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Nature versus Manmade—Amalgamated

BY ERIC HOPE

The hazy sunlight washing through the trestles of the Shepardstown's Norfolk Southern Potomac River Bridge is a sight few would think to ponder. For Adam Davies, locales like this one represent invitations for contemplation—moments in space where the footprint of man intersects with the natural world. His unadorned images of bridges, culverts and streambeds lack the photo-shopped “hyper-reality” present in some modern photography. This simplicity is hypnotic, slowly pulling you into the image and gently bumping up against your emotions. I recently sat down with our EMULSION 2013 winner and 2015 DC Artbank inductee to discuss his approach to photography and why these images strike such emotional chords

Davies' interest in the still image and fascination with history overlapped in college, where he earned degrees in both studio arts and history. He next pursued a Master's of Education (and landed a position at the National Gallery of Art) but when the time came to determine the overall arc of his working career—academia or visual arts—Davies knew he would ultimately be more fulfilled creating art than lecturing in a classroom, so back to college he went for an MFA degree. Both educational paths have turned out to inform his work in crucial ways. From a fine art's perspective, Davies notes he's among the last generation of photographers to be immersed in pre-digital techniques. Likewise his love of history, archives and museums covers his images with a chronological, documentary-style sheen.

For most of us a walk along a riverbank, is a merely a pleasant pastime; for Davies it represents a hunting expedition. The artist is keenly interested in the notion that, “all of what we think of as nature is often manmade,” especially in the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic states. In Davies' view, structures conceived and labored over by engineers don't mar the landscape so much as merge with it at times overwhelming it before being subsumed back by the undergrowth or erosion. There is a sense of the mundane to these structures which suits his needs perfectly. Rather than looking for architecture built by the latest “starchitects”, he seeks out humble structures designed with pragmatism rather than designer flourishes. The Kelly Avenue underpass in Baltimore would unlikely win any architecture awards, yet for the artist there is an inherent, aesthetic beauty in the architect's vision that resonates on a fundamental level.

In this context, his work builds upon a line of visual inquiry dating back to antiquity which seeks to capture the dissolve between our manmade world and the natural environment. While Davies highlights his fascination with the architectural etchings of the Italian artist Giovanni Piranesi (1720-1788), he is not simply interested in copying his Italian or other European forbearers. Rather, his images resound with a modern, faintly American vernacular that reverently exalts wide-open spaces while simultaneously paying homage to the ways in which American ingenuity seeks to tame these vast expanses. That vernacular is easily

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recognizable in earlier works featuring prairies and other vast panoramas, but is just as evident, and perhaps more sophisticated, in his current body of work focusing on bridges and underpasses.

Under Davies' gaze, manmade structures soften at their edges as they interact with the biological world. That this happens subtly is a testament to the work involved in obtaining each image. It starts with a climb up a riverbank or along a bridge support with a Canham 8 x 10 inch large format camera in tow. While perhaps nostalgic, this hardware choice allows him to manipulate perspective and even out optical distortions in ways unobtainable with similar digital devices. His use of single film negatives forces him to be extremely methodical with his compositions where lens exposure times can last up to thirty minutes. But with that methodical mindset also comes a sense of stillness which Davies notes, “gives you time to experience the changing of the moment.”

All this work may result in only one usable image, but to Davies the headaches are worth it: the resulting level of visual detail obtained with his Canham is unmatched by current digital



IMAGE COURTESY ADAM DAVIES.

Adam Davies, Clara Barton Pedestrian Bridge, Potomac, MD, 2014-2015.
Archival pigment print, 40 × 50 inches.

cameras. Such details allow nuance to be easily conveyed, even at the scale of the finished works (many clocking in at 40x50 inches). It is precisely those subtle nuances that thrill him the most: the misty cobwebs fluttering in breeze beneath the steel girder; the patch of mold growing upon and silently wearing away a concrete post; the ephemeral ripple of a river's current around a truss.

For Davies, the intersection of “man” and “nature” is not bombastic, but an amalgamation of a thousand incremental touchpoints. At a time when our human interactions with nature might be antagonistic, his images are proof that such an assessment is not so black-and-white. Focus closely and the steel girders even begin to take on a life of their own. In his detailed eye rivets stand out like moles—rust like blemishes on aged skin—as steel girders flex tautly, their heaving exoskeletons beset upon by gravity. Forged by man,

their very molecules seem to subtly shift as the natural world continues to morph around them.

These shifting relational aesthetics highlight the artist's unique contribution to this visual trope while simultaneously underscoring a modernist point of view. While investigating the biomorphic properties these structures gain from their interactions with nature, he simultaneously reduces them to their most basic, geometric forms. The complex interplay that results demonstrates how our notions of beauty, form and function are shaped by these immutable mathematical equations—equations that help structure the ways in which these two worlds interact. In that sense, his images build upon ideas entertained by Cubist artists who sought to reduce their visual vocabulary to similar mathematic constructs.

For Davies, these observations are all well and good, but they

gloss over a personal aspect of his work: the unseen hands of those individuals behind these constructions. The artist's site preparation includes studying both the history of the site and the finished structures' architectural plans (if available). Part of what intrigues him is attempting to view structures through the eyes of their creators. Davies notes that often, “the architect was just building [a structure] to get the job done, but they still have a sense of aesthetics” around the way they design. Those aesthetics and the way in which they insert the structure into the landscape ultimately determine how the two worlds shall blend. The architects remain unseen, but they leave a lasting impression upon the natural world.

Davies is not unaware of the social ramifications of his work. “If there is a political bent to the work,” he tells me “it's to make people consider the landscape.” The artist presages a moment in time when the natural world will quietly envelope manmade structures laid amidst its vastness, ironically noting that this very subsumption will fundamentally alter the natural world as well. We're watching change at a glacial, almost indescribably slow tempo with Davies acting as our metronome, each image visualizing another note in a symphony of time. You'll never look at a crumbling viaduct the same way again.

For more information about the artist, visit his website at www.adamdavies.net

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