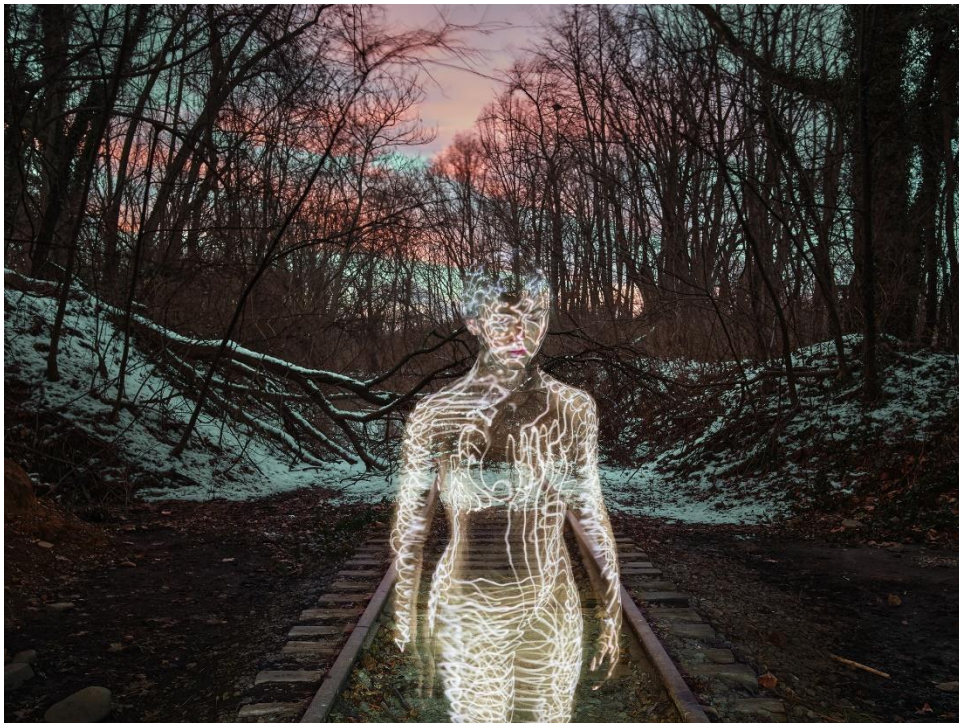


Figure 26: David Christian Rehor, Defunct Railroad, 2021. Pigment print, 24 in. x 30 in.



Figure 27: David Christian Rehor, Floodwall, 2021. Pigment print, 24 in. x 30 in.

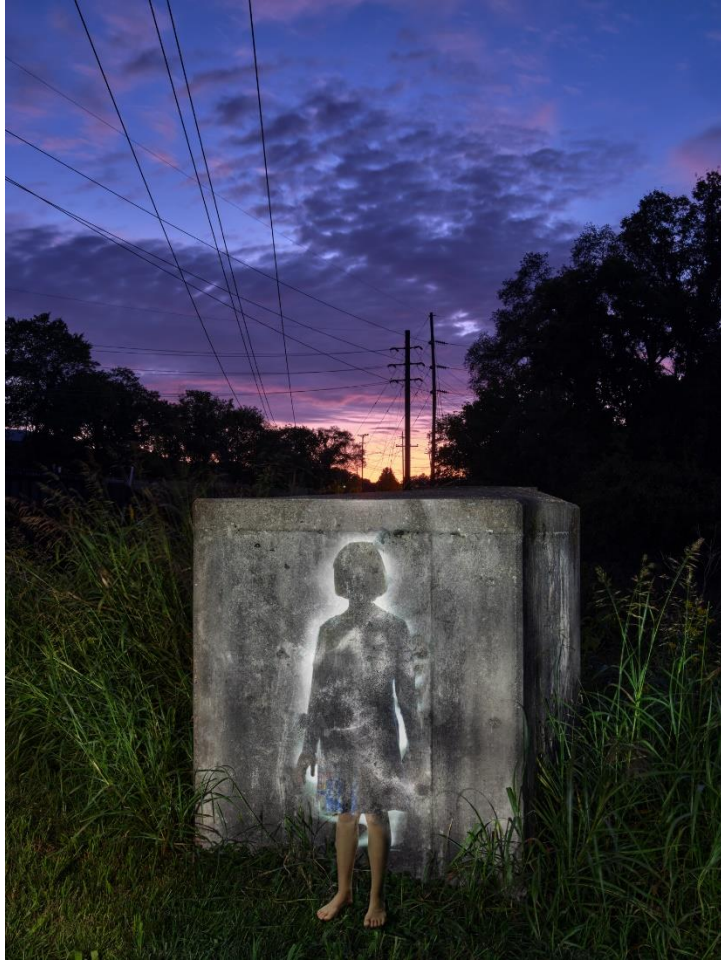


Figure 28: David Christian Rehor, Concrete Cube, 2021. Pigment print, 24 in. x 30 in.



Figure 29: David Christian Rehor, Passageway, 2021. Pigment print, 24 in. x 30 in.

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