

AUG 19 2019

## INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SANDERSON

John Sanderson is drawn to broad topographical subjects within the United States of America. It is there in the outdoors he feels most creative. His photographs reconcile American motives of impermanence, and expansion within the contemporary landscape. His projects include themes such as transportation, leisure, residence, industry, and decay. The influence of growing up in New York City's Midtown Manhattan underpins much of Sanderson's work which is rooted in a passion for architectural design. He captures photographs for each project with multiple large format film cameras as well as smaller digital cameras as needed for commercial clients.

Sanderson's photographs have been featured in a variety of publications such as: Slate Magazine, BBC News, The Wall Street Journal, and NBC News. Fallen Flags, and Railroad Landscapes have both been the subject of several solo and group exhibitions. In 2017, he published National Character, a Monthly Monograph Magazine, by Subjectively, Objective. His work resides in a number of private and public collections including the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, New York Transit Museum, NTR Partners, and the Center for Railroad Photography & Art.

Visit John Sanderson's [Website](#) to see more of his work.

Consider purchasing either the Carbon County [booklet](#) or the Carbon County [folio box](#) on the Zatarra Press's website.



© John Sanderson, Bill, Saratoga, Wyoming

### **First, tell us a little about what originally inspired you to take on photography? When was the first time you realized you wanted to do photography?**

Since I was very young I was intrigued with the places I visited on road trips out of our home in New York City. I walked around the broken down roundhouse and rail yard in Scranton, Pennsylvania with my father in the late 1980s. We explored together and a lot of this would form the material for my first photographs when I began taking pictures around age 15. My first camera was a 35mm Minolta SLR and I'd get my photos back in the form of prints. So it was there where I learned the excitement between taking pictures and seeing the result. I later learned of Alfred Stieglitz's idea of a photograph acting as an "equivalent" to what he felt at the time of taking the picture. Especially early on, this is exactly what was going on with me.

I only began to see the deeper meaning in photography when I returned again and again to the nearby Hudson Valley to make pictures. Certain places have called out to me over time and have been a muse for creating work. It was along the River where I really began to understand the challenges, joys and frustrations inherent to the medium of photography. There was a point in time where I can remember being utterly drained and burned out from returning to the same locations along the River, such as Iona Island, Peekskill, Storm King, and Newburgh, without creating anything that truly matched my feeling for the place. I was not making any progress, and I never thought I'd pick up a camera again. This was around 2002.

After stepping back and revisiting the origins of why I was making pictures, I realized that I had been getting in my own way. I was placing so much importance on the final product, how the photograph should look, that I lost my instinct for making a thoughtful and sincere photograph. This instinct was the ability to let go and allow the experience of the moment to really sink in and resonate. I was disconnected and I was forcing things too much. Once I realized this after a long few months of reflection, I returned to the Hudson Valley in 2003 with a renewed sense of purpose. These images formed the foundation for my later projects. It was during this period when I realized again how exciting photography could be. It held all the elements of risk, challenge, and potential beauty that kept me coming back. The decision to be a photographer was made. I wanted to take the risk because the rewards were so great.



© John Sanderson, County Sign, Near Muddy Gap, Wyoming

**I personally came to know you from your work “Railroad Landscapes” and “Locomotive” where you travel the U.S finding these historical and specific types of Locomotives and documenting them as an archive. Can you tell us a little about these works, for some of our readers who might be less familiar, and how you come about the find these specific Locomotives and their locations?**

Aside from the gift photograph which began this project, *Erie #844 in Port Jervis*, the Locomotives are almost all researched ahead of time. I was amazed where some of these streamliners sprung up. They are located in museums, public parks, rail yards, parking lots, and even a hospital. I often find their locations through railway preservation groups across the United States of America, where many of these remain in operating condition. Others are in pretty bad shape, awaiting restoration or the scrapper's torch. Staring straight into the camera, the expressive streamlined countenance of these locomotives often bear the markings of [long-gone railroad companies](#), and the burden of time. Part of why I photograph each one systematically center weighted, with equal emphasis on their surroundings, is to emphasize this highly expressive frontal aspect. These locomotives were designed at a time when travel was glamorous. How you get somewhere was just as important as where you were going. In that sense they are not only contemporary, but historical. Contemporary in the sense that their present state calls back to the regional charm that once existed prior to the suburbanization of America. You can see this in the names of some of the railroads: Reading, New York Central, South Dakota Central, Pennsylvania, and Lehigh Valley. Today these roads exist as only a few major corporations and many of the small towns and cities they served were disconnected from the rail network as America's transportative framework shifted to highways and suburbs. Unfortunately most railroads in the industrialized Northeast and Midwest United States went bankrupt in the 1970s in the face of competition from trucking, airlines, and U.S. Government regulation. The Locomotives exist as historic relics, pieces of equipment that witnessed the pre-1950s railroad hegemony transition into today's geographically indistinct rail conglomerates.



© John Sanderson, Rodeo Moonrise, Brush Creek Ranch, Wyoming

**It seems that in general in your work you are looking to capture times that are changing by the minute with our movement in technology and culture. Not only that there is something very “American” about your work - searching to highlight and archive American histories that are important to you. Could you elaborate on these notions?**

The importance of creating an archive is only one half of the making of a photograph. The influence of history weighs heavy on me and my work. I seem drawn to these locations which unfurl a layer of social and economic transformation unique to the United States of America. With a background in Political Science, I am interested in the meaning that these people and places represent in our collective experience. The experiential approach of social geographers such as John Stilgoe and J.B. Jackson, who deconstruct the intersection of the built environment resonated with what I was tackling

intersection of the built environment, resonated with what I was tackling photographically. They were all about going out and looking at these places in the flesh to reveal their hidden truth.

The other half is the expressive potential of the print. There must be some emotional response to what I'm experiencing at the time of taking the picture. Be it the subject, weather or light there must be some feeling behind what's happening. When I'm in the field working, time and intent accumulate into these transfigurative moments that become a photograph. I may pass over many places that are interesting on a descriptive level but are not situated at that time to be crafted into a meaningful photograph. This is why it was so important for me to spend seven months in Wyoming photographing Carbon County. The time and access allowed me to return to locations at different times of day. It allowed me to search for those moments when mood, light, and subject match my vision of the scene.



'Carbon County 'Booklet published by Zatarra Press

**You document these places and people - but what about these projects tell about you as an artist and person? This might be a hard question, but it would be interesting to hear how your personal life and personal history got you to where you are photographically.**

There are a few aspects which have informed my practice: the city and travel. Growing up in Midtown Manhattan of New York City underpins a lot of what I'm attracted to photographically. I find myself looking towards architectural subjects as a foundation for designing my portrait or landscape photographs. Being surrounded with the street grid of New York, with its long corridors of avenues and cross streets has given me an appreciation of the scale and expression of the built environment. An intrinsic need to travel began as a boy during long awaited family road trips to nearby Pennsylvania and the Hudson Valley. So in many ways

It has been this relationship between home and afar that has been tied in with the photographs.

**You chose to use large format cameras (4x5 and 8x10 formats) – can you tell us the choices behind this formats? How did it all start? And why do you think it is important for your work?**

I first began using a large format camera in High School when a mentor suggested it fit my style. I did not start using it in earnest until my early 20's because I didn't yet feel the need for it. As my practice evolved, 4x5, and later the 8x10 monorail became my camera of choice. I also saw the exhibition prints of Edward Burtynsky in the Brooklyn Museum in 2005. The potential in what I saw in the format drew me. The camera's movements allow for precise depth of field control and perspective correction. The large negatives allow me to print huge. It also forces me to slow down and become more sensitive to the environment I am photographing. This mindfulness important to my process.



© John Sanderson Shadowchaser, Brush Creek Ranch, Wyoming

**“Carbon County“, your new project and booklet and collective portfolio box, are images of Wyoming and the ranch you worked at for a while. Can you tell us how this project started? What made you, a New York City based artist, to get so involved with the area?**

In 2015 I traveled to the Western United States to find more photographs. This was in the midst of my solo exhibition of *Railroad Landscapes* at the New York Transit Museum. I was searching for something different, and that summer I was awarded an artist residency at the Brush Creek Ranch in Wyoming. Then I had to then fund a month-long trip to the West with a Kickstarter campaign. *Carbon County* includes one photograph from this first trip, a portrait of Kimatha and her Great Dane, Wyatt. From her windswept hair and long denim duster coat, this portrait seemed to symbolize the American West in my mind. I desired to return immediately to Wyoming, but it wasn't until 2017 that I got a job as the official Brush Creek Ranch Photographer. That job allowed me intimate access to the ranching community. As a child, the myth of the American West entered my mind through movies, music and television. It has always been my desire to experience it for myself. The artist residency and later employment at the ranch gave me the opportunity to further explore these ideas.

**For me a big part of the work seems to be a feeling of celebration. A celebration of these people, their lives and their landscapes. You do mention in the text on your website the “Through popular culture I inherited a false mythos of the American West as a place of abundance and adventure.” – can you tell us how your opinion changed about this place?**

It was not so much my opinion that changed, but rather how the West changed me. There was a slowness to living in Wyoming that appealed to me. This came through in my interactions with people as well as through experiencing the land. Being surrounded with the vast horizon was at the same time peaceful but it also gnawed at me to photograph it. This counterpoint between tension and ease found its way into the photographs as I turned to the great expanse of sky as a motif throughout the project. There was a respect for the people and land that set in a month into working at the ranch. The High Plains elevation of 7,000 feet can be an extreme environment when spending time outdoors. The summer months give infrequent cloud cover and the sun beats you down. Working in this kind of environment demanded a lot of physical stamina. My respect for the people that live there grew deeper once I understood the hardships of being in such a rugged and isolated environment.



**You also talk about how today the people in this area are inspired by the rich past of the land and their stories, but are also a part of the modern changes we live in. How do you find that people explore both aspects of their lives in that perspective?**

The wilderness is such a presence in the area that it brings people to live a life rich in outdoor activities. The tradition of ranching and cowboys is still very alive in the region. It was my goal to capture this aspect through the photographs.

**You mention that this work was inspired by Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* - can you tell us more about how they inspired you?**

These works search for meaning in a two fictional American small towns, Spoon River and Grover's Corners. For me, *Carbon County* became almost akin to these two places. Both Master's and Wilder's ability to encapsulate the characters of these places into the book and play informed me. I wanted to create a photographic story of the American West that distilled *Carbon County* in the same quintessential way as these two works of fiction.

**You have just had a successful Kickstarter campaign to help support your upcoming portfolio print box and booklet with Zatarra Press. What was the process of creating this publication like? And why did you chose to have it published in this manner?**

In 2016, I met Andrew Fedynak of Zatarra Press at the LOOK3 Photography Festival in Charlottesville, Virginia. We stayed in contact and I visited the Zatarra Press table at The Photography Show By AIPAD the following two years. In between I returned for my second trip to Wyoming, and on my return I started the process of figuring out what had truly done over the 7 months in Wyoming. Then in mid 2018 after AIPAD, Andrew contacted me to express his interest in the project. He had been casually following my trip on Instagram and he was intrigued by the project's inclusion of people with active energy in addition to the landscapes. We meet for our 2nd meeting with 4x6 print outs of everything I had shot, and Andrew started creating a sequence.

At the beginning we were not sure what form *Carbon County* would take as a final project. I always liked the idea of making something which referenced the tradition of Western Photographers. For inspiration we looked at portfolio boxes of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. I took a trip to the Museum of Modern Art Library where Phillip Parente, the Library's Collections Coordinator, brought out a dozen different photography books and boxes to look at. One of the most striking was *The Island of Rota* by Abelardo Morell, an illustrated book which was casually wrapped in a soft shard of leather that was encased in a weathered wooden box. I wanted the same kind of earthen feel and tactility for *Carbon County*. With these ideas in my mind, I went through several design iterations for the *Carbon County Folio Box* were we finally landed on the clam-shell book cloth version with the painted leather bison. Christine Rucker crafted the boxes, and back in 2016 she had worked on prototypes of *Everglades* by Lisa Elmaleh for Zatarra Press.

While the box was being designed and finalized, we chose to add another level of detail to the project's boards. Each letter-pressed board includes the photograph's title, location, date, my name and Carbon County, and each board holds one of the 24 photographs tipped into laser cut slots. We had the pleasure of making these letter-pressed boards with Dave Wofford of [Horse & Buggy Press](#).

I conceived of the Booklet Version of *Carbon County* as a way for there to be an affordable option for me to bring back to the people of Wyoming. It is my goal to give back to the community through an exhibition, workshops and the free distribution of the booklets to everyone involved. I will be having more information about this plan with exact dates in the near future. The booklets are available at ZP's website as well to the general public.



**What was the hardest part of creating this folio box? And what was the best part?**

In terms of physical stamina, printing the entire edition of over one-thousand 8x10 prints for the edition of 50 folio boxes is probably the hardest part. Once each print passes muster, it's trimmed down to 8x10 from letter-sized paper, labeled and slipped into archival polypropylene bags before being placed into its respective letter pressed board.

The best part is being able to show these boxes to people and seeing their reaction. One of the reasons I wanted to work with ZP is their ethos of creating unique art object photobooks. I think those who see the *Carbon County Folio Box* are responding to the tactility and hand made aspect of the entire art piece

**What was the process of getting in touch with the right publisher for you?**

It was pretty straight forward for this project. I had been in contact with Zatarra Press in passing for a few years prior to beginning *Carbon County*. I had been in contact with a few publishers, but none were interested in exploring the idea of a limited edition item. I knew immediately that they were the ones to work with. *Carbon County* demanded a complete artistic thought to create this unique object throughout each step of the production. Their attention to detail appealed to me. I knew it couldn't just be a simple casebound book.

Working with Zatarra Press was a unique experience because it was truly a direct one-on-one process with Andrew Fedynak as a designer and printer. He brought a wealth of knowledge and work ethic to the table. He introduced me to new ideas and concepts I would never considered trying to finish this project by myself. I came away from this experience as a far better photographer, printer, and artist.



© John Sanderson, *Clearing Storm*, Saratoga, Wyoming

**Which photographers most inspire you?**

O. Winston Link's black and white night photographs were my first big influence. This was back when I was in high school. His work is so steeped in legend and mystery that it elevated the world he photographed into the sublime. The small town America he documented from 1955-1960 was soon to be gone. I lived through his work for many years. The way he froze otherwise ordinary scenes has informed me to a great degree. Later on I began looking towards contemporary photographers. The photographs of Jeff Brouws inspired me during this time. Through his book *Approaching Nowhere*, he was able to create this wonderful narrative of America's highway landscape. In many ways this led to my *Railroad Landscape* project because I wanted to make a similar investigation into the territory adjacent to America's railroads. Seeing Jeff's work gave me the confidence that something like that could be done on a national scale. Other influences include Andreas Feininger, Carleton Watkins and George Tice.

**Any advice to other photographers reading this interview?**

Go out there and make a lot of work. After time your voice will develop. Be open to other genres of photographers, other mediums and art forms. I'm influenced by all photography as much as painting, music, and literature. But don't try to create it alone. Find a community that you can work with and discuss ideas that challenge you. Perhaps most importantly, don't get in your own way. If you're afraid of capturing a photograph for whatever reason, that's usually a good indicator that it needs to be photographed. Be open to meeting and photographing strangers. Spend time with the work after you have made it to better understand the photographs you made rather than quickly posting it out on the internet. Most importantly, take your time. Photography cannot be rushed.



© John Sanderson Frontier Justice, Rawlins, Wyoming

INTERVIEWS

Jonh Sanderson

