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Interview with Dennis DeHart about "Confluences"

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- 1 Dennis DeHart is a fine art photographer and an Assistant Professor of Photography at Washington State University (Pullman, Washington). He has held solo exhibits in China and Los Angeles, lectured on his works in France and was an artist resident in Finland. Some of his projects include 'Land of the Stratus' (2007-2012), 'At Play' (2010-present), 'Confluences' (2013-16).
- 2 'Land of the Stratus' was the first project Dennis DeHart initiated upon his return to live in the West Coast of the United States after over 20 years of absence. Black and white photographs primarily of landscapes or portraits create a sense of place (both real and fictional) grounded in Orcas Island of the San Juan Islands. Another project of interest, 'At Play,' began in 2010 parallel to 'Land of the Stratus' and 'Confluences'. 'At Play' is a more autobiographical set of works in which Dennis DeHart explores fatherhood, family, community, education and the rural environment through color photographs capturing the lives of his two sons Emmitt and Asher. 'Confluences,' the subject of this interview, is an on-going lens-based project that began in 2013. Divided into four parts, the color photographs of 'Confluences' depict interconnecting facets of the Northwest region of the United States. According to Dennis DeHart, "'Confluences' examines the multiple narratives inherent in place. The photographs engage with Native American history, land use, environment, energy, poverty, agriculture and industry in rural Eastern Washington and Oregon, and Northwest Idaho. Weaving together landscape, portrait, and still life, they express the unparalleled beauty and tragedy of the dynamic and complex landscape and its inhabitants." (<http://www.dennisdehart.com>)

You have mentioned that this body of work originated from a personal experience. Could you tell us a bit more about your inspiration for 'Confluences'?

The impetus for 'Confluences' stems from a desire to learn and develop a sense of place through both research and direct, experiential engagement. After relocating to

the inland Pacific Northwest in 2010, I was drawn to learn more about the region. I read that a characteristic that defines the Pacific Northwest is the vast network of rivers in which the salmon can travel, in order to spawn. I found this both a beautiful and somewhat disheartening metaphor of place, particularly in regards to salmon depletion due to damming. As a framework for the project, I chose to focus on the rather vast system of rivers and tributaries known as the Columbia River Drainage Basin, which extends into Canada and four US States.

I grew up in the western part of Pacific Northwest. I moved from Seattle in my 20's to attend graduate school at the University of New Mexico. Later I moved around the United States in order to pursue an art/academic career. While working in upstate New York, my wife and I realized how important the Pacific Northwest was to our identity and lifestyle. We initially decided to relocate to the San Juan Islands in Washington State, where I had previously began doing work on the project 'Land of the Stratus.'



View from Eastsound, Washington (Orcas Island) looking at Indian Island. From the Project, 'Land of the Stratus', Pigment Print, 24"x30" inches, 2008.

All images courtesy of the artist unless otherwise noted.

While living on Orcas Island (largest of the San Juan Islands), I learned about the concept of bioregionalism through the work of regional activists who were pushing (and succeeded) in renaming the Puget Sound waters, The Salish Sea. The term bioregion refers to a region whose limits are naturally defined by topographic and biological features (such as mountain ranges and ecosystems) in contrast to political borders. For example, the Puget Sound exists in both the United States and Canada. If something occurs in the waters of one country, it will obviously have an affect on the other country. Hence bioregionalism looks at the larger system, as opposed to isolated parts.

'Confluences' is based around the Columbia River and its tributaries. How have you tried to capture photographically the landscape and its cultural construction of this region?

The conceptual framework for 'Confluences' includes multiple moving parts. On the one hand, 'Confluences' is process oriented. I spend time traveling around the region, which includes biking, driving, and hiking. These trips enable me to look, wander, stumble, and innately revisit places. Many of the images I photograph stem from happening across places.

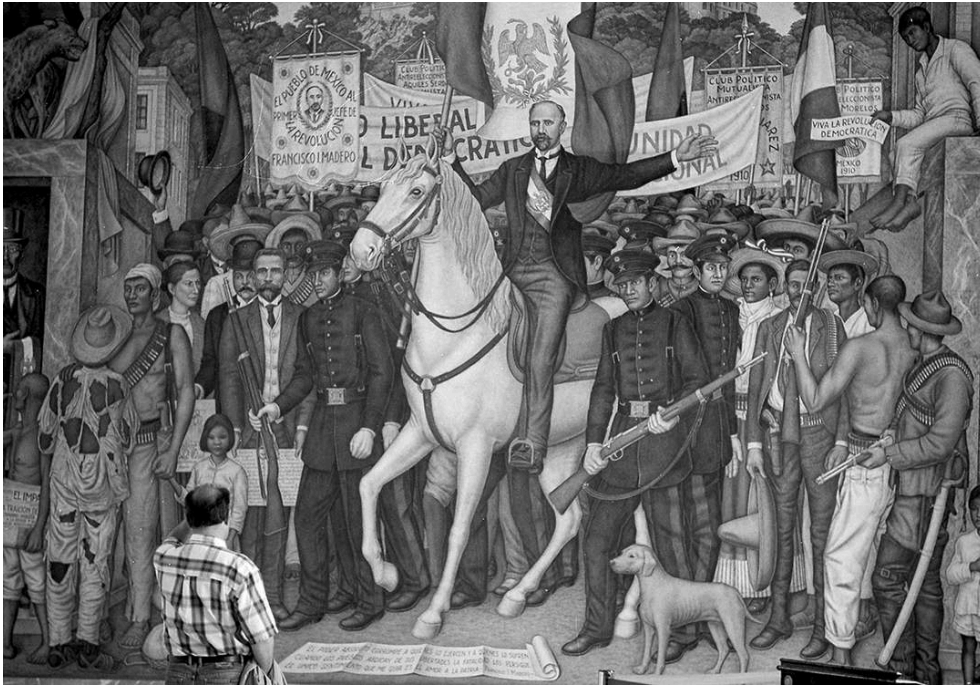
I often do research ahead of time and travel to locations with the intention of expanding the project. Working visually, I have the liberty of compressing, sequencing, and juxtapositioning time and space in creative ways. While many of my images are focused on landscape, I am interested in weaving together an expanded idea of place, which includes photographing built and natural spaces, in addition to creating portraits of people. The landscapes and portraits function together as characters in the broader story of 'Confluences'. I am interested in generating analogies about place, which stems from a desire to emphasize links that might otherwise be played down or ignored. Barbara Marie Stafford's book *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting* has been influential in my use of analogy as a non-linear way to communicate ideas and concepts visually.



Diptych, Tree Farm (left) and Shooting Range (Clay Pigeons) (right), near Deary, Idaho, Archival Pigment Print, 30"x40" inches each, 2013.

In your description of 'Confluences' you write, "The photographs engage with Native American history, land use, environment, energy, poverty, agriculture and industry in rural Eastern Washington and Oregon, and Northwest Idaho. Weaving together landscape, portrait, and still life, they express the unparalleled beauty and tragedy of the dynamic and complex landscape and its inhabitants." This evokes Walker Evans' sequencing of architecture, portraits, advertising and artifacts in order to visually define American society in his exhibit/photobook *American Photographs* (1938). Has his work influenced this project?

'Confluences' is rooted in a contemporary photographic art aesthetic, which has roots reaching back to Evans, whom I value for his long lasting contribution to American photography. I have perhaps been more influenced by the contemporary American photographer Alec Soth, who often compared to Evans. In the early 1990's, a friend of mine gave me a Henri Cartier-Bresson book of photographs. I became intrigued with the lyricism, geometry, and social layers of his work. Later, while travelling through Mexico City and the states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Veracruz, Mexico, I visually drew from Bresson, which was important in the development of my early photographing seeing.



Mural, Mexico City, Silver Print, 11"x14", 1996

The book *Photographing America: Henri Cartier-Bresson / Walker Evans 1929-1947* by Agnes Sire (2009), examines the parallels between these two photographers while placing their work in the context of photography as a form of social criticism. Cartier-Bresson and Evans' practices are distinct from each other, though they are both recognized for their directness and clarity of vision. Evans and Cartier-Bresson established the documentary style of photography as an art form.

I am a project-based artist and use different strategies, depending on the series. With 'Confluences', much like Evans and Cartier-Bresson, I am employing a direct, straightforward approach. In other projects, I am not above manipulating the image in order to generate that kind of work that I am interested in making. For example, with 'Land of the Stratus', I engage with the emotional in-between that exists when living as both an outsider and insider in a new culture. With 'Stratus', I am interested in blurring the lines between fact and fiction, as a response to my own subjective experiences. While the series is documentary in nature, I crafted the project in such a way as to create a place, which is both real and imaged. I accomplished this through both the artifice of photographic technologies (including image compositing) in addition to how I edited and juxtapositioned the images.

With 'Confluences', I am less interested in "muddying the waters" and instead, in communicating through the images and written text. Accompanying text with images is something that came about after working with the journal *Places: Design Observer*. The editors asked me to include text and an essay for some of the images they were publishing. As it turns out, I really enjoyed the pairing and writing about the context of the images. Since then, I have found text an important component in 'Confluences.' Several of the actual images in 'Confluences' also include text. Much of the text in the images is there to provide both another form of contextualization and sense of place. The text also acts as visual graphic element, in addition to formal texture.



Rainier Light, The Only Local Business Left in Bovil, Idaho. Archival Pigment Print, 30"x40".

Image courtesy of the artist.

'New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape' (1975) has been considered as a "radical shift from traditional depictions of landscapes" (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art).¹ Some of your photographs (especially 'Columbia Center Mall') dialogue with the 'New Topographics' heritage. Do you feel landscape photography has evolved since then or has the American landscape become permanently obfuscated by man?

Most contemporary photographers who are dealing with issues of the land have a connection to the 'New Topographics' exhibition in one way or another. Robert Adams, who was one of the seminal photographers from the 'New Topographics' exhibition, lives at the mouth of the Columbia River in Astoria, Oregon. I was fortunate to see his retrospective show at the Jeu de Paume in Paris in the spring of 2014. Admittedly, while I am familiar with Adams' work and have several of his books, I am just now fully appreciating his work historically and contextually. Adam's passion and tireless commitment to photography has been inspirational. I also value his commitment to exploring issues centered around the environment.

With 'Confluences', I am approaching the project in a multi-disciplinary manner. The project is imbued with shifting layers and entry points. I am examining place by employing a diversity of creative and conceptual strategies, which weave together multiple points of view and disciplines. For example, in 'Confluences', 'Heavy Metal', I spent time with several scientists, including hydrologists and geologists, learning about the environmental history, ecological impacts, and future of the area. This experience deepened my understanding and awareness of the region while enabling me to communicate these experiences through photography and text.

What was most revealing in shadowing these scientists, was how uniformed I was about the places I had previously visited. For the most part, my previous experiences were physical and aesthetic. In revisiting the sites with researchers, I learned about

the environmental and social impacts of logging, mining, railroads, and the long-term effects it is having on these once pristine wilderness areas. While I consider myself informed, I was quite humbled by ignorance.

I recently had the opportunity to visit the 'Center for Land Use Interpretation' in Los Angeles. I am a fan of the organization's mission and projects. I find inspiration in the projects the organization does, which crosses many disciplines.



Columbia Center Mall, Kennewick, Washington, with steam rising from the Columbia Generating Station, Hanford Nuclear Site, Archival Pigment Print, 30"x40", 2013.

You have said that you feel influenced by the 'Myth of the West.' Could you explain how it has helped shape your artistic vision of American landscape in 'Confluences'?

'The Myth of the West' is the title of an exhibition that was held at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, Washington in 1990. Chris Bruce, the current Director of Washington State University's Art Museum, curated the exhibition. In the exhibition catalog, Bruce defines two major aspects of the visual arts in shaping and defining this myth which include: the "lone individual" who becomes a hero and "the landscape as the stage set upon which this drama of the western myth is played out." (Bruce, Chris, Henry Art Gallery, *The Myth of the West*, Rizzoli, 1990.)

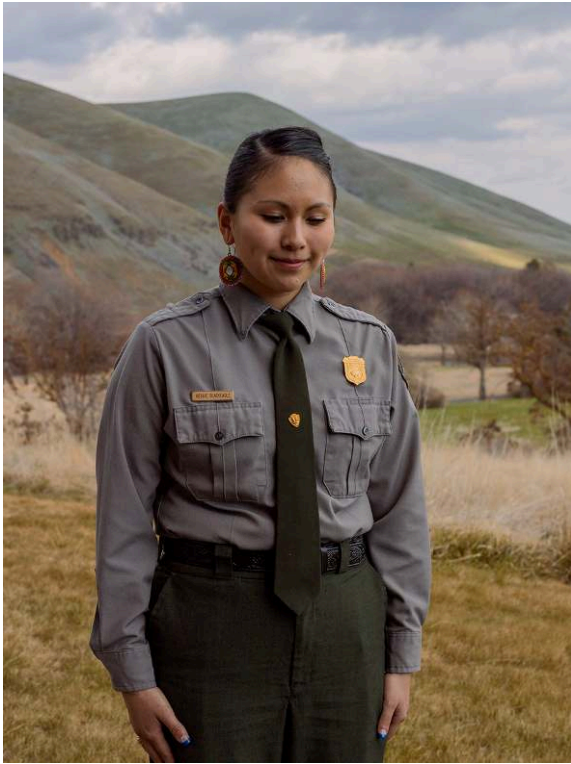
I am interested in the representations associated with the American West. I recently read the book *Photography Changes Everything*, edited by Marvin Heiferman (2012). I was particularly interested in the essay by Edward Schupman, entitled "Photography Changes The Way Cultural Groups are Represented and Perceived". Schupman is citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) nation of Oklahoma and produces educational material for the Smithsonian's National Museum of Native Americans. Some key points in Schupman's essay include a discussion about the multiple face values of images and their importance as visual records. He also writes, "that by not reading photographs objectively, the images can easily tell as many lies as truths." The essay includes several historical images of Native American's, which over the course of

history have take on many different kinds of readings ranging from overt racism to romanticized stereotypes.

'Confluences' is simultaneously a celebration and critique of the "west." The American west still holds powerful narratives within our popular imagination. For example, while visiting France in the spring of 2014, I observed French DJ David Guetta's popular song and video called *Shot Me Down*. The music video is comprised of images depicting the American desert landscape and iconography (cowboys and cowgirls) including animated images inspired from Sergio Leone's 1966 western, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. While the song and video are brilliantly complex, I found it curious how the songs visual vocabulary relied so heavily on an iconography drawn from American popular culture.

I am interested in creating a thoughtful narrative that avoids over simplifying complex issues and ideas about the west, and more specifically, the Pacific Northwest. I feel it is important to create contemporary images that are sensitive to issues of representation, while celebrating and acknowledging the richness of diversity and culture. In employing a multi-disciplinary approach, I am attempting to create a multifaceted vision of the west that simultaneously questions and illuminates varying aspects.

With the portraits in 'Confluences', I am resistant to staging my subjects. Generally, I talk with the individuals I photograph, ask for permission, and ease into making a picture. More often than not, the portraits are unsuccessful for numerous reasons including a lack of emotional and/or aesthetic complexity. What I am interested in with the portraits is a kind of collaborative in-between, in which the portrait is neither candid nor staged. I am looking for a kind of authenticity that is not colored by reinvention.



Bessie, Interpretive Ranger, Nez Perce National Historic Park, Idaho, 2013, Archival Pigment Print, 30"x40", 2013.

In the late 19th and early 20th century photographers accompanied surveyors to capture the sublime beauty of the West and document American expansion. In the 20th century, photographers embarked on road trips to capture the American landscapes, which culturally defined the nation. Could you tell us about how your hiking, biking and walking through the Northwest fit into this tradition?

There is a spirit of adventure in my process of making photographs for 'Confluences'. I am often physically tired from scrambling up hills with a camera and tripod. It is also invigorating to be actively interacting with the environment. I have been fortunate to share part of the process of photographing 'Confluences' with my own children, as they sometimes accompany me while making pictures for the project. I have also been developing a series of photographs over the last five years entitled 'At Play', which is a semi-biographical exploration of fatherhood, family, and nature play. Spending time outdoors is a kind of cultural heritage that I want to pass down to them. As a child, I spent a significant amount of time with my grandfather, who was an Oregon mountain man type who had a passion for the outdoors.

Photographers, such as Carleton Watkins, who shuttled large, wet plate equipment around the western United States, fascinate me. I feel a kinship to these 19th century landscape photographers (equipment aside). Nineteenth century photographers worked with mammoth cameras and wet plate technologies that were technically temperamental, heavy, and somewhat dangerous. I primarily work with a medium format digital camera on a tripod. This kinship resides in the spirit of adventure, which photography invites. There is something quite satisfying in experiencing the elements-be it rain, snow, heat, or sand, for example, first hand, as one negotiates varying spaces.



Emmit, Kettle Falls, from the Series At Play, Archival Pigment Print, 16"x20", 2014. This image was made near the site of the former Kettle Falls, which is now under water after the Grand Coulee Dam was put in place. The slack water (which is the Columbia River behind the dam) is now referred to as Lake Roosevelt.

In your photographs, the West is no longer depicted in its pristine and sublime form as idealized by photographers from O'Sullivan to Ansel Adams—man's mark seems to have been left everywhere—in the replanting of forests or a trail in the sky left by an airplane ("Burn"), a sign in front of a river ("Fish"), or a track in field. This is an obvious 'Confluence.' Do you believe this is the inevitable new state of nature in America?

I would like to address this question first with a note of optimism. The United States has a magnificent system of National Parks that were set up through the stewardship of many. Timothy Egan's book, *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire that Saved America* (2010) illuminates some of the important work done in the establishing the United States national park system.

I do not know what the future state of nature will be in America. I do recognize that a significant amount of damage has been done to the environment through extraction industries in the west. In my essay "Heavy Metal" (*Places: Design Observer*, 11.21.13), I focus specifically on the effects of the mining industry in the Silver Valley in Idaho, which is one of the largest Superfund sites in the United States. The Silver Valley is an example of the long-term affect of a lightly regulated industry and how it is affecting the ecology of the region for generations to come.



Images from *Confluences*, *Heavy Metal*, Archival Pigment Prints, 16"x20" each, 2013.

In reference to war photography, Graham Clarke writes that there seems to be "little left to photograph, even though there is everything to record." (*The Photograph*, 1997) Do you believe this could apply to landscape photography in America today?

Clark's quote speaks to our consumption and proliferation of photography in terms of the everyday. Quality, inexpensive photographic tools have multiplied the ability for everyone to be a photographer like never before. Everyone can be and is a photographer, in the sense that we can record our individualized, day-to-day lives and experiences. It seems apt to interject Susan Sontag, who wrote at length in her 1977 book 'On Photography' about how images "are consuming reality" and that the taking of a photo is "replacing our actual experiences." Sontag ultimately advocated in 'On Photography' for "an ecology of images".

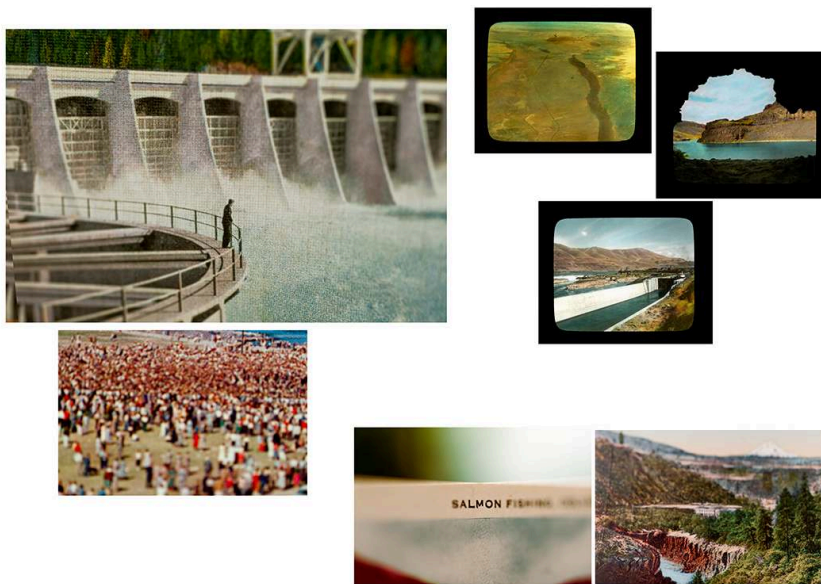
As a teacher, I stress to my students, the difference in the conscious act of *making* a picture as opposed to a *taking* a picture. I correlate taking a picture as passive and a form of recording. Making a picture is fundamentally an active process that is about conscious choices, which includes framing the image technically, conceptually, emotionally, aesthetically and formally.

Could we discuss the "tragedy" your photographs express. While present in Part I (pollution in "Lewiston Mill At Near the Confluence of the Snake and Clearwater Rivers" 2013 or poverty in "Mother/Daughter" 2013) it becomes much more predominate, yet insidious in Part II: "Heavy Metal". 'Confluences,' faithful to its name, is both touching and despairing. Where will "Part III" of 'Confluences' take you physically, creatively and politically?

I plan to continue photographing in the Columbia River drainage Basin. I have also been collecting vernacular, cultural, and historic postcards of the Columbia River and am integrating them into the project as a form of mapping. I am also in the process of

expanding the physical exhibition of 'Confluences', which includes multi-media projections, time-based media, and photographic prints.

I am also interested expanding my approach to 'Confluences' through potential collaboration with other individuals and groups. I recently had dinner with the fabulous artist Nina Katchadourian, who discussed her ideas about "sites not just being places, but social situations." Drawing inspiration from her quote, I would like to integrate a participatory/social media aspect into future components of the project.



The black-bordered images above are historic photos from the Washington State Archives, Conservation Department, Planning and Development Division. They are of the Columbia River basin and part of lantern slide show collection, and dated 1908-1939. The other images are taken from vernacular postcards that I purchased off E-bay and re-photographed. The images include dams from the Columbia River and tributaries.

Even the most "straight" photography is still the result of multiple decisions made by the photographer lending to a subjective vision. Is there a political agenda to 'Confluences'?

The term 'political agenda' sounds so heavy handed. I would like to reframe 'political agenda' to rather a notion of 'consciousness raising.' 'Confluences' is about my own journey in unraveling and making sense of this place I call home. I grapple with being free of editorial comment in the work, as the editorializing is often what gives images their power. I am trying to balance objectivity in the project, somewhat free of an overt political or social agenda, as I am interested in reaching a diverse audience. With that, I am personally disturbed by how the land and the peoples of the American west have been exploited by a small minority for profit and gain. I find it disturbing that many of the policies that are supposedly put in place to protect people and the land, have become complicit in the problem. If you really look around, it is nearly impossible not to be outraged.

Your project is regional in scope, but do you think it has a national dimension as well in regards to American space?

Water and energy are fundamental challenges of the 21st Century. While 'Confluences' focuses on a specific region of the United States, we live in a highly globalized and network society where small waves can have broad ripples throughout. Recently, I was photographing around the Dalles, Oregon, near the original site of Celilo Falls. Within the landscape, I observed the Dalles Dam, the Dalles bridge, multiple Native American fishing platforms, and a Google corporate data center. It was a unique juxtaposition, that one hand was regionally specific, and on the other, completely interconnected and global in scope.

American space is a mosaic of government (military and energy, for example) private, public, and indigenous lands, all competing for different interests, uses, and ideas about the function, management, and stewardship of these lands. 'Confluences' is looking at very small slice of the American landscape, in order to explore and creatively express analogies about American spaces as a larger phenomena.



Dalles Dam and bridge with fishing platforms in the foreground. Archival Pigment Print, 30"x40", 2014.

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NOTES

1. http://www.sfmoma.org/exhib_events/exhibitions/407
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