

Elizabeth Houston Gallery

World Photography Organization
Bay Views - Mark Lyon, THE FENCE
Interview by Jill Cotton
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Best Way, North Adams, MA - © Mark Lyon

This blog is part of a series of exclusive interviews with the winners of United Photo Industries' (UPI) pioneering Brooklyn-based public photography installation THE FENCE.

New Yorker Mark Lyon is no stranger to exhibitions. Since graduating from SUNY New Paltz, his work has been shown widely in the US including Pulse NY, Boston University's Photographic Resource Center, Woodstock Center for Photography and Rayko Photo Center.

Bay Views, his work on THE FENCE, focuses on the spaces that others might overlook. Mundane spots are transformed into beautiful scenes of quiet stillness.

Let's start at the beginning - what drew you to photography?

Growing up I was taught that art had value. Drawing and painting were a focus of my early art education. My Father was an employee of Eastman Kodak, so I understood that photography was significant along with traditional art media. It took time for me to find the full potential of photography as an expressive medium. Ironically, discovering contemporary photographers that were referencing master painters was my turning point.

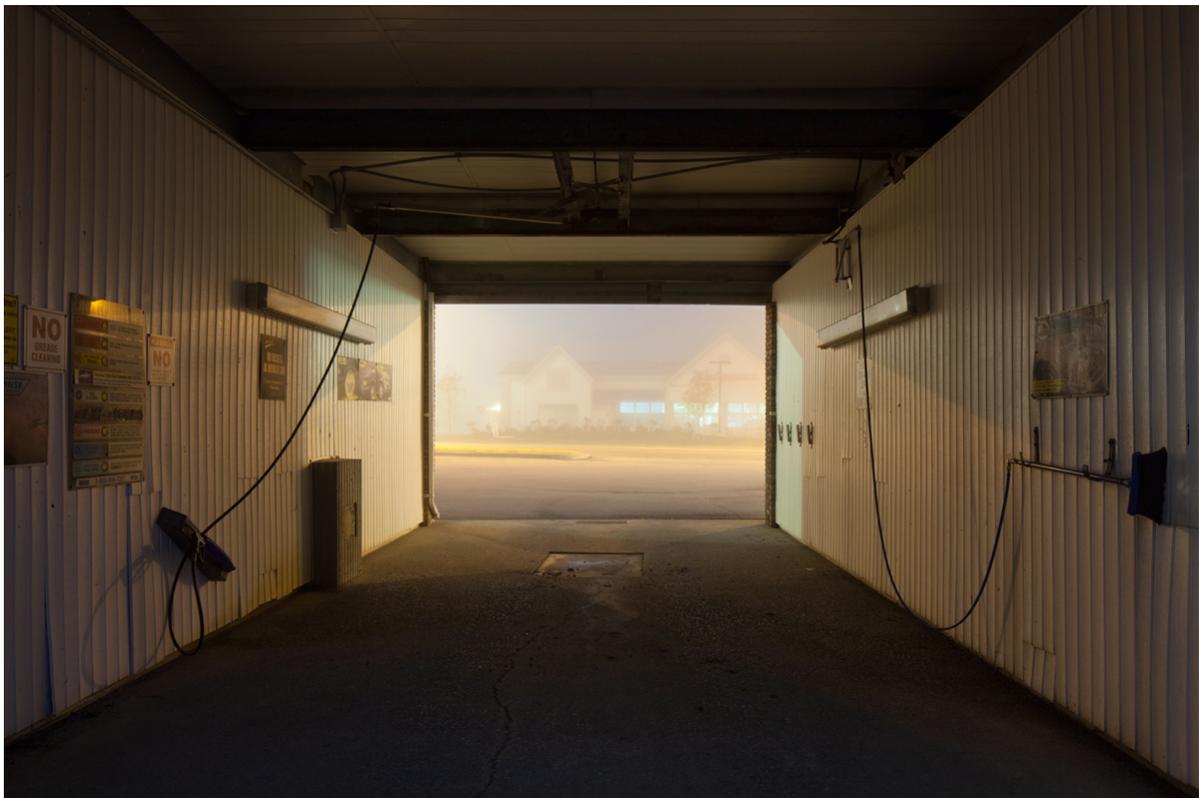
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Early in your career you were recognised by several prizes and fellowships, including the Aperture Portfolio Prize and Photo Lucida's Critical Mass. How important were these recognitions and what effect did they have?

The wider exposure to my photographs through Aperture and other institutions opened up new opportunities to exhibit and publish my photographs. But just as importantly, the recognition was a validation that the work has significance outside of my need to make it.

Bay Views, your series on THE FENCE, has an unusual subject matter – self-service car wash bays. What was the inspiration for this series and when did the project begin?

The project began with a single image of a frozen car wash wall in 2007. Initially nothing became of the image. Years later I was searching for a new subject to begin working on and the memory of that image became the point of inspiration.



Purple Parlor, Poughkeepsie, NY - © Mark Lyon

Can you tell us more about technical approach to the shoot? How did you light the shots in the space? What exposure did you use?

These photographs are all taken at night with exposures ranging from a few seconds to fifteen minutes. I used only available light, which meant that I had to be very patient to get the images I envisioned. Some photographs took up to two years for the circumstance to be ideal. This entailed waiting for lights to be burned out and specific seasonal weather conditions to comply.

The composition of each image provokes a strange sense of quietness, even loneliness. Is this what you hoped to achieve? Was the absence of people always intentional in this series?

The relationship of architecture and framed landscape was at the heart of what I was after. It wasn't one of action, but

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of slowly looking and perhaps introspection. The symmetrical view, lighting and even the simplicity of the open cube played to a more quiet and introspective image.

I liked that these locations were packaged in something simple and also very much connected to the culture I live in. These were spaces people actively used, unlike the automatic bays found at most of these same locations. The spaces themselves told a story through the choices that were made in their construction and design. Even the state of disrepair of the bays gave an implied history of use.

In some cases I had to work quite hard to keep any traces of people, traffic or my own shadow out of the photographs. With long exposures, even in the middle of the night, traffic, planes and people become an issue. In some cases I cover the lens for a few minutes if needed, but it isn't always clear when a car will drive through the shot. I have also had to give up on some promising locations because the light imposes one or more self-portrait cast shadows in the bay, effectively killing the mood.

What have been the challenges of shooting this series?

Persistence and timing are the biggest challenges. The reliance on available light and weather makes patience and persistence a must. These spaces are in abundance, but few have potential on the first visit to create the photograph I am after. Some locations have only worked because of an enduring hope that a photograph could be made if only ideal conditions could be met.

Do you have a favourite image from this series and do you plan to continue photographing this subject?

This is an ongoing project. I do have some favourites; "Defunct (Summer)" is one of them. It's a location that I initially decided against even looking at. I had the mindset to avoid including any locations that had been abandoned. I didn't want the series to be perceived as just a photographer's hunt for abandoned structures. But as I began to find car washes that were newly renovated (Best-Way in Massachusetts) and even updated with LED lights (Foam and Wash in Poughkeepsie), including some contrasting locations that were out of service became a possibility.

"Defunct (Summer)" is a location that I visited numerous times. I photographed there enough that I began to notice a cycle of a particular streetlight that would occasionally turn off for about ten minutes. When this happened the cast shadows of the overgrowth outside would become visible in a deep amber light on the bay wall. I waited for a wet night (to emphasise the moss inside the bay) and exposed the image for the duration of the time the light was off.

Your previous work, Landscapes for the People, looks at the romanticized use of wallpaper landscape photographs, again in spaces that might be otherwise overlooked. Are there parallels between the two series? Did Bay Views develop in any way from Landscapes for the People?

Bay Views was a response to the earlier work. I wanted to continue to pursue landscapes, but in a way that would get me outside (this time) to react to light and weather. I also intended to incorporate the rigid geometric wall structures into the project. The car wash bays fit the bill perfectly.

The idea of artifice was something that I at least wanted to reference in the new work. In Bay Views the framed landscapes can take on the quality of something unreal, while in Landscapes for the People the scenes were facades adhered to a wall.

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What was the first wallpaper and room you photographed and why?

The first location I photographed was in a laundromat. Nearly an entire wall had been plastered with a wallpaper landscape depicting an idyllic lake scene with boats and hot air balloons. A wall mounted phone projected from the lake. Along the bottom of the landscape a vintage orange folding table matched the balloons and a houseplant made reference to the lush mountains above. All of the elements were there just asking to be photographed. It quickly dawned on me that I had recently encountered a Zen wallpaper landscape at a physician's office and that this could become a body of work.

How did you source the spaces you photographed for this series?

Friends, family and co-workers were very helpful in finding new spaces. I also began to actively pursue locations where I thought I would find wallpaper murals. I kept an eye out when I drove or walked in commercial areas- even finding a few at dusk when lights were turned on in buildings.

Looking forward, are there other "forgotten interiors" you wish to photograph or will you turn your attention elsewhere?

There are a few new potential project ideas that I have been considering. But for now I would like to keep my focus on completing Bay Views.

Last question – if we could transport you anywhere in the world to continue your Bay Views series, where would you like to shoot your next car wash and why?

These are almost all very mundane spaces that become something more when certain circumstances are met. So in this case I wouldn't need to be whisked away to Rome or Paris to get the kind of images I'm after. I do often find myself framing a location and wishing that I could drop in a car wash at will.

It would be fantastic to find a location that looks out over a body of water with warm ambient light from a nearby city or moonlight reflecting in the water. This is a place I would return to over and over again. The closest I have found is a car wash bay that fills with a foot of water (Defunct Winter).