

Photographing Lewiston

For four years, often multiple times a week, I have been photographing in Lewiston, Maine's second largest city. It is a quick trip from my studio in Lisbon Falls and I enjoy being surrounded by its tall buildings. I also like how its smaller downtown has me returning over and over again to the same spots to watch them change. Just as *what* I see changes, like a vacant storefront suddenly being readied for occupancy, *how* the place appears often seems different, too. This is usually due to variations you'd expect—shifts in the angle and intensity of the sun, for instance—but other, less obvious factors, like a kind word from a stranger on the street or even a passage in a novel I read the night before, can affect my view of the place. As I shoulder my camera and return to wander its streets, I am often left to wonder what has changed the most since my last visit, the place itself or my outlook.

Most of what I see—Lewiston's office buildings, places of worship, courthouse, hospital, shops, and string of massive former mills—offers a contrast to the state's predominantly rural character. But, alongside this, Lewiston stands as a city of immigrants, especially those fleeing hardships in their former homelands. In 1850, as Ireland struggled with widespread famine, nearly a quarter of Lewiston's population was newly arrived and Irish-born; not long after that an influx of French-Canadian mill workers further expanded its diversity. Today, one in ten Lewistonians is foreign-born, many having recently sought refuge from a bevy of war-torn nations in Africa. Its public schools reported in 2022 that less than half (48%) of its student body identified as White. As it has since its incorporation in 1795, the city balances on a demographic cusp, an exciting, if uncertain, moment for its citizenry: The "minorities," most "from away" and, these days, many with darker complexions, are poised to flip the equation, to find themselves the majority in one of the whitest states in the nation.

These images of Lewiston describe moments also balanced on a cusp, specifically when close attention to the everyday unveils its remarkable qualities. Take, for instance, this image on the right, a view east from the dog park on Maple Street in April 2023. Its intersecting shapes and array of colors, in plain view for all to enjoy, vibrate between two realms, referring simultaneously to the seemingly random flow of our lives and a kind of order, of disparate facets snapping into place, sometimes astonishingly so.



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The "snapping" we sense in a photograph stems from its ability to record a discrete slice of time and arrest its passage. I love how this gives me a view of the world I might not otherwise have and often spurs my curiosity about what else I may be missing. The suspension of a moment in a snapshot also highlights our place on the cusp of time's passage: As the permanence of the image rubs up against life's constant flux, the fleeting nature of experience and our own impermanence is revealed. In the end, the stillness and the order of the photograph teach me how to see, to look around as one moment flows into another and fills me with wonder.

Michael Kolster is a 2013 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellow in Photography. His work has been exhibited widely and is included in the permanent collections of numerous museums in the U.S. and Europe, including the Center for Creative Photography, George Eastman House of Film and Photography, High Museum of Art, Huntington Library, Museum of Contemporary Photography, and Princeton University Art Museum, among others. His fourth book, *Mongrels of Our Making* (2025) has just been released. Previous books include *Paris Park Photographs* (2022), *L.A. River* (2019), and *Take Me to the River: Photographs of Atlantic Rivers* (2016). He is currently Professor of Art at Bowdoin College, where he has taught since 2000 and lives in Brunswick with his spouse, Christy Shake, and son Calvin.