



BOMB

A Charged Stillness: Tema Stauffer
Interviewed by Kathryn Savage

Photographs that capture the restlessness of place.



Tema Stauffer, *Red Clay Driveway, Perdue Hill, Alabama*, 2019, color photograph.
Courtesy of the artist.



Photographer Tema Stauffer's work, ranging from portraits and landscapes to domestic interiors, emanates with charged stillness. Her 2018 book of photographs, *Upstate* (Daylight Books), depicts the legacy of industry and agriculture in Hudson, New York. Loss is the pilot light igniting images of an orchard burning or the rundown Furgary fishing shacks; and yet, perhaps paradoxically, connection with people and places, often overlooked, can also be felt. If one pillar of capitalist hegemony is erasure, then in Tema's work I'm reminded that extending curiosity toward places with long, complicated histories—extractive, industrial, social, economic—can be an act of animation closer to protest than spectacle.

Recently, she's turned her attention to settings that inspired literary works by canonical Southern fiction writers such as Alice Walker, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty. In images of their homes and surrounding landscapes and vernacular architecture, a kempt bedroom, a blue kitchen curtain, or a mint-colored, corded phone pulse with life. How an empty room can be an open face calling forth an intimate response is one of the allures of her new work.

—Kathryn Savage

Kathryn Savage

TRACEY MORGAN GALLERY

188 COXE AVENUE ASHEVILLE NC 28801 828.505.7667 TRACEYMORGANGALLERY.COM



In your photographs of place, stillness is often broken by a restless image: a red sky and vibrant green stacks of topsoil bags or a roiling fire in a wintry field. How do you capture these fleeting instances?

Tema Stauffer

The images you mentioned felt like the result of good fortune when light, color, composition, and content met in synchrony. Such moments don't come often or easily, but demand searching and persistence, so I revisit locations and photograph settings during different seasons and times of day until these elements can be fully realized in an image.

KS

Your current project includes photographing the homes of canonical fiction writers. Can you talk about how your current project came to be?

TS

I was fascinated with the idea of exploring and photographing the South using its literary tradition as a road map and discovering where writers I'd long admired lived and wrote. I grew up in the Midwest and spent much of my adult life in the Northeast, and my understanding of the South, both before and after I moved to Tennessee, was shaped significantly by reading Southern literature. In December 2018, I visited Rowan Oak for the first time with the intention of simply seeing William Faulkner's

home before seeking to photograph there. I met the director, Bill Griffiths, and because no one else was in the house at that time, he generously let me set up my camera and take pictures. I took a photograph of Faulkner's kitchen on this first morning in the house and have since returned twice to photograph other rooms, particularly Faulkner's daughter Jill's ethereal childhood bedroom.



Tema Stauffer, *Wards Chapel AME Church where Alice Walker was Baptized*, Eatonton, Georgia, 2020, color photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

KS

TRACEY MORGAN GALLERY

188 COXE AVENUE ASHEVILLE NC 28801 828.505.7667 TRACEYMORGANGALLERY.COM



The images in your series feel haunted by the person who is absent from them yet who remain so central to my understanding of these spaces, both interior and exterior.

TS

Eudora Welty surrounded herself with thousands of books, some left in piles on her furniture, and her passion for reading and her expansive curiosity about so many subjects is palpable in her home. Both Welty and Faulkner positioned their desks and typewriters near windows in their studies, which for Welty, was also her bedroom. I tried to capture the quality of light from windows streaming into their domestic spaces and how this light felt integral to reflection and to the literary imagination.

KS

Contemporary fiction writers Xhenet Aliu and Charles Baxter have written moving essays about your body of work. Your work has inspired writers; where do you draw inspiration from?

TS

I have deep respect and gratitude for writers who have written about my work, including Aliu, Baxter, and the scholar Alison Nordström who contributed an insightful essay to the *Upstate* monograph. When I was a teenager, Carson McCullers was the first Southern writer whose work captivated me, in part because I identified so strongly with the tomboys and misfits in her stories and their restlessness and longings. In 2018,



I drove to Columbus, Georgia, to look at the exterior of her home, but I haven't yet photographed it. I'm not sure to what extent her history will be part of this project. Columbus is less interesting and visually rich to me than the rural areas surrounding these other writers' homes, but she is my first love. I have also started reading the work of the contemporary Southern writer Jesmyn Ward, who grew up in DeLisle, Mississippi. I bought all of her books from my favorite bookstore, Square Books in Oxford, and began with her most recent novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Themes of race, poverty, and familial bonds are conveyed powerfully through her beautiful and lyrical storytelling. The photographer William Christenberry has long been an inspiration, and now that I am shooting Southern architecture and landscapes myself, it's impossible not to think of his work, and even reference his work, when photographing a church in Alabama or an abandoned house overtaken by wild, lush foliage. I am equally interested in film. The most moving film that I've watched in recent years is *Moonlight*, directed by Barry Jenkins. Jenkins's exploration of social class, Black masculinity, and human relationships is so deeply compassionate; he is an extraordinary filmmaker and storyteller.





Tema Stauffer, *William Faulkner's Kitchen Curtains*, Rowan Oak, Oxford, MS, 2018, color photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

KS

In your *Ballad of Sad Young Men* series (2008), masculinity also seems to be a central theme. Tell me about your portrait work.

TS

I shot the photographs of young men in Binghamton, New York, in the fall of 2008 during the onset of the recession, and these portraits reflect several themes simultaneously. At the time, I was dating a woman who lived in Binghamton, and I made frequent bus trips from New York City to visit her there. Seeing young men on and around Main Street resonated with my own experiences growing up as a gay teenager in a midwestern college town in the 1980s. The portraits are an exploration of gender and sexuality, as well as the uncertainty of adolescence. The title of the series, *Ballad of Sad Young Men*, derives from a song performed by Shirley Bassie and Roberta Flack that was significant to the gay community in speaking to vulnerability and loneliness. The context of photographing these subjects on Main Street was important in the sense that “Main Street” was being used as a metaphor in the media during the recession to talk about the experiences of working- and middle-class Americans; and, of course, Main Street has been a focus in the history of documentary photography since Walker Evans.



My next and larger portrait series, *Paterson* (2009–14), documents residents of a post-industrial city in New Jersey during the years following the economic crisis. The portraits focus on the self-expression of working-class and economically marginalized Americans of the diverse racial and ethnic groups comprising Paterson’s population. Shot in natural light on streets with a medium-format camera, each image explores the psychology of an individual who reveals herself or himself willingly to the camera’s gaze. The minimal backgrounds suggest the urban environments these subjects occupy; however, these straightforward, realist, and classically composed photographs concentrate on faces and the depth of human experience that is spoken through them. The portrait series explores how “place” is written on the faces of people.

KS

In the Rust Belt, the South, the Midwest, when a portrait of a place is, in part, a portrait of decline, I wonder how you approach the tensions of showing industrial ruin without producing spectacle?

TS

Pathos is certainly a strong current running through my photographs of people and places. My collective bodies of work explore social and economic struggles within specific communities as well as themes of abandonment, loss, isolation, endurance,

time, and change. I don't think that I portray ruin or decline as a spectacle, but for example a deserted factory in Hudson resonates with me as an important relic and symbol of the history and economic reality of this small city and other post-industrial cities across America. The story of Hudson is about factories that thrived and factories that closed, and the photographs in the *Upstate* series try to tell that story honestly.



Tema Stauffer, *Anderson Cotton Gin, Clarksdale, Mississippi*, 2020, color photograph. Courtesy of the artist.

KS

TRACEY MORGAN GALLERY

188 COXE AVENUE ASHEVILLE NC 28801 828.505.7667 TRACEYMORGANGALLERY.COM



I love what Baxter said about your work in a short piece published on your website: “Look closely at the photographs by Tema Stauffer, and you will see two seemingly incompatible qualities presented next to each other and holding each other in a kind of suspension — stillness and wildness.”

TS

Baxter beautifully articulated something about my photographs that I didn't see clearly until he revealed it to me; there are few greater gifts for an artist than when a writer accurately captures, in words, what one is trying to express through images. He wrote these observations in 2010, and a decade later the co-existence of stillness and wildness is still relevant to my more recent photographs. There is wildness and hauntedness in the abandoned houses and cars, deserted factories, churches, barns, rivers, trees, and skies of these regions. My approach to photographing these settings through the meditative process of using medium- and large-format cameras, in Baxter's words again, evokes: “a particular kind of stillness.” The subdued light also conveys solitude and silence.



Tema Stauffer's work can currently be seen in the online exhibition Untitled—The Summer Show at Sasha Wolf Projects's website.

Kathryn Savage's debut lyric essay collection, Groundglass, is forthcoming from Coffee House Press (2022).