

Down by the River:

Exploring American Waterways 40 Years After the Clean Water Act

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These photographs describe transitional American Rivers on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the 1972 Clean Water Act. They also attempt to explore the paradoxical nature of rivers as particular places constantly formed by time and ever changing. My interest in rivers comes from how they embody the ever-shifting nature of our own attachments to place and to one another, giving shape to the flow of time that washes our days away.

Beyond creating conventional black-and-white and color film and digital photographs and video clips, I have experimented: by layering multiple digital exposures into one image; scanning large-format black-and-white film negatives of structures along the river's banks, then digitally hand-coloring these images; making multiple images of a scene and arranging them in a grid to provide a larger, slightly overlapping view; and, most recently, using a wet-plate photographic process from the nineteenth-century to make ambrotypes—unique positive images formed on glass plates.

To paraphrase the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus, "One can never step into the same river twice." Despite the many gains made since the Clean Water Act, America's urban, industrial rivers will most likely always remain compromised ever-shifting affairs reflecting the dynamic nature of human and natural demands. But this doesn't mean that they don't matter or that they cannot recover differently. For Heraclitus, the river became a powerful metaphor shaping his larger philosophy of *panta rhei*, or "everything

flows," yet he didn't deny permanence, either. Just as much as the waters flowing over your feet are ever changing, something of the river remains. Flux and persistence can and do coexist.

For me, photography is the vehicle to explore, embrace, and ultimately share with others the paradox that Heraclitus outlined two and half millennia ago: that flux, or change, as a central component of our daily lives, coexists with our ability to discern patterns in all that is swirling around us; that to see and remember what persists in the current of time enables us to form attachments with other people, places and things surrounding us in this life. Embracing this paradox, allowing for uncertainty to lap at the footholds of our attachments in order to test their strength and adjust them as required, defines a part of the challenge of what it means to be human.

The invention of the wet-plate photographic process in 1850 marks an era when the industrialization and degradation of the river was kicking into high gear. And, of course, the invention of photography itself just 11 years earlier was a result of the period's industrialization and technological advances. By using a nineteenth-century process to make photographs today, I attempt to engage the viewer in a consideration of the photograph's slippery status as record of fact and stimulant of the imagined. The photographs' tonalities and inherent flaws, along with the strange effect of viewing the photograph, called an ambrotype, on a plate of glass, suggest an experience of seeing that hearkens back to the 1850s, before cell phones, automobiles, and the Internet, when the places we occupied looked very different than they do today.

The process of making an ambrotype begins by pouring the collodion solution, whose consistency and color resembles maple syrup, onto a plate of 8" x 10" glass. I then dip this wet, thinly coated plate into a silver bath to sensitize it to light, run to expose the plate in

the camera and quickly return to my dark box to pour developer over the still-wet plate before I fix its image permanently onto the glass in another chemical bath. All of this occurs on site at the river's edge. Each step must be performed immediately in sequence without fail, giving me a finished photograph within 15 minutes. The results are handmade photographs, which for us these days is a bit of an oxymoron. The conventional photograph of today and for much of photography's history is largely a product of standardized industrial and mechanical processes playing unseen in the background. As Kodak proclaimed back in its heyday, "You push the button and we do the rest."

Running counter to George Eastman's desire to minimize the handmade qualities of the photograph and thereby remove the messy inconsistencies of life from the production of the image for the consumer, the wet-plate process attracted me despite or perhaps due to how cumbersome, laborious, and particular it is. Initially I justified its use by how distinctive and seemingly magical the results can be. What really excited me was discovering how the process complemented my choice of subject both literally and conceptually. The physical correspondence is direct: water and "wetness" are the key elements to both. And the historic arcs of chemical photographic processes and our rivers' industrial alteration seem to mirror one another, suggesting the two are sides of the same coin. In similar ways the photographic plate and the river convey flow and instability, while simultaneously they reference a longstanding relationship between the irrevocably altered nature of the places we live in and our ability to make photographs of them.

These resulting ambrotypes, with all their flaws, also intrigue me for how they present a contradictory vision of the world, simultaneously contemporary but seemingly from some other time and place. They describe the river as it looks and acts today in shockingly rich detail yet, because the plates are only sensitive to very limited wavelengths of visible light,

most colors in the world are rendered in the images with a narrow range of tones. To me they cut between a rich, yet limited, range of information, much like a memory or a dream. I love how they suggest simultaneously the immediacy of flowing perceptual experience, of the here and now, while also conjuring up a period of time and a place we can only imagine.