Libbie Masterson

“Still, a series of evening photographs, is based on the rugged and extreme landscapes of West Texas. I chose the name because it refers to the stillness that you find in the evening and also touches on the unchanging quality of the terrain. These black and white images shot with evening light evoke nostalgia and quietude. The word still also denotes a single-cell photograph. The idea is to capture a feeling of timelessness. To preserve something that is unknown, beautiful and frightening. Something so foreign, yet somehow familiar.

This series speaks both to the grand scale of Texas and the intimacy found in such an untouched and mysterious place. The 4 x 38 foot panoramic installation draws on the sense of openness and distance. In contrast, a small suite of six single images are more human in scale. These capture moments so quiet, all you can hear is the sound of your own breathing. The handmade portfolio on the pedestal is taken directly from the panorama and can be read through like a book or a family album. Ideally a viewer will experience the terrain in a quiet setting, taking the time to be still.

Photographing Big Bend in the evening was an adventure. I didn’t know what to expect and had no idea it would be so captivating. My formal training and background began with painting and sculpture. At the time, a working knowledge of the camera was still a challenge! It was also a bit unnerving, being alone at night on the Texas border with the snakes and the mountain lions. During my second trip, however, I joined a group led by photographers Scott Martin and Lance Keimig. It was still a little spooky, even with a group, but it was very rewarding. And together we ventured to places I would not have attempted alone.

I shot the large panorama several times. At first, I intended to make the image super sharp. But the more I looked at it, the more I wanted it to feel like someone, maybe Clint Eastwood, should be riding through. A solution was found by putting a filter behind the photograph to soften the light.

Though I wasn’t alone while shooting the four part panorama, I was still distant from our group. As I was shooting across the Rio Grande, I kept imagining I was seeing things. Later as I was processing the images, I kept zooming in to see if the camera might have caught something I couldn’t quite see. This is one of the cool surprises with shooting in the evening. One can sometimes find things that were right there in front of you. Yet, they only become visible when captured by a long exposure.

The Lightning Series is a bit of a journal about Hurricane Ike as it was passing through. It wasn’t really the lightning itself I was trying to capture, but the landscape and silhouettes created by the lightning. At the time I wasn’t thinking of the practicality of standing in the middle of a storm with a large metal tripod. I was inspired. Now I have a carbon fiber tripod, although I don’t know whether that would have made a difference.

I refer to the six small archival inkjet on film prints as the Small Suite because they are such a different scale than I usually make. I love the idea of a musical suite and having a collection which gives variety. All together it makes a story. It is also nice to have something that is more intimate. There is a little something different in each of them and they are all experiments. In one, a pickup truck drove right through the shot, headlights and all. You can’t even see it because the exposure was so long.”

Libbie Masterson
Biography

Libbie Masterson earned a BFA from the California College of Arts. Through her travels to Europe, Norway, Iceland, Alaska and Antarctica, Masterson developed a series of photographs illuminated with light panels. These photographs, scaling up to 70 feet in length, have shown at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, the Barbara Davis Gallery, Houston and the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. In 2008, she created a stage set for The Mozart Trilogy, performed by the Dominic Walsh Dance Theatre and the Sarasota Ballet in Houston, Dallas, New York and Tokyo. As designer with Masterson Design, she also created a stained glass installation for the Amazing Place Chapel.

In 2009, Masterson was awarded an Individual Artists Grant from the Houston Arts Alliance to develop Still: A Study of Texas in the Evening, which was first shown in 2009-10. She continued her work in Provence, receiving a residency awarded by the MFAH at the Dora Maar House, in the South of France. The resulting series NUIT, was exhibited at Wade Wilson Art during FotoFest Biennial 2012. At that time Masterson created a second set design for Dominic Walsh, Claudel. She also created a photographic mural of 100 feet, installed at 2Houston Center building, downtown Houston. In April 2013, she produced a temporary installation of illuminated blossoms for the reflection pool at Hermann Park in concurrence with designing a set for the Houston Grand Opera, HGOco. Titled The Memory Stone, this opera was based on Japan and the Japanese Garden in the Park. The influence of Japanese themes was seen in Water’s Edge (Mizugiwa), an exhibition last summer of her latest work at the Catherine Couturier Gallery (formerly John Cleary Gallery) Houston.

As a curator for the Houston Center for Photography, Masterson has produced the exhibitions Magical Realism in Photography (2011) and Unusual Garden (2013). She is currently working on a show of photography that deals with principles of science and the use of photography in research. Masterson also serves as a reviewer for FotoFest and Lens Culture, Paris.

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