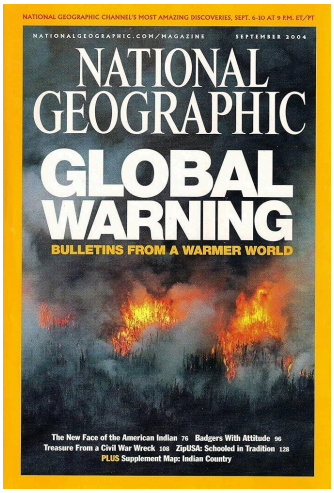
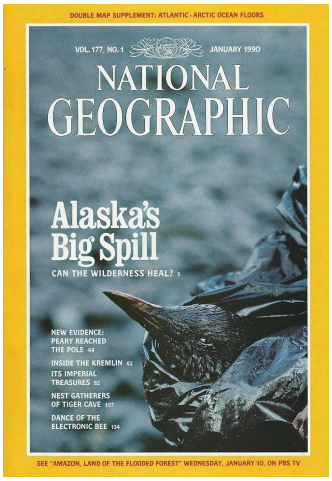
A Chaos of Hard Clay: Photographs of Earthly Doom

My photographic practice considers the human-nature relationship, focusing especially on the individual psychological experience of climate doom in the Anthropocene. This project was initially inspired by the surreal scenes of my mother's work in wildlife rehabilitation, which also happen to be my earliest memories: an injured beaver's convalescence in our bathtub, an unlucky deer's late-night euthanization by the roadside. I once helped dig poisoned bird seed from the gullet of a pigeon (it died), and it was not lost on me that most of these creatures had been hurt or displaced by humans. Dozens of boxes of 35mm slides document this time. They reflect the simple moments of a young family, but also archive the novelty of our contact with animals usually seen from the window of a car or through the crosshairs of a rifle.

Witnessing simultaneous care and destruction, I learned over time that ruinous human acts outpace reparative ones: even in my youth, climate change was considered an existential threat, but its mention seemed relatively absent from most discourse, art and everyday life. Amitav Ghosh writes, “The strange reality is that this historic encounter, whose tremors and aftershocks we feel every day, has almost no presence in our imaginative lives, in art, music, dance, or literature.” On family camping trips I learned to “leave no trace,” but this applied to particular preserves of natural phenomena, and “traces” seemed to refer to litter, but not the paved road encircling (or tunneled through) the redwood trees. Along with the many other contradictions of the human world, the dissonant lessons of my childhood were foundational and alienating: despite my parents herculean efforts to rehabilitate bent-wing starlings and instill in me a respect toward plants and animals, I grew to be cynical about the compatibility between humans and the rest of the natural world.





My upbringing notwithstanding, I myself could not recognize a heron for an egret, could not tell you if a particular tree was dying or thriving, if a wall cloud threatened tornado. Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “Philosophers call this state of isolation and disconnection ‘species loneliness' — a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship.” Joshua Barnett Trey considers how this separation can hamstring our ability to properly grasp the

climate disaster, “Many among us barely know the names of our more-than-human cohabitants . . . and struggle to envision the earth as it once was and as it could one day be. Without these capacities, it is difficult to reckon with ecological losses past, present, and to come.” Even long before technology flooded our daily lives the way it does now, Aldo Leopold wrote, “Your true modern is separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable physical gadgets. He has no vital relation to it; to him it is the space between cities on which crops grow.”

Obviously this narrative is not universal and many cultures, including indigenous cultures in the United States, maintain direct relationships to the land. Many people hunt or farm or work in forestry or ecological restoration, carry deep knowledge and treasure their connection to the nonhuman world. I am not from one such background, and it is likely that without the threat of climate doom I would have not been aware enough to name this alienation. Andreas Malm writes, “If postmodernity is a malaise of amnesia and displacement – as though time and nature had in fact disappeared – we might think of the warming condition as a realisation, in the dual sense of the term, of a more fundamental illness or wrongness in the world.”

I wrestled with this wrongness in the most meaningful manner I could: I crawled willingly into the psychic crevasse that is climate change research and turned the focus of my photographic practice towards my questions about nature. In early attempts at this project, I made photographs at the seams of a supposed divide between nature and culture: depicting abandoned landscapes or crumbling infrastructure overwhelmed with vines, imagining I was appreciating the poetry of nature's endurance or the righteousness of its vengeance.

I found the landscape of the southeastern United States particularly fascinating for its perpetual explosion of overlapping forms of life. Early in my research, I read an entire book about the miraculous mechanics of moss. Now when I watch my dog sniff at a glowing veridian patch of it I can't help but imagine how many conditions had to align for it to exist. In general, I found that reading about ecology, botany, environmental aesthetics and archaeology renewed my appreciation for the awesome complexity of our planet. James Bridle compares this to the mathematical paradox underpinning the concept of fractals, "Instead of resolving into order and clarity, ever-closer examination reveals only more, and more splendid, detail and variation." This idea infiltrated the imagery I made. I found myself looking for scenes in the landscape that evoked a sense of unknowable complexity, uncertainty, wonder.

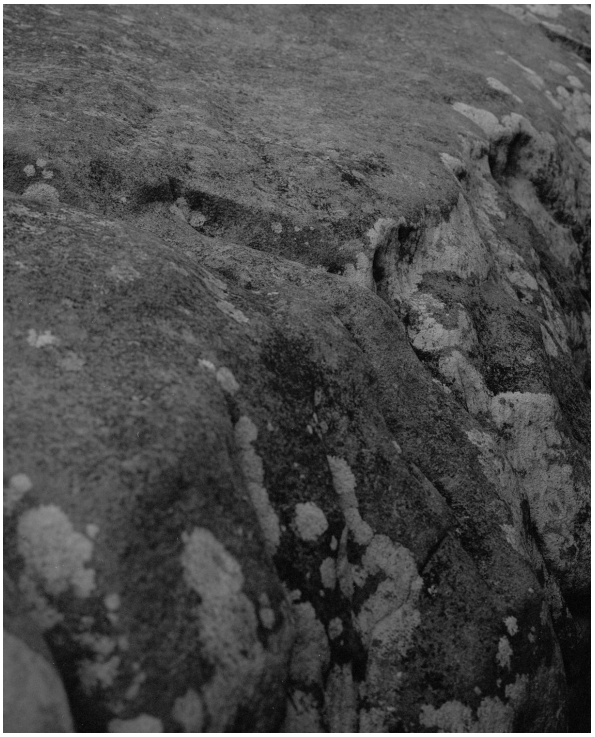

The vegetation of the south was potently inspiring after moving from the high desert, where I was used to a landscape that moved in "the meter of eternity," as put by Ursula K. Le Guin. Plants like "mile-a-minute" Kudzu erupt and fade at a pace imperceptible in deep time. Looking out over the small ocean of Kudzu and bamboo in my backyard in Georgia, colloquial wisdom reminded me that each of these plants were "invasive," that their presence interrupted a supposed natural order of things. Banu Subramaniam writes, "We divvy (plants) up into heroes and villains—native and invasive species. This paradigm is botanically incoherent, if not altogether misleading. It says a lot more about us, and the nativist roots of our society, than it does about the natural world." Ironically, many of these invaders were invited guests. Cal Flyn points out, "A 2011 study showed that, of the thirty-four plants listed by the IUCN as among the hundred worst invasive species worldwide, more than half are known to have escaped from botanical gardens."

As it turns out, my favorite plant, *mimosa pudica,* is sometimes considered an invader. Also known as "the sensitive plant," its fronds fold dramatically when touched in a gesture so humanlike I have always found it uncanny and even unsettling. Perhaps this is because it reminds me that plants are not inert objects, that they are much more than a backdrop to human activity. The very idea of a human-centered world and the unrelenting extraction it wrought is certainly traceable (at least in part) to Western philosophy and Christian doctrine. Kate Soper writes, "The theological purposes . . . attributed to a deity, who had so designed all things and laws of nature as to place them at the service of his human servant, were frequently used to justify a dominion over all those creatures below us in the Chain, and an instrumental use of earthly resources." Climate change, among other things, reveals this as a fantasy, and appropriately will likely cause biblically-adjacent apocalyptic destruction. Roy Scranton writes, "After the icy millennia of the late Pliocene, the Holocene was a kind of Eden.. . . Human civilization has thrived in what has been the most stable climate interval in 650,000 years. Thanks to carbon-fueled industrial civilization, that interval is over."

The sheer force of our destructive power makes it easy to give humankind too much credit, when one considers the scale of our combined impact on our environment. Cal Flyn writes, “We have written ourselves into the DNA of this planet, laced human history into the very earth. Every environment bears a palimpsest of its past.” Even though humans have altered the planet since long before the Athropocene, industrial technology has dramatically accelerated the scope of our impact. David Wallace Wells writes, “More than half of the carbon exhaled into the atmosphere by the burning of fossil fuels has been emitted in just the past three decades…this means we have engineered as much ruin knowingly as we have ever managed in ignorance.” Still, countless texts on this subject insist that humanity must decenter itself if we hope to avoid destroying the entire planet. Winona Laduke writes, “If Galileo shocked the old order by stating that the earth is not the center of the solar system, the environmentalists and the Apaches are asserting that man is no longer at the center of nature.”


MARINE INVERTEBRATE FOSSILS

This approach introduces the term “more-than-human-world,” first used by ecologist and philosopher David Abram. Not only is human-centeredness a notable root cause of climate destruction, it powers a particular approach to the issue of climate change, one that combats the reckless ingenuity of the past with the scientific powers of the future. Elizabeth Kolbert writes about the great lengths wildlife biologists go to to maintain a small, captive herd of otherwise extinct creatures. Attempts to curb the destruction of the California Condor include subjecting chicks to puppetry and electrified garbage to train them not to eat poison or fly into power lines. Mathias Thaler calls such efforts “solutionism,” noting that, “Putting faith in a solution that comprises within it the very causes of the problem ultimately represents a form of self-harming cruelty.” This scholarship does not suggest we stop trying to conserve what is threatened, but insists that unless these efforts are combined with significant political and cultural change, they will fail. It is in this corner of environmental philosophy that I located what feels so sisyphean, so painfully hopeless about climate activism: it is unlikely that any (even well-studied and funded) effort can bring about the massive systemic change needed to evade extreme and irreparable ecological destruction.

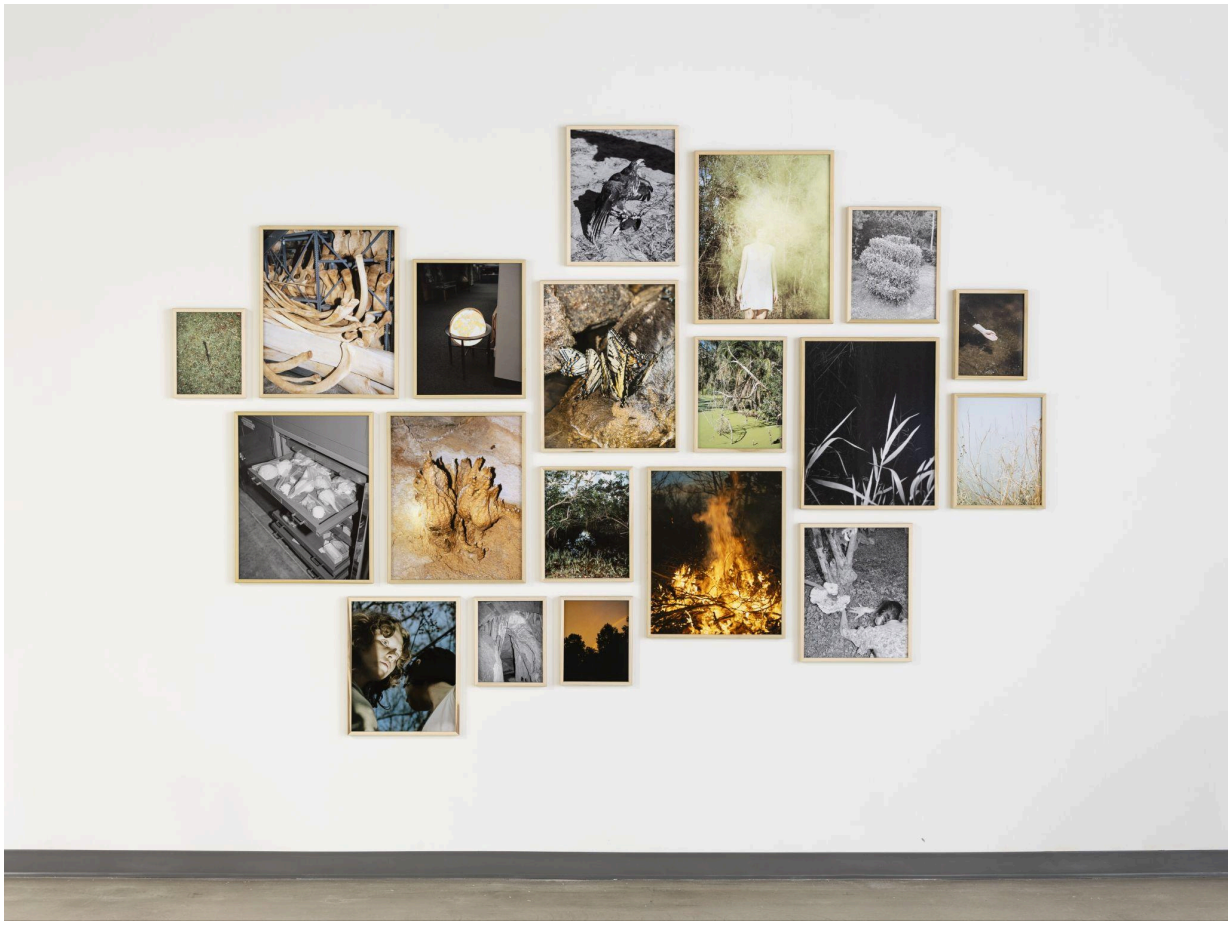


When I first embarked on this research, I was certain it would calcify my despair, justify my cynicism and provide even more readily-conjured statistics and visions of doom. Instead, I discovered my assumptions about humanity as a cancer on an otherwise stable chain were misguided and oversimplified at best, and potentially "eco-fascist" at their logical conclusions. Kai Bosworth writes, "The speculative format suggesting 'humans are the virus' collapses the species into an undifferentiated biological mass taken to be essentially destructive of the planet's ecology . . . ultimately concluding that some portion of humanity ought to be exterminated." This is not to say that all desire for accountability and change is inherently genocidal, but that unregulated emotional postures toward this problem can in fact impede collective action. Bosworth continues, "It is not that such emotional repertoires are solely responsible for the failures of environmentalism. Nor should we stave off the emotions associated with factual knowledge of ecological catastrophe. However, when crystallized through aesthetic work, such an emotional knot has the capacity to lead to depression and burnout, to reinforce the heteronormativity and whiteness of environmentalism, and to buttress expertise and in-group behavior at the expense of new participation."

To borrow this phrasing, untangling “emotional knots” is nearly always the impelling force behind my image-making practice. I could probably not make landscape pictures unladen with guilt, rage and grief about environmental destruction, though initially I feared further research would have a paralyzing effect on my practice. Allen Carlson wrote about the “speechless rapture” experienced by Mark Twain watching the sun set over the Mississippi River. However, as time made him into a seasoned steamboat captain, “. . . after he had ‘mastered the language of this water’ and looked upon it with a ‘trained eye’ . . . moving combinations of colors, lines, and shapes are replaced by understanding of the meaning of the river.” In short, he began to see the forest for the trees, to see meaning (and obstacles for his riverboat) rather than beauty. My ability to admire the beauty of nature, whether pristine or poisoned, was surely altered through this work. Notably, I still cannot identify birds based on their call, or which metals are present in the soil based on the tinge of a poppy flower, but I feel that my landscape pictures are actually more earnest in their devotion, more cognizant of the hundreds of layers of unseen significance in each frame.

This period of study also revealed the importance of acknowledging the beauty of novel ecosystems evolving rapidly in the places humans have terraformed, bombed, excavated and made toxic. Cal Flyn writes, “To come into an abandoned mine or spoil heap or quarry or parking lot or oil terminal, and see it for the natural wonderland it has become is, I admit, a difficult ask. But in these environmentally straitened days, it is a taste worth cultivating.” Similarly, I found inspiration to continue making photographs in the relatable fatalism of “eco-miserabilists.” Roy Scranton writes, “The role of art in the Anthropocene . . . must be founded on a hopeless hope: the end of global human argo-extractive capitalist civilization concomitant with the end of the mild climate of the Holocene, and the reemergence of human collective life in a new and terrifying world.”

In my resulting thesis piece, both vigilant and resigned portrait subjects observe a world that is multitudinous: surreal and menacing, worshiped and ravaged, mutated, extinct. Artifacts from natural history museums, stacked perilously or labeled neatly, pay homage to the many scientists who mourn the losses of climate change with particular clarity. Aldo Leopold wrote that the ecologist "lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen." Visual references allude to resource extraction, manipulation and abuse of the landscape, while others suggest reciprocity between humans and other creatures.



A Chaos of Hard Clay
Archival Pigment Prints, 2024

A key narrative reference and source of the title of this body of work is the poem "Darkness" by Lord Byron, written after and likely influenced by the 1815 eruption of

Mount Tambora (it starts, “I had a dream, which was not all a dream”). The volcanic cloud led to dramatic climate changes, famine and instability in a “Year Without a Summer.” In “Darkness,” Byron describes what befalls a world when the sun abruptly fails to rise. He writes of men turning against each other in the primal chaos that follows: “all hearts / Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light.” Largely interpreted as a condemnation of the selfishness of mankind, the poem cautions against ignoble acts in the service of self-preservation. Despite suggesting a natural disaster, all of the suffering it details is caused by how humans react to it. David Wallace Wells writes a similar warning about our changing climate, “The uncertainty of what will happen—that haunting uncertainty—emerges not from scientific ignorance but, overwhelmingly, from the open question of how we respond.”

Painting by Ron Wood from the cover of 'The Year Without Summer'

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