After The Fire

In the third post in our series on wildfire in North America, photographers Eric Zeigler and Aaron Ellison make a pilgrimage to some of the oldest living beings, the bristlecone pines of Nevada's Great Basin to gain a deep time perception into the effects of fire. on the natural world. Crossing fire-scarred lowlands and snow-shrouded passes, they contemplate how photographic processes old and new might grant us access to the perspectives of birds, insects, and ancient trees.

Great Basin Bristlecones Below Promontory (2021). Original glass plate image by Eric Zeigler & Aaron M. Ellison.

Eric Zeigler & Aaron M. Ellison

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We arrive in Great Basin National Park, on the eastern edge of Nevada. The mountain peaks in the distance cut the evening sun's afterglow like shattered razors, leaving darkness to fill a foreground penetrated only by our car's headlamps that skim the tops of the scrub brush for miles ahead. In the distance, a few lights outline an outpost town, while the edge of the horizon feels as distant as the Milky Way shimmering above us.

We have come to witness the Great Basin bristlecone pines – the oldest known singular living organisms on Earth. The intense cold and thin air of these rugged mountains that extend more than 3000 metres above sea level counterintuitively increase the longevity of these Methuselan trees; the seedlings of the eldest would have been contemporaries of the builders of Stonehenge. The cold also shields them from the heat of the fires that regularly rage miles below them.

Early in the morning, we ascend the trails while our shoulders sag under the weight of our cameras and associated equipment. We cross over free-running mountain streams hearing the splash of ice falling from tree branches as it melts in the morning sun. We reach the Bristlecones and, awestruck, make images that we hope adequately honour their perseverance. But after only three more days, a deep snowfall blocks the roads and buries the trails to the trees. This weather, which the Bristlecones have shrugged off for millennia, forces us to retreat to the fire-scarred lowlands and the safety of the Stargazer Inn, whose name eponymously conjures the immense distances and perspectives of the Basin and Range.

seems alive; one step later, we are no longer sure.

Slowly rising in altitude but still far below the snowline, we reach charred piñon-juniper woodlands that obscure our view forward, hiding the mountain range ahead. We can drive only as far as the new parking area near the centre of the fire scar; its predecessor – a mile further on and now identifiable only by a barely legible and melted sign – was washed away by the rains that scoured the land after the conflagration. Wildlife seems sparse here – the legacy of the fire or only the season – but then we see the flash of a Northern Flicker as the landscape abruptly opens and the mountain range appears sharply in front of us.

Charcoal snags puncture the rocky, cheatgrass-covered soil like a bed of nails. Space stretches. Time stops.

*

We look around. What do we see and what do we not see?

Lexington Arch, Charcoal Snags (2021). Photo by Eric Zeigler and Aaron M. Ellison

Two of our cameras are unusual. One is a modern digital camera with a hyperspectral sensor that 'sees' beyond the boundaries of our normal, human-visible spectrum, expanding our imagination into the ultraviolet and the infrared. With this camera, we explore worlds that exist side-by-side with 'ours' and that are inhabited and sensed by myriad other organisms. The vision of birds and bees, for

plates coated with an emulsion that mimics, to the extent possible, the forgotten trade-secret recipes of photographic emulsions used in the 1880s. These emulsions were sensitive to ultraviolet light, to human-visible blues, greens, and some yellows, but not to oranges or reds. The Linhof's view of the world is an echo of photography's past.

In the 21st century, so many of us form digital memories by instantaneously capturing images that appear on our small glowing screens. The latent image – the invisible image-on-film (or glass plate) that exists like a hungry ghost in limbo between non-being and being – and the perspectives it contains, have been all but lost. The tools we use now to create images have eliminated the step between decision – *camera shutter clicks* – and revelation – *an image arises from a chemical bath in a room bathed in warm red light.* With our smartphones and digital cameras, we have willfully outrun and outgrown time while relegating latency to a soft-focused nostalgia.

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The latency of the film and glass plates forces us to stop, look, think; weeks elapse before we can return to our darkroom, develop the negatives, print the photographs, and revive and instantiate the context of the moment-of-taking. This critical slowing down opens a window that lets us see – as others might – the photographs we have made and the memories they reawaken.

Unexpectedly, our digital hyperspectral images have latency, too. It is difficult, perhaps impossible, for us to comprehend what the

we've returned to the Stargazer, and later still, when we have comparison prints, can we take the time to process the digital images and glimpse what they really portray.

Lexington Arch Charcoal Snags in Valley (2021). Clockwise from top left: Visible Spectrum, Colour; Visible Spectrum, Desaturated; Infrared Spectrum; Ultraviolet Spectrum. Original digital and film images by Eric Zeigler and Aaron M. Ellison.

There is a greater value to latency that extends far beyond its appeal to romantics and hyperspectral enthusiasts. Latency permits us to forget the connections between earlier events – the pleasant anticipation associated with snapping a great photograph or the immediate horror of a wildfire – and their subsequent outcomes – the stunned satisfaction (or the more frequent painful disappointment) of actually seeing the photograph or the amazement of the resurgence of life in the fire's long aftermath. The deliberate practice of forgetting initial and acute pleasures or pains while reifying the sensorial outcome is essential for the creation of memories, according to Lewis Hyde in *A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past.*

The intentional forgetting accompanying enforced latency is a critical part of processing our glass-plate photographs and hyperspectral images. It is the gestalt of the scene that makes us stop, look around, and take a picture. When we press the shutter, we

and hazy sky in the ultraviolet. The obligatory latency between exposure and its revelation focuses our attention on the continuous flow of time and space rather than on getting the perfect shot (or watching it slip through our fingers) in the here and now.

*

As we hike back to the makeshift parking lot, we hear only the stones grating against each other beneath our boots. Passing patches of chokecherry bushes laden with shrivelled fruit, we turn and scan the grassy bowl the fire left behind.

Lexington Arch Charcoal Snags in Valley (2021). Original glass plate image by Eric Zeigler and Aaron M. Ellison.

Look again. What did we see, what have we forgotten? What will we see, what will we remember?

May, 2023

We switch on the colour-corrected fluorescent lamp near the printer, and it stutters to full brightness while we hang the prints of Bristlecones and charcoal snags near one another under its glow. The prints are large as photographs go, but small compared to trees. Individually, these images made nearly two years ago define

eye-witness memories of such an apparently salient event, if they ever had it at all.

The bristlecones would not have seen the Black Fire but the smoke they inhaled is recorded in their annual rings.

The bristlecones would not have seen the Black Fire – nor the dozens of others that regularly flared miles below them and decades behind them – but the smoke they inhaled is recorded in their annual rings. The thickness of the air in the ultraviolet images reminds us that until we walk into and through the frame, expand our limited vision, and discover different paths, it is impossible to determine what is dead or alive, about to sprout and grow or fade into twilight.

Great Basin Bristlecone (2021). Left: Visible Color; Right: Ultraviolet. Original Digital and Film Images by Eric Zeigler & Aaron M. Ellison.

an hour, their family for only 72. The image deceives – the fire could have/is/will happen/happening/happen anywhere and anytime – and we find comfort in the deception: it happened before and it may – or may not – happen again. Yet, before the Bristlecone saplings have even escaped their youth, the silver on our glass plates and the ink of our prints will fade, and the charcoal snags will collapse into dust.

*

As we turn out the lamp and stack the prints safely in an archival box, our imagination runs on, finding pleasure in recalling actions and revelations, forgetting the when.

Dark Mountain: Issue 23 – Dark Kitchen

The Spring issue 2023 is set around our Dark Kitchen table where writers, artists and cooks explore food culture in a time of unravelling

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