

Barry Andersen is Elemental

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Review of Barry Andersen: Sky, Earth, and Sea Selections from 30 years of Landscape Photography at Notre Dame Academy

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It was a cold afternoon and sunny. The air was crisp and I soon found myself at the Notre Dame Academy · Frances Kathryn Carlisle Performing Arts Center and Gallery. The gallery was set off to a wing of the school that allowed for a quiet visit. Hardly anyone would have known I was there at all which, in my opinion, is the best way to review an art exhibit. Barry Andersen was always well known for his ability to capture brilliant moments within nature, so I was excited to see what he had in store. I had been an art student at Northern Kentucky University, but did not have the pleasure of taking his courses prior to graduating. I had no doubt seen much of his work due to our proximity and was aware of his mastery in the arts. In fact this show marked 30 years of dedicated service to the arts, which is no joke. The man is obviously quite sincere about what he does, and this is reflected well in this show.

Upon first view his style has the essence of what 19th century artists would refer to as 'The Sublime'. Andersen dares to challenge the classical notion of painting on canvas as the sole repository of this so-called 'Sublime.' The romantic ambience of the scenes seemed to harken back to the black-and-white photographs of Ansel Adams, as they often call forth deep-rooted spiritual questions that plague the psyche of modern man. How have we arisen from our earth-roots, and why? Basic questions that man is always asking and never seems to figure out. The cosmic riddle.

His works as a whole evoked a core quality of my nature that left me quite satisfied. It wasn't the usual satisfaction that comes after say a coarse meal, but a bliss that was peace of mind. I felt still and centered. The quiet of the space took my thoughts to quiet places, and I began to feel lost in wonder. Most of us are bludgeoned so heavily on a daily basis with the many jagged noises and violent colors the design world has summoned forth that peace and quiet are too often seen as sins. His landscapes seemed to draw me gently forward into space without me even noticing, and before I knew it I wasn't just seeing a photo on a wall, I was experiencing it. This was the gentle handiwork of a master artist; never forceful, but always wins us over in the end.

None of the pieces begs for the viewer's attention, but for this reason I found that my attention had surrendered. Perhaps this was due to the apparent lack of any human activity, as his photographs often have little to no trace of our footprint. The greatness and simplicity of Nature had indeed cast her spell upon me. A piece that immediately strikes the viewer is "Avebury Sheep and Standing Stone". Here we see a giant natural stone balancing its top-heavy body in the dead center of the foreground, surrounded by resting sheep. Immediately the concepts of primitive and pre-religious cultures come to mind. In this interpretation I might assume the stone as the shepherd who "maketh them to lie down in green pastures", and doubly serves as their master and protector. There is even a curved distortion of the horizon when closing in on the stone revealing its apparent power to shape creation. Ah, the mystery inherent in this body of work does enchant the perception.

One thing that is immediately present to the viewer is the use of balance within each piece. This wasn't the rigid and militant balance of symmetry, but that 'golden mean' we too often find in the duality of Nature herself. I found myself engaged while completely relaxed. Scale is another popular theme in his work. If you are a fan of that 'high and mighty' scale that usually accompanies long peers into the distance, you won't feel cheated one bit. In "Sky and Sea #8452" for example, the landmass seems to be conversing with the cloudscape. One is left to wonder what their conversation might have been, but we are helpless to hear that far into the distance. Scenes like these have a tendency to throw me off into a kind of vertigo due to their scope and magnitude. In his pictures I found plenty of room to breathe, which is some assurance to the viewers who think we are running out of room here on Earth. The photographs remind us that there is plenty of space out there, it is simply a matter of choosing the right place to have a view. I often imagined myself walking barefoot through these various scenes, and spreading my toes in the dirt. Breathing smooth and easy. It was a nice change of pace for someone like me, who can't seem to slow down.

Something caught in the atmosphere of his works allow viewer's to embark on their own journey. One thing is for sure, this path must be travelled alone, for this is the only way to tread these misty realms. His "Tree on a Hillside" seems to conjure this notion too well. The singular tree of the scene appears lonely, but this may not be the case. He may simply be the first of his kind; the Adam of paradise awaiting his Holy Bride with confident patience.

Barry Andersen has an eye for moments that cross our path gracefully instead of like a steam roller, and for this he has earned much respect both as a teacher and an artist. I can say confidently that his work has left a mark on me that I do not wish to wash away. I can only hope that his retirement from N.K.U. is but the beginning of a different artistic pathway.





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