

TPS Tech Sheet ■ 25

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Constructed Photography by Lori Nix

Getting Started

I consider myself a “faux” landscape photographer. I meticulously build model landscapes and environments and photograph the results. I enjoy working with my hands; I like getting messy and part of me, subconsciously or not, is a bit of a control freak. Since picking up the camera, I’ve tried my hand at portraiture and photojournalism and I’m horrible at both pursuits. By creating my own miniature worlds, I can take as long as I like to build a scene, compose the picture and make the exposure. Let me tell you how I came to the “constructed photograph.”

I’ve always employed a sculptural element in my photography. During my undergraduate years, I studied ceramics, woodworking and photography. I continued pursuing three-dimensional studies in graduate school by learning how to weld, make paper and hone my woodworking skills. I must admit I have a fondness for power tools. In



Circleville

graduate school I was building room size sets such as a beauty salon and business office and putting myself in the picture. Upon leaving school, I left behind my open studio space and instead found myself broke and living in an attic apartment in Columbus, Ohio, without money, space or the support network that is built into the academic world. I was adrift but ready for action. On a trip to Chicago, I stopped in the Museum of Contemporary Art and viewed Richard Misrach’s series “Desert Cantos.” I was taken aback by his many-faceted portrait of the American desert. From abandoned towns, to animal depositories, and on to the military bases, I was amazed that Misrach could return to the desert year after year and have a new story to tell.

Standing in front of these large images, I began examining my own history and realized I’ve only lived in one place for more than five years. Those years were spent in rural northwestern Kansas. Although the Midwest is viewed as fly-over country, I had many exciting adventures in my childhood. I experienced tornados, floods, insect infestations and snow storms. I knew I had no desire to physically travel to my childhood stomping ground or the financial means to spend long periods of time unemployed. Instead, I could bring Kansas to the kitchen table in my attic apartment.

The first thing I did was run to my local retail bookstore and purchase a “how to”

book on building model railroad scenery ([How to Build Realistic Model Railroad Scenery](#) by Dave Frary, 2nd Edition). My copy is now dog-eared from use and has been my bible of sorts, a go-to book for suggestions on materials and paint. I also spent many hours perusing the shelves of the local hobby and train stores, seeing what products were readily available. It felt funny, usually being the only woman in the store, knowing that I’m not going to be building a model railroad but hijacking the ideas to construct my own dioramas. It’s been ten years since I constructed my first scene. I’ve experimented with a lot of materials and continue to seek out new and improved ways of making fake fur look like anything but fake fur. With every new scene, I try something new, ratchet up the technical problems and hope the photographs become increasingly more interesting as time goes on.



Tornado

Inspiration

I think the hardest part of being creative is not access to materials and space, but knowing how you want to expend your energy. How often do we feel like taking a photograph but are left asking ourselves, “what do I want to take pictures of?” I count myself very lucky in that I had a pretty interesting childhood, and that my current surroundings continue to inspire me.

I was born in Norton, Kansas which at the time had a population of 3500, two stop lights, and plenty of open space to roam. I lived in a neighborhood surrounded by pastures and woods where as a child I fell out of trees, got stuck in mud and snow so deep I had to leave my shoes behind, and lit

a couple of tumbleweeds on fire. I’m also a product of 1970’s disaster flicks such as *Towering Inferno*, *Airport 76*, *Earthquake* and my personal favorite, *Planet of the Apes*. When I wasn’t outside running amok, I was inside watching television. I think these activities have asserted themselves over the photographs I create today.

When I began to build my tabletop dioramas, my experiences with Mother Nature in Western Kansas provided the subject matter. The way I have always dealt with adversity is through humor, and when confronted with an unusual or difficult situation, I try to find the silver lining, or rather, the inside joke. These colorful childhood

experiences inspired the body of work *Accidentally Kansas*. I reanimated my personal history, but with a heavy dose of embellishment. As a child, I heard sonic booms regularly and spent many hours staring up at the contrails crisscrossing the sky, wishing for one of those planes to come down and rescue me from my boredom (*Airplane* 1998). Once when a tornado ripped through my neighborhood, smashing houses to bits, I wasn’t afraid at all, but looked forward to go adventuring through the rubble (*Tornado* 1998). In the middle of the woods I came across a stove that contained some family’s dinner ham, almost cooked to perfection (who knows what that might inspire). One



photograph has a blimp careening into power lines (*Blimp* 1998). I just say the Hindenburg

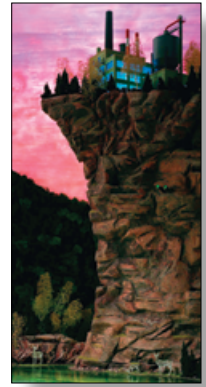
crashed in Kansas. The idea is to trick the viewer, but only for a second, because my photographs will never fool anyone. The humor is in the lie, the combination of disaster married to humor.

I've returned time and again to the landscape in the series *Some Other Place* and *Lost*,

concentrating on the darker edges where the urban and rural meet, and where everyday life becomes dangerous, unexplained and haphazard. *Elysian Fields* shows a mysterious interaction between a milk truck and a tanker carrying liquid hormones. In *California Fire* a sweet little trailer is in the path of an oncoming wildfire, its inhabitants too preoccupied with their TV to notice. Some images are also grounded in personal experience. *Uranium Extraction Plant* is based on such a place in southern Ohio, where the factory workers must be tested daily to see if they have been contaminated while on the job, and all deer hunted in the area must be tested to see they are indeed fit to eat. Much like my previous work, these series continue to blur the line between truth and illusion. The rich colors and

theatrical lighting magnify a sense of isolation and melancholy.

The latest work to occupy my time recreates interiors synonymous with urban surroundings. Public spaces, some once grand, lie deteriorating and neglected. With the apparent absence of humans, nature is slowly reclaiming these sites. Their purpose no longer clear, they lay in wait for the next phase of their existence.



Uranium Extraction Plant

Technical

Most of the dioramas from the series *Accidentally Kansas* are pretty small, ranging from 16"x20" to 30"x40" in diameter. They are constructed out of simple materials such as plaster, cardboard, paint and extruded foam. Some of the props such as buildings and automobiles were purchased from hobby stores and internet supply stores. It took anywhere from a couple of weeks to two months to build the sets and begin photographing the results. I photographed the scenes with an inexpensive Speed Graphic 4x5 camera and three studio flashes. I opted for a shallow depth of field to control where I wanted the viewer to look but also to hide my lack of painting skills. I know how to make the camera lie. I shoot the scene on negative film, make a contact print, then begin making changes to the set-up and reconfigure the lighting. I shoot again and go through the same process. It can take up to two weeks and several boxes of film to

achieve the final photograph. I've always worked in a color photography lab so this extended way of shooting has always fit into my "daily job."

Working through the series *Accidentally Kansas*, I became more accomplished with the materials, added new equipment and took on more complex ideas. I also moved out of the attic apartment in Columbus, Ohio and headed to New York City – Brooklyn to be exact. Along with the Midwestern landscape, I've added the city life into the mix. My entire apartment has been given over to the studio. I build the dioramas in the middle of my living room on top of a couple of hollow core doors I picked up from the hardware store. As my scenes have become more technically complex, they've also grown in size. Now they are approximately six feet wide and up to six feet deep. I am also relying less and less on pre-made

objects and must scratch build some of the more unusual things found in the scenes. For this purpose, I have begun to rely on other artist friends to help me with the building of the sets. Not all objects are ready made and therefore must be painstakingly recreated. I've enjoyed this collaborative process immensely. It feels like I've not only built a diorama but an artistic community as well.

I've also graduated to an 8x10 Cambo large format camera and a super angulon lens thanks to eBay. I've added more studio lights, now employing up to ten flash heads to light a set. A typical scene now takes around seven months to build and photograph. I will use a combination of flash and continuous lighting, depending on the desired look.

I get a lot of satisfaction working with the constructed images. I love turning simple materials such as foam board, paint and plaster into fields of grass, mountains, and crumbling buildings. What I enjoy most is the problem solving. Since I do not do any digital retouching, I have to figure out how to make paint and light look like lightning, how to make plastic look like bodies of water and cardboard look like weeds. Some of my favorite materials include extruded foam, polyester resin, paint tints and a fog machine. Everything else is a secret.



Elysium Fields

About the Author: Lori Nix

Lori Nix was born in Kansas; has lived throughout the Midwest and now resides in Brooklyn, New York. She is a 2004 New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA) Individual Artist Grant recipient. In 2001 she was awarded a Light Work *Artist-in-Residency*, from an internationally recognized photography organization in Syracuse, New York. She was a 1999 recipient of an Ohio Arts Council *Individual Artist Grant*; a Greater Columbus Ohio *Arts Grant* recipient in 1998. She has exhibited at the California Museum of Photography,

Riverside, CA; DiverseWorks, Houston, TX; G. Gibson Gallery, Seattle, WA; Miller Block Gallery, Boston; Alona Kagan Gallery, New York; SF Camerawork and Jenkins Johnson Gallery, in San Francisco, and the Houston Center for Photography, Houston, TX. In the fall of 2002, Light Work published a monograph to coincide with an exhibition of her work. Museum exhibitions include *Fresh! Contemporary Takes on Nature and Allegory* at the Museum of Glass, Tacoma, WA; *Picturing Eden* and *Vital Signs* at the George Eastman

House in Rochester, NY; Katonah Museum of Art's *I Love the Burbs* in Katonah, NY and *Innocence* at the New Britain Museum of Art, New Britain, CT. More of her work can be viewed at www.lorinix.net.



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