

A photograph of a misty, golden-hour landscape. The scene is dominated by a thick layer of fog or low clouds, with a warm, orange-gold light filtering through. In the lower-left foreground, the dark silhouettes of trees are visible, partially obscured by the mist. The overall mood is serene and atmospheric.

DOUG DERKSEN

**STANDING IN THE CALM OF THE STORM**

JULY 18 – SEPTEMBER 7, 2019

**EXHIBITION:** JULY 18 – SEPTEMBER 7, 2019

**OPENING RECEPTION:** JULY 18, 7:30PM

Curated by Alyssa Fearon

Exhibition Sponsor:



# STANDING IN THE CALM OF THE STORM

Interview by Deirdre Chisholm

Introduction by Alyssa Fearon

In 2000, Doug Derksen suffered a painful back injury that resulted in nearly a decade of extremely limited mobility. Through his journey of recovery, Derksen turned to photography as a means of therapy and healing. In his photographs, familiar landscapes like the Brandon Hills, Souris Bend Prairie, and Riding Mountain National Park are presented in ways that emphasize the natural beauty of these everyday scenes. Doug Derksen is a scientist by trade, and a self-taught photographer—he seeks to capture the essence of life, beyond the physical and tangible, and his artistic practice is tied to his recovery. How does one bear excruciating pain, especially when options to find solace are few? *Standing in the Calm of the Storm* is part of Derksen's ongoing journey to seek peace through his recovery and make visible his connection to the land.

COVER: Doug Derksen, *Souris River Cutbank*, Photographic Print, 2016



**Deirdre Chisholm (DC):** DC: Your photographic practice evolved from a time of healing after a critical injury. The links between the arts and health are growing in recognition. Doctors can “prescribe” museum and art gallery visits to help patients in their recovery. How did your practice of photography assist in the personal healing process?

**Doug Derksen (DD):** Photography has definitely helped my healing process. I’ve always been interested in photography and have been deeply connected to the natural landscape, which is where I feel most at home. I had a back injury followed by a surgery that didn’t go very well. What followed was a long convalescence with eight to ten years spent

mostly in bed or in a recliner trying to survive pain. After a second surgery, a slow recovery began. Other than my family, my deep connection to the land brought me through this very difficult time. I was no longer able to work and be defined by what I did, and I was alone much of that time so it was very much an inner journey. It was difficult, but I found great peace despite the pain. Much of that peace was connected to nature, so with my camera I tried to capture the sense of being that I had discovered. It was a great tool in self-discovery; however, rather than being a prescription for health, where someone would say, “Oh, here’s a treatment - now go and do art so you can return to your normal life,” this was the opposite experience. For me it came from within - this sense of being was something that needed expression, and it became part of my life rather than a prescribed addition.

**DC:** Have you always worked in digital photography? Or did you practice other lens-based photography as well?

**DD:** I’ve been taking photographs for a long time; I was using colour slide film before switching to digital capture. I’ve never liked the physical darkroom; I don’t like the alchemy of it and was never able to translate what I saw into black and white. What I enjoy is being out in nature, experiencing and capturing the richness of it

ABOVE: Doug Derksen, *Solstice Sunrise: Souris Bend*, Photographic Print, 2010

on-site, rather than being in a dark room. However, I was frustrated with slides because the images come out 'flat' and sometimes you get things in your compositions that you can't do anything about, maybe it's a tree branch or something else. The digital darkroom has allowed me to bring my experience and vision at capture to a final photographic print, which I achieve using programs such as Photoshop and Lightroom.

I feel colour more than I can describe it. The experience of standing alone in rich natural light as coyotes howl and the sun comes up is extraordinary, and it gives me great pleasure to bring that experience to others through photography. Although it may seem counter to what I have just said, there are a couple of black and white works in the show. I've been experimenting with black and white because it gives me a chance to focus exclusively on composition.

I bought a new camera where you can set its film simulation to black and white. When I look at the LCD monitor or through the viewfinder I am seeing in black and white. This has given me a chance to really understand and explore photography in this way. It's positively influencing my colour photography and I am excited to see where it goes.



Sebastião Salgado is a photographer whose work I admire. When I saw his landscape images at a show recently, it was as if I was seeing in colour. He presented the same emotional connection to the land that I try to capture, and the fact that his photographs are black and white really made me think. He recently switched from film to digital so I have been trying to follow his approach. He has inspired me to learn the art of black and white.

**DC:** How do you prepare to take pictures? Is there a destination or landscape that you return to, in order to find the moment or essence of the place? How do you determine what to photograph?

ABOVE: Doug Derksen, *Barley Field at Sunrise*, Photographic Print, 2018



**DD:** The best way for me to prepare to take pictures is to have an open heart and uncluttered mind. The process is not always easy and it takes work that is not directly related to photography.

Here in southwestern Manitoba we have amazing light: the light of early morning, late evening, and the light during or after storms is rich and beautiful. By following the weather, I become aware of the light that is happening or that will happen. All of the photographs in this exhibition were taken within a forty-minute drive of Brandon: because of my back problems I can't travel very far and have found natural places close by. I return to these places often and try to match the amazing light with the interesting landscapes that I know. I often ask, 'Which way will the light shine when it breaks

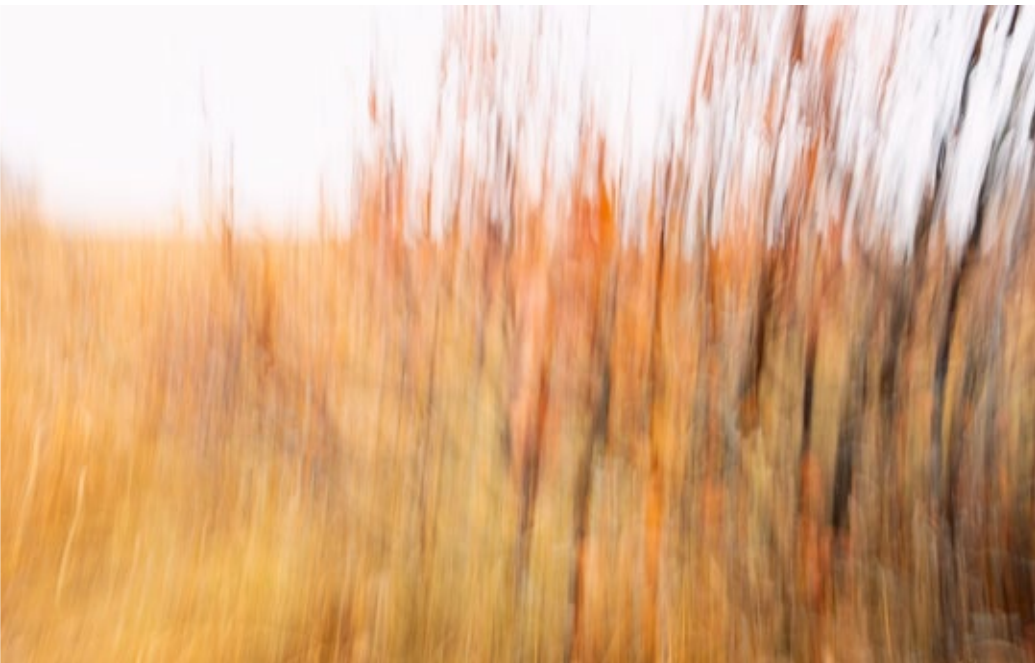
through the clouds after a storm,' or 'Is the sun going to rise through a fog tomorrow morning?' It becomes an exploration of light and land.

People ask me about the colours in my photographs - what's 'real' or how much has been altered by Photoshop. I try to retain the original colour at capture. It may not happen often, or only very early in the morning, but there's a time in the day - a moment - when the colour is fantastic.

**DC:** Who are your artist "parents"? Do you have 'favourite' photographers or artists who have influenced your work?

**DD:** I remember seeing a reproduction of the Group of Seven painter Lawren Harris' work on the north shore of Lake Superior. It's a stylized landscape





painting, but I wondered: is it or isn't it? He caught the soul of the land. I wondered, if I was standing beside him as he was painting and I took a picture, what would it look like? In other words, how much did he interpret, and how much was being recorded as is? I had this concept that Harris would come back to his studio and manipulate his sketches, the way some photographers use Photoshop; however, I found out that the Group of Seven painters were really trying to capture what they saw. The whole idea of capturing the landscape with emotion, simplicity of form and composition, spoke to me. I didn't have the vocabulary at the time, but that's really where it started for me.

ABOVE: Doug Derksen, *Netherhills Chokecherry*, Photographic Print, 2018

The Canadian photographer, Freeman Patterson had a big impact on my photography. I saw a presentation of his where he put his slides to music and I was totally overwhelmed. I bought his books about composition. He talked about line, shape, and form - all the things that artists learn that I had been doing intuitively. He helped me articulate what I was seeing, and then to see in a new way.

**DC:** Can you describe your process of working? Is the image re-worked in your studio via graphics editing, for example? How does the printing of images change with your inspiration?

**DD:** I spent a lot of time just getting the feeling of what's present and then trying to capture that feeling. For example, I may be really drawn to the way the light is shining through mist rising from a river. I move around trying different lenses and different points of view. As I work I go between being open to feeling the moment and then more logically articulating what lines or shapes enhance the composition. I like this dance of intuitive and logical.

David duChemin, a Canadian photographer is a big influence on my process. He calls his process 'sketching'. Instead of trying to have a perfect image at first, it's a process of exploration. In the end I may take a few hundred photographs exploring a scene, each one leading to another photograph. It is only when I get home a look at the images that I can see what really worked well.

I use Photoshop and Lightroom to bring out the inherent elements of a photograph. I capture the original photos in RAW format to get the most detail and best quality of light. RAW files are bland and need processing. I honour the colours and light at capture, and I don't add colours or elements from other photographs. Instead, I gently bring out existing colours. Dodge and burning, as well as selective localized contrast enhancement enriches the inherent lines and shapes and helps lead the eye around an image.

Printing has become an important part of my photography experience. Printing shows the fundamental elements of an image in a way that viewing them on a monitor does not. It is much harder to get a good final print than it is to get something that looks good on screen. Furthermore, it is even more difficult to get a good looking image when you print it large-scale, which is where all of the flaws show up. Printing large has helped me focus on having a clean and simple composition. Large-scale printing also requires different techniques to preserve colour and ensure the image isn't degraded in the process of enlargement. It all goes back to having a good quality file at capture. Forming the basis of a technically good large print is achieved through quality equipment, working from a tripod, and using long exposures to capture the maximum quality of light.



**DC:** Your works are very beautiful and carefully crafted. What are the elements of a great picture/ photograph that must be present for you?

**DD:** I honestly have a hard time articulating what makes a great image. It is about honouring the experience at capture. What makes a great image is capturing a sense of being, rather something technical. Technical elements are in service to that goal. I would say a good image has a bit of soul -but I have no idea what that means.

**DC:** Photography has been an important link between science and art for several decades. How does your background as a scientist inform your work as an artist?

ABOVE: Doug Derksen, *Souris Bend Rainforest*, Photographic Print, 2016

**DD:** Until my back injury, I spent my career as a research scientist. We're taught that science is a logical process of applying the scientific method. This worked well for me initially. I realized that intuition was necessary to find new ideas and questions and to develop underlying principles rather than just focus on details. By some definitions, intuition is fast logic: that means you've totally immersed yourself in information and ideas. Then it comes out - something new and exciting. Intuition doesn't come out of nowhere, it is nurtured. So, by honouring intuition and then using the discipline of logic and exploration, I was able to make contributions in science.

Early on I assumed that photography was the opposite, that it was about intuition and feeling alone. This also worked for a while, but had its limits. One day I had a real epiphany - that the photographic process is the same as the scientific one. You need to nurture your intuition and listen to it, be immersed in the process, then use the discipline of logic to bring all of your craft to bear on articulating your personal vision. Once I realized this, I was able to explore and create with greater focus and freedom.

## LIST OF WORKS:

- Fog on the Little Saskatchewan*, Photographic Print, 2011
- Souris Bend Rainforest*, Photographic Print, 2016
- Prairie Storm I*, Photographic Print, 2016
- Souris River Hoodoos*, Photographic Print, 2017
- Prairie Storm II*, Photographic Print, 2018
- Barley Field at Sunrise*, Photographic Print, 2018
- Solstice Sunrise: Souris Bend*, Photographic Print, 2010
- Souris River Cutbank*, Photographic Print, 2016
- Netherhills Chokecherry*, Photographic Print, 2018
- The Crossing*, Photographic Print, 2018
- Assiniboine Valley: Morning Fog*, Photographic Print, 2018

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## UP NEXT:

KEVIN EI-ICHI DEFOREST  
**OKASAN & PAPI: REMIXING HYBRIDITY**  
 SEPTEMBER 19 - NOVEMBER 16, 2019

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