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Artist's work emphasizes humans' relationship with nature

Brittany Henning

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A row of white wind mills contrasts with the dark sky, standing in juxtaposition with the highway - a nice image, but add the title, and it is not just a picture anymore; it has a way to be looked at and a story to tell.

The piece entitled "Clean Energy Now" is a photograph taken of Interstate-80 in Iowa from 2005 and is part of the Westcott Community Art Gallery exhibit: "Photography to Help Bridge the Relationship Between People and Place." It portrays how everyday decisions, as simple they may seem, have a large effect on the environment and the places people live in.

"When I'm walking through a town or hiking through the hills, it stands out in a way that's difficult to put into words," said Drew Burdick the featured photographer at the exhibit. "We are all connected to each other and the places we live in, in ways we don't often comprehend and understand."

When Burdick graduated from St. Lawrence University in 2003, his family gave him a 35mm camera. He worked for a while to save money, living in southern Spain and North Africa with the camera.

"The camera started everything," Burdick said. "I wasn't out to get a certain collection of connected photographs. It's easier looking back to find common themes. Los Angeles, California and the mountains of southern Spain are very different places on the surface in aesthetic feel, but the theme is steady; the human relationship to the natural setting."

Burdick's passion for photography began when he was a full-time land steward at the family-established Center for Whole Communities in Knoll Farm, overlooking the Green Mountains in the Mad River Valley of Vermont. Burdick worked in close proximity with co-founder Peter Forbes, a writer, photographer and conservationist. While managing the entire 400 acre farm, caring for fruits, vegetables, animals, forest trails and building maintenance, the experience evolved into a mentorship.

Forbes shared his photography with Burdick, and together they discussed their creative ideas.

"It's always great to learn from someone else's perspective and mold it into your own style," Burdick said.

"Peter and Drew had many conversations about photography," said Helen Whybrow, who is co-founder with her husband and communications director of the Center for Whole Communities. "Peter gave him a lot of encouragement."

Whybrow said Burdick's photography is similar to Forbes' style. Each has a documentary feel with energy that makes the picture seem very close to the subjects, with a landscape and human connection.

Whybrow said Burdick has an eye for detail and artistry.

"I like the photographs because they tell a story," Whybrow said. "It's not just a pretty picture."

Whybrow said Burdick helped to keep the family's farmland and hardwood forest in good shape to host the educational programs. While Burdick worked full time for six months and lived with them for a year, he became more politically active, especially around the war in Iraq, and became more engaged and interested in environmental issues.

"He thrived on the physical work and was always observing everything around him," Whybrow said. "He was a very much hands-on-the-land kind of person. I think he was inspired by the landscape here; he often had his camera in hand."

Burdick said his theme for the gallery is an evolving concept. After many years of taking photographs and trying to tell the story, it will draw out that story so it will become more conveyed through images without words. He said the exhibit is not at the point where it communicates as effectively as he would like it to.

The artist said selecting the gallery portraits is never an easy task; he's always second-guessing and rearranging. Beginning the process with a few hundred computer-based images, he picks about 70 of his favorites to print. He said there is a huge difference between looking at the photographs on a backlit computer screen and looking at the print outs in reflective gallery lighting.

Jackson said Burdick e-mailed the Westcott Community Center about a year ago asking to show his photography at the gallery that now holds only a fraction of his collection.

"He seems quiet and an all around nice guy - very down to Earth," said Kim Jackson, assistant director of the Westcott Community Center and gallery committee member. "I think he's out to make people happy."

Jackson said Burdick's family will take his work from the gallery because he returned to Portland, Ore., his hometown. He moved there in August 2006 to set up a photography studio with his girlfriend.

Burdick is developing his own masters program by combining environmental engineering and evolutionary ecology with photography and working for Seanchai Productions, a documentary film company.

Burdick wants to connect scientific knowledge and the general understanding of the public. He said the transition of turning academia into reality and application is a slow process, but he is using his photography as a way to make change.

"I want someone who walks out of the gallery to have a slightly different perception of how intrinsically tied their relationship is to the world around them," Burdick said.

If You Go:

What: Photography to Help Bridge the Relationship Between People and Place

Where: Westcott Community Center

When: Weekdays, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. until Feb. 5.

Cost: Free

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