

Portfolio ShowCase Volume 4: Book and Online Exhibition

Like the magnifying glass and the microscope, the camera lens has long been used as a tool for research and inquiry. The photographers selected for the *Portfolio ShowCase Volume 4: Book and Online Exhibition* are all explorers, bringing back evidence of life around the world in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. These pictures examine our relationships to the plants and animals and buildings and machines that inhabit the world alongside us.

Many people across the globe spend a lot of time indoors now, experiencing the natural world through the windows of houses, offices, and cars, or seeing pictures of it illuminated on television and computers. Rita Maas explores the esthetic side of this interior perspective, capturing the delicate, random beauty of ice and leaves on a skylight. The colorful and cryptic abstractions of Elaine Wannechko trace the transformation from plant to food that occurs once we bring the choice bits into our homes, wash off any traces of earth, and prepare to devour them. Venturing beyond the inner sanctum, Susan Abrams photographs some of the plants and flowers in her own garden, emphasizing their unfettered, alien forms. Stephen Strom is also attracted to nature's extremes, highlighting the subtle colors and patterns of uninhabited land masses that some would dismiss as featureless and barren. In Jon Edwards's intimate series, *A Life*, we get a glimpse of a now alternative lifestyle, the daily cadence of a boatman in Maine, whose livelihood is dependent on his ability to work cooperatively with nature.

Few of us, perhaps even the boatman, have an uncomplicated relationship with the world in which we dwell. Long ago, human beings confidently adopted the role of alpha species, molding the environment to cater to their needs and desires. That includes the cultivation and domestication of the plants and animals we invite into our lives for all sorts of ulterior motives, cherishing their wild spirit and life force even as we alter them or crowd their natural habitats. Fellow creatures can be classified as livestock, friends, athletes, or dinner, depending on our inclinations. Work by Susan Hayre Thelwell, Ellen Rennard, and Tony Chirinos speak eloquently of our multi-faceted connections with the animals in our lives, while Sharon Lee Hart offers portraits of those beasts that have survived their service to humankind and are enjoying a peaceful retirement.

Husbandry aside, it is the built world that is our most likely legacy as a species. Standing as monuments to the American penchant for constructing and abandoning commercial building sites for other concrete pastures, Brook Reynolds photographs the bright colors and tattered flags of derelict gas stations. A more dynamic portrait of urban life is conveyed in two very different bodies of work by Kai-Uwe Gundlach and Michael Flicek, which explore the connections and disconnections of city dwellers. Stepping back from the urban flow, Gabriel Benaim views his city from above, revealing the sinuous lines and muscular patterns that form the armature of life in contemporary Tel Aviv. We build machines that fling us up into the air, as we see in Isa Leshko's series on amusement parks, but we also build machines to protect our fleshy vulnerabilities, like the customized aluminum carapaces in Nan Brown's series on trailers.

What a joy to be born human, a joy and a sorrow. We're brave, we're fragile, sometimes ridiculous, very contradictory, but always interesting. I'm delighted to have spent time with these visual essays.

Katherine Ware