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Beyond the train



One scholarship helps artist add Midwest rail art to his New York portfolio

By John Sanderson | July 25, 2013

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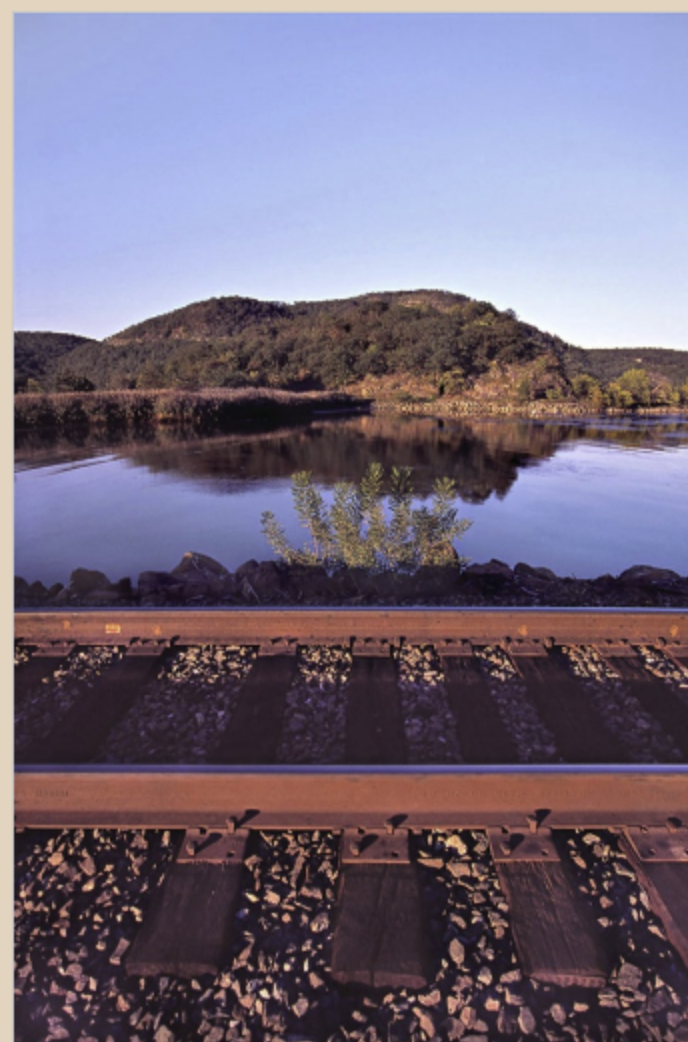
In its heyday, the American train was a wellspring of inspiration. Romantic images of long-distance passenger trains impelled artists such as J.P. Nestor to create swirling banjo and fiddle melodies in "Train On The Island," while Arthur Honegger's orchestral score traces a steam locomotive's imperious journey in "Pacific 231." The symbolic representations of the train in these songs run the entire emotional spectrum, but they also seem to permeate beyond the train, into the landscape itself.

Much of the regional personality that defined American railroading has waned, like the weathered boxcars of fallen flags: Great Northern, Santa Fe, Norfolk & Western, Rio Grande, Rock Island, Erie, Lackawanna, Frisco, Southern Pacific. What remains is the very thing that spurred the construction of the railroad: the places themselves. Likewise, my own photographic interest has moved beyond the trains and towards the immutable presence of the rail line.

As a recipient of one of the Center for Railroad Photography & Art's 2013 Docent Scholarships, I had the opportunity to travel from my home in New York City to Lake Forest, Ill., to attend the Center's annual Conversations about Photography conference. Many of the presenters provided new insights into my own work, while the scholarship travel stipend helped put me in a position to add a new geographic region to my railroad landscape photography: the Midwest.

Given the importance of regional landscapes in my own photography, it came as no surprise that some of my favorite conference presentations featured deeply felt, regionally specific photographs. In particular, the pointed regionalism of Steve VanDenburgh and Michael Froio brought forth a spiritual and intellectual passion that beckoned me to a deeper inquiry of my own work. I sought an understanding of my connection to the railroad, and on an image-making level, how composition and light can express this connection.

Reflecting on my past photography in New York, two images came immediately to mind. One was taken on Iona Island and the other near Storm King, both in the Hudson River Valley. Each is devoid of a train, but the Storm King image hinted at such a presence. Framed in a web of branches, an approaching train illuminates the signals and the tracks, gleaming in the blue light of early evening. At the time I was very much interested Brian Plant's photography; Plant uses the train's lights in a way a writer might use figurative rather than literal language to build up suggestions and metaphor. The Iona Island image stood in contrast to Storm King, being clear in its description with a layering of elements to which I would later return.



Tracks and landscape, Iona Island, N.Y., 2002

John Sanderson



Approaching train, Storm King, N.Y., 2003

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Influence

The graphic dimensionality of Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth's American precisionist paintings, often referencing railroading and industry, fascinated me in their strict linearization of form and shape. The 'energy of line' in these works symbolizes the subject's momentum and creates, on a flat surface, an internal rhythm that guides my eye around the picture.

Edward Hopper's series of paintings depicting the railroad landscape are a touchstone for my earlier images at Storm King and Iona Island.

Hopper, in contrast to the precisionists, was less overtly interested in the shapes and lines of American industry. His was a judicious observation of how light communicates mood in a transient context, and this demanded a technique less geometrically realistic than the precisionists. His later

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work, such as "Road and Trees" (1962), eschewed figures and suggested movement through an empty landscape.

My photography took on greater personal significance as I came to better understand the work of these artists. I began to feel some camaraderie with those who, eighty years before, struggled to capture the same animistic quality of the landscape as I was. I began to understand what came before and what direction I might pursue.

Landscape, composition, and light

It is the journey through these spaces, linearized by a rail line, which shows us not only historical importance, but also how the line can be an expressive object through representation in visual art. But how to capture narrative momentum in a picture, without lyrics, sound, or a painter's accumulation of time and intent?

Placement of the tracks is crucial, for they direct visual momentum into, across, or out of the frame. Forming an aggregate, wholly unified landscape of interrelated form, color, and shape, the visual 'mantra' of rail is often present.

Geography and terrain vary, from the juxtaposition of pastoral trees and iron-ore heaps in Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio (2013); the structural rendering of Riverline, New York (2012); the ominous shadow and spectrum of colors in Crossing Shadow at Dusk, Blissville, New York (2012) to the furtively placed entrance of an adult store in Behind Broad Street, Waverly, New York (2013). Although not documentary in intent, the images are open to interpretation and may tow certain historical, social, or economic lines.

Light is the final step in the realization of an image at the point of exposure. In order to render movement in a photograph, I often look for a quick-fading light, and working in a small radius allows me to revisit places in order to capture that specific quality. It is an embrace of Ansel Adams' vision of the landscape as, to quote John Szarkowski, "something that's not permanent but evanescent—always, always in the process of becoming something else... [Adams' photographs] are defined by the transient quality of the light, by the weather..." The movement of light and weather across Adams' pictures underscore the temporal nature of the landscape.



Crossing shadow. Blissville, N.Y., 2012

John Sanderson

A conclusion

My interest in portraying contemporary trains or regionally distinct rail operations has, at least for the moment, been replaced by an abiding interest in the context of a rail line. This is due partly to my somewhat nostalgic leanings, and to the overwhelming number of exceptional historical and contemporary train photographers.



Bellevue Junction, Ohio, 2013

John Sanderson

What more could I add that hasn't been covered? Looking at the American landscape through the prism of the railroad is, for me, a process of depicting that indescribable notion the American railroad has conjured up for so many others. Attending the Conversations on Photography Conference educated me on the broader context of railroad art.

The experience has and will continue to shape my photography. Inspired by the California photography of Steve VanDenburgh and Michael Froio's recent work in Pennsylvania, I aim to further explore the landscape beyond the Northeast and Midwest.

More of Sanderson's work is available at www.john-sanderson.com.

The Center for Railroad Photography & Art, founded in 1997, is America's foremost organization for interpreting the intersection of railroad art and culture with America's history and culture. It holds an annual conference at Lake Forest College in Illinois and produces numerous gallery exhibitions around the country. For more information, please visit www.railphoto-art.org.

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Added 3 years ago

DENNIS A LIVESEY

John sees what few others do. His work is sublime and illuminating to me. I must admit studying his work to see where I can improve mine. I will continue to follow his work for I wish him to obtain even greater heights of seeing.



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