



AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY

‘UPSTATE’ exhibition at Reece features ‘timeless’ rural, industrial landscapes, recent work of
ETSU arts faculty member

White curtains frame a ’50s-style diner table with red vinyl bench seats and cup of coffee waiting. Leafless trees, patchy snow, empty warehouses and unmanned equipment dot the Hudson River’s edge. Dark clouds loom over a weathered yellow house rimmed with weeds, featuring an unwelcoming “private property” sign in the yard. Tema Stauffer’s lens sees barns collapsing, weeds encroaching, structures deteriorating, cars rusting and world-worn eyes staring – after history has been made and nature often has reclaimed the landscape. There’s a haunted quality and an eerie sense of peace. “The little yellow house on Wire Road in Germantown always caught my attention whenever I drove past it ...” Stauffer says. “This [photo in the UPSTATE series] generally seems to captivate viewers the most. I think there is a little house that lives in many of our imaginations and this one perhaps speaks to our childhoods and sense of home.” The Yellow House and Stauffer’s other photographs from the Hudson, N.Y., area – that constitute the “UPSTATE” exhibition – will spark imaginations and memories at East

Tennessee State University’s Reece Museum Oct. 22-Dec. 14.

Stauffer, who holds an MFA in photography from University of Illinois-Chicago, is marking her second year as professor of photography at ETSU, and the “UPSTATE” exhibition, says Anita DeAngelis, director of exhibition co-sponsor Mary B. Martin School of the Arts, is a good way for the campus and community to better get to know Stauffer and her work. “In her photographs of Hudson, N.Y., Tema Stauffer has produced an original body of work while acknowledging the

histories and capabilities of her medium,” says independent scholar and photography curator Alison Nordström. “Her treatments of the area’s landscapes and modest buildings often employ a dark and moody palette, appropriate to a region that Minor White described as being always 18 percent gray. “The impression this produces is hushed, meditative and nostalgic, suggesting a degree of timelessness ...” While Stauffer’s images depict moments in time from upstate New York, the scenes are also universal, says Stauffer, whose passion for photography has taken her to state fairs, water parks, dog shows, locales out West and in Florida, on police ride-alongs in Chicago and to the city streets of Paterson, N.J. “I hope people will take an interest in this [UPSTATE] body of work as a reflection on history, natural beauty, place, preservation and changes to the built environment and economic landscape that are relevant to post-industrial cities across America,” Stauffer says. “Those in this region might see parallels between upstate New York and Appalachia in regard to the mountains, rivers, vernacular architecture and socio-economic experiences of various communities. When I have shown these images to locals in Johnson City, people have frequently commented to me that this ‘looks like Appalachia.’”

While Stauffer, born in North Carolina and raised in Michigan, was teaching at Concordia University in Montreal before moving to Johnson City in 2017, she was often in the Hudson area and “fell in love with the landscape and history of this region.” The “UPSTATE” series incorporates images portraying the [Hudson] river, as well as abandoned industrial and home sites that appear almost haunted, Stauffer says, but she hopes the camera looks past the surface, into the past and at the present. Amid the deserted landscapes and homes, Stauffer also injects humanity and an eye to the future. As Nordström notes in her essay accompanying Stauffer’s book, UPSTATE: Photographs by Tema Stauffer, published by Daylight Books this fall, “While Hudson may be marked with its industrial past, the portraits of three of its present-day inhabitants show immediacy, liveliness and a connection between artist and individual that helps us see her non-human subjects as equally compelling, understood and admired.” American

history and literature, as well as the struggles and identities of American people, are the driving forces of Stauffer's photography, she says. "My three years living and teaching in Canada only reinforced my awareness of American life as the central subject of my artistic vision and practice." Through photography about the American landscape and people, Stauffer says, viewers can learn "about complicated histories, multiculturalism, social and personal identities, environmental and economic issues, and most importantly, how we fit into, impact and change any or all of this." To assist the community in making these connections, several collateral events are planned. On Wednesday, Oct. 24, at 5 p.m., Xhenet Aliu will present a reading of her foreword for the "UPSTATE" monograph, as well as selections from her recent novel, Brass. On Wednesday, Nov. 7, Stauffer will give an artist talk at noon, where she will discuss earlier bodies of work, as well as the photographs of "UPSTATE." Then, on Thursday, Nov. 29, at 5 p.m., Nordström, a renowned photo historian, will share her perspectives on the exhibition. All the accompanying events also will be held in Reece Museum. "The Reece is honored to host 'UPSTATE,'" says Reece Museum Director Randy Sanders. "Stauffer's powerful, sublime images inform and indelibly impress upon the viewer an ever-changing America. While the subject matter is Upstate New York, one can easily see a strong and immediate connection to the people and land of Southern Appalachia." "UPSTATE," Nordström says, "is both an indisputable portrait of Hudson, and a general meditation on the marks of human activity everywhere."

For more information about the Martin School of the Arts, visit www.etsu.edu/martin or call 423-439-TKTS (8587). For disability accommodations, call the ETSU Office of Disability Services at 423-439-8346. Follow the Martin School of the Arts on Twitter @artsatetsu and on Facebook. For more information on Stauffer's work, visit www.temastauffer.com.

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