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## Riding the Rails, Without Seeing a Train

John Sanderson's photography celebrates the romance of train travel



John Sanderson's 'Railroad Landscapes' is on view at the New York Transit Museum in Brooklyn. PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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Given the tragic derailment in Philadelphia just days ago, this might not seem the ideal moment to celebrate the romance of train travel. But "Railroad Landscapes," a photography exhibition by John Sanderson at the New York Transit Museum in Brooklyn, does so with quiet eloquence. And without showing a single train.

"It goes back to the feeling of traveling through the American landscape, the quality of absence of showing the tracks without the trains in them," Mr. Sanderson explained last week as we surveyed his work at the 1936 IND subway station-turned-museum. "That kind of quiet melancholy seen in Edward Hopper paintings influenced me greatly."

I get the quiet melancholy/Edward Hopper influence. But Mr. Sanderson's large-format photographs also capture, as subtly as any I've seen, another aspect of train appreciation. It's the reason I volunteer to pick up visitors, my daughters in particular, when they arrive for the weekend at the beautifully restored train station upstate in Hudson, N.Y.

As you hear the whistle blowing, and then spot the Amtrak train coming around a bend, there's a palpable sense of excitement. It's somehow different, more elemental than anything associated with air travel.

"There's a ceremony to it, in a way," Mr. Sanderson said. "Just showing the tracks and the environment is part of that experience."

Railroad crossings convey similar mystery. While you may not be able to see beyond the next curve, it isn't hard to imagine those tracks traveling infinitely in either direction. Connecting New York or New England to the Midwest, and from there to the mountains and deserts of the West, before the journey terminates at the Pacific Ocean. It isn't exaggeration to suggest that tracks evoke a sort of patriotism; they're a visceral symbol of national grandeur.



Photographer John Sanderson PHOTO: ADRIENNE GRUNWALD FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

I'll confess to being somewhat biased about Mr. Sanderson's work because much of his subject matter concerns the Hudson Valley and the trip along the river that I take frequently. For example, there's 2011's "Hudson Line, near Croton, New York," which shows snow-covered tracks, the icy river and clouds at sunset streaked with the vapor trails of jets.

Planes flying overhead at 40,000 feet also provoke wanderlust. But from the ground you somehow feel left behind. Trains, perhaps

because they're terrestrial, feel rife with freedom and possibility. They summon a bit of the hobo in everybody.

Mr. Sanderson, 31 years old, grew up in Hell's Kitchen and started taking pictures while he was a student at City-As-School High School in lower Manhattan. But his interest in trains

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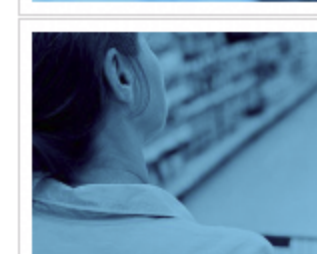


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began as a boy when his father, a train buff, took the family on excursions to Steamtown National Historic Site in Scranton, Pa.

“From an early age, I remember exploring these industrial sites,” he recalled. “I’ve always been drawn to the visual qualities of the American landscape.”

Many of the images are beautiful, for example, another snowy track scene, this one in black-and-white along the Hudson River at Storm King, N.Y. But there’s even beauty to be found in ostensibly unattractive subject matter: “Park Avenue Tunnel Cut, New York City” (2012) shows a row of tenements overlooking the 19th-century graffiti-strewn walls where Grand Central trains emerge into the open air at Park Avenue and 97th Street.

But most evocative of all are the rust-colored tracks that run past the wall, with their intimation of more charmed landscapes beyond the picture frame.

“I mostly drive to the locations,” Mr. Sanderson said of the freight rails along the Hudson’s east bank and the passenger train tracks on the west side. “I feel fortunate I live so close to the Hudson Valley.”

The photographer’s show also provided an opportunity to visit the New York Transit Museum for the first time. The highlight is undoubtedly the 19 restored subway cars, complete with vintage advertising, that range from those dating back more than a century to cars from the 1960s and 1970s.

If you grew up in New York City, you can try to remember your first subway ride and what the cars looked like back then. I seem to recall upholstered seats, such as those on the museum’s R-12 IRT train built in 1948 by the American Car and Foundry Co.

One thing the equipment, including an assortment of turnstiles, seems to establish is that the gentility of subway travel has gone steadily downhill—unless you’re a fan of fiberglass seats too small for the average human posterior—since Teddy Roosevelt’s presidency.

Then again, there’s something to be said for air conditioning, public-address announcements and LCD displays informing you where you are.

And the Transit Museum’s store is probably worth a trip all alone. If you find beauty in NYC subway maps and nomenclature—those colorful, circle-enclosed route numbers and letters—you may well max out your credit card on mugs, magnets, oven mitts, aprons, socks, T-shirts and baseball caps. There’s even fine jewelry, such as cuff links, made from brass tokens of yesteryear.

I picked up an articulated toy 34th Street crosstown bus for \$13.50 and have been admiring it ever since.

—ralph.gardner@wsj.com



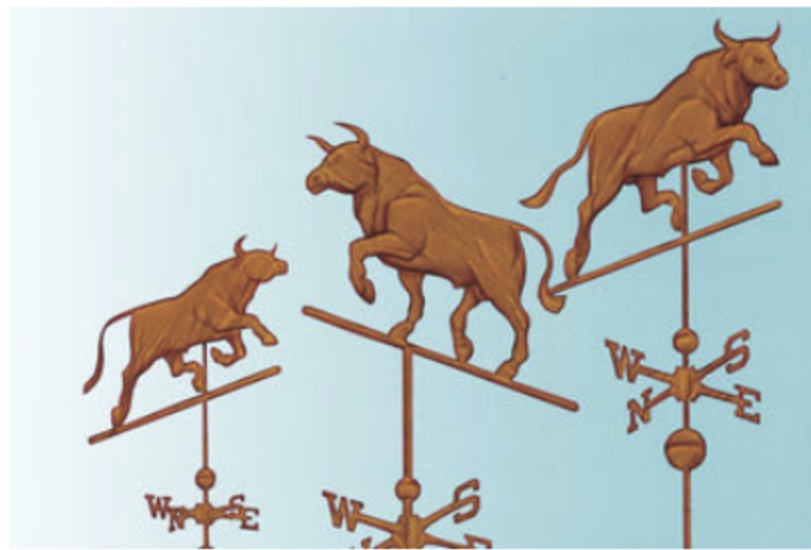
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