

Wicked Cool Stories

Portraits, Interviews and Oral Histories

Andy Frazer

Joe Reifer

Keywords: Night Photography

See other interviews and oral histories at: <http://wickedcoolstories.blogspot.com/>

Wicked Cool Stories
Oral Histories

Project: Wicked Cool Stories
Interviewee: Joe Reifer
Interviewer: Andy Frazer
Interview Date: 2010
Interview Place: Berkeley, CA
Editor: Andy Frazer

Biographical Note: Joe Reifer is a photographer based in Berkeley, CA. His primary interests are night photography of abandoned places, and 360° panoramas. He co-created a popular series of night photography and light painting workshops held at California's most scenic junkyards between 2008 and 2015. Visit his website: www.joereifer.com.

Interviewer: For the past few years you've been teaching the Pearsonville Workshops¹ with Troy Paiva. Even though the world is probably reaching a saturation point with photography workshops, the Pearsonville Workshops have usually had a waiting list.

Joe Reifer: The success of the Pearsonville workshops is due to the unique location, Troy [Paiva]'s sizable fan base, and the quality of instruction. We've had a lot of photographers repeat the workshop multiple times, and recommend the Pearsonville experience to friends. Troy and I have both shot over 25 nights in this amazing junkyard, and we're still finding new material and perspectives. As photographers grow in their night photography and light painting skills, Pearsonville keeps offering up new challenges.

Interviewer: Your shooting style is quite different from Troy's style. What's the advantage of having one workshop with two instructors with two different shooting styles?

Joe Reifer: Workshop participants have found our different styles to be very complementary. Troy is a master of lighting and color blending -- there's no better instructor for light painting. I focus more on using moonlight along with subtle flashlight fill-light. Our varied styles and interest are also an enriching part of the classroom and critique sessions. One workshop participant referred to us as the Siskel and Ebert of night photography.

¹ <http://www.joereifer.com/workshops/>

Interviewer: How would you describe your night photography style?

Joe Reifer: My style is rooted in the documentary tradition. I'm interested in depicting ruins in the context of their surroundings. Spirit of place. The images allow space for the movement and mystery of night.

Interviewer: How has that changed over the past few years?

Joe Reifer: My style has been pretty consistent over the last five years, but it took a couple of years of intensive shooting and experimenting to get there. As my lighting skills have improved, I've been able to refine the subtle look of the lighting.

Interviewer: Night shooting time is precious. Does teaching cut into your night shooting time? Or does it provide an opportunity to shoot more?

Joe Reifer: Troy and I shoot for demonstration purposes at our workshops. Our focus is on helping the workshop participants with their composition and lighting techniques. We typically add an extra night to our desert trips in order to do our own shooting. Teaching workshops is really gratifying -- I love seeing light bulbs go off when people get it!

Interviewer: Your blog, Words², is a mix of night photography, daytime road trips through Nevada, and sometimes links to other photographers. But there's something very cohesive about it. Do you have a grand plan for what you want to present on the blog?

Joe Reifer: Thanks. The grand plan is to have fun and keep a record of what I'm doing and thinking about. I learn a lot by writing these things down, and hope a few other people will also benefit.

Interviewer: What were you photographing before you got interested in night photography?

² <http://www.joereifer.com/words/>

Joe Reifer: I shot a lot of events and portraits, street photography, and did a little bit of editorial work. I was working with small flashes and studio strobes before the whole “strobist” phenomenon, and tried a one-night Nocturnes workshop as a way to add to my lighting skills. I was immediately hooked and have focused on night photography ever since.

Interviewer: I know you’ve always been a big fan of the desert. What sort of locations and situations do you look for when you’re shooting at night?

Joe Reifer: Out of the way places, little known historical sites, anything that's forgotten, crusty and has an air of mystery about it.

Interviewer: Do you agree that “location is everything”? Do you believe that successful vernacular night photography is possible?

Joe Reifer: You have to put your camera in front of something interesting. What qualifies as interesting is a very subjective question. The biggest or the most difficult to access locations aren't necessarily the most interesting. An abandoned gas station in the middle of nowhere can have plenty of mystery and spirit of place.

When you say vernacular photography, do you mean photographs of every-day objects taken at night? I don't want to make a close-up photograph of an old oil can behind a gas station. I'd rather shoot a wide view of the scene with star trails.

Interviewer: Maybe “vernacular” was a bad choice of words. I was referring the more popular locations, such as the bunkers up at the Marin Headlands³, or Sutro Baths⁴ in San Francisco.

Joe Reifer: I've enjoyed photographing well-known locations like the Sutro Baths and Wolf Ridge in the Headlands. The popularity and accessibility of these sites doesn't diminish the joy of being out under the moon. Photographing at night near urban areas is a much different dynamic than the quiet solitude of the desert.

Interviewer: A few questions always come up when people see a photographer’s work of abandoned buildings. Such as, why photograph abandoned buildings?

³ <http://www.nps.gov/goga/marin-headlands.htm>

⁴ <http://www.nps.gov/goga/learn/historyculture/sutro-baths.htm>

Joe Reifer: Ruins have been a fascinating subject throughout history. We're living in a time with a lot of ruins. Photographing abandoned places by moonlight is a way to open yourself up to the ineffable mysteries of being alive. Perhaps Jack Kerouac said it best: "I wrote the book because we're all gonna die." And I don't mean this quote to be taken in a morbid sense. Rather it's important during the brief time we're here to find something to open yourself up.

Interviewer: How do you find these places?

Joe Reifer: Finding locations can be done through online research, networking, books, and studying maps. Driving around on old roads that have been bypassed by the Interstate is a great way to find locations in the desert.

Interviewer: Do you prefer undiscovered locations over known locations?

Joe Reifer: There is almost no such thing as an undiscovered location, just varying levels of being known over time. I steer clear of the peak-bagging mentality of some UrbEx⁵ folks. I don't worry about my adventures being colored by what someone else is doing.

That being said, sites that receive too much attention from photographers are prone to having their artistic impact diluted when presented in the larger context of gallery shows and books.

Interviewer: You seem to have more than a passing interest in the history and impact of abandoned buildings. I remember you picked David Darlington's book *The Mojave*. It was all about history of small towns in the Mojave Desert. That sort of background must influence where you shoot and maybe even some sort of shooting style.

Joe Reifer: David Darlington's Mojave book is fantastic. Photography is just one way to tell a story. Having some historical information about a site is a great way to enhance the creation and presentation of your work.

Interviewer: Most well-known artists have had a love for different types of art other than their specialty. Most of them said that the other arts had a big influence on the type of art that they were known for. I know you're a big fan of music.

⁵ Urban Exploration: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_exploration

Joe Reifer: I played piano as a kid, guitar in high school, and upright bass for 12 years before giving up playing music for photography. I'm still a very active listener, and anyone who's taken a road trip with me knows that I have pretty eclectic musical taste. I'm especially fond of world music, free jazz, and Krautrock. The soundtrack to a photography road trip puts you in a certain state of mind. The best shooting is a lot like the best playing: you create a space for something interesting to happen by being present at a certain time and space with your instrument or camera. Thinking gets turned off for a while and intuition takes over. That's when the magic happens.

Interviewer: I also know you're a big fan of movies.

Joe Reifer: I watch two to three movies per week. It's often a thought-provoking activity. I was so blown away by the reissue of [Antonioni's] *Red Desert* I watched it a second time and made screen captures to study some of the compositions. Even watching more passively can be a chance to absorb ideas about style and framing from the great directors.

Interviewer: When you've talked about your photographic influences, I've always remembered you talking about people who are not necessarily night photographers, such as Ed Ruscha. How have they influenced your work? Do they have a direct influence on your shooting style? Or do they just motivate you to get out there and shoot a completely different style?

Joe Reifer: Ruscha's low-budget photo books were way ahead of their time. Just like studying film or music, looking at paintings can be another influence. The best artists in any medium are able to absorb and blend influences in a way where they aren't readily apparent. The whole "influences" question can often lead to a reductive view of an artist's work.

Only looking at photos online can be a very restrictive exercise. My best advice to young photographers is to get a library card, and find out about interlibrary loan. My biggest inspirations have come from regularly sitting down with photo books from a wide variety of photographers. Recently, I've really enjoyed reading George Barnard's *Photographic Views of Sherman's March*, Lee Friedlander's *America by Car*, and Gerry Badger's *The Pleasures of Good Photographs*. There's a list of about 40 of my favorite photo books on Goodreads⁶.

⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/review/list/1075313?shelf=favorite-photo-books>

Interviewer: Do you think most of the current night photographers are producing fresh work? Or are they just re-shooting existing work?

Joe Reifer: When was the last time you saw a photographer in any area who was producing really fresh work? Breakout artists don't come along very often in any medium. If we're all working within known technical and stylistic tropes, then the subject material becomes even more important.

Trevor Paglen's night work is an interesting hybrid of night photography and surveillance that has broken some interesting ground. He's looking at the night sky in the context of observing spy satellites. Like the best night photography, Paglen's work suggests mystery with the added element of investigating military black ops.

The best night photographs I've seen in ages were at Nocturnes⁷ event where Lance Keimig did a slide show on little-known night photographers throughout history. The Vargas brothers were a revelation. These Peruvian photographers were doing long exposures with complex arrangements of figures and beautiful lighting almost 100 years ago.

Interviewer: Are there any current night photographers who you think are producing very interesting work right now?

Joe Reifer: There are certainly quite a few night photographers who are producing work of interesting locations. Although not a night photographer, Taryn Simon has taken the location is everything idea to new heights with her book *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*.

Interviewer: I know you've invested a lot of time learning about the RAW processing work flow, and especially sharpening techniques.

Joe Reifer: Processing a RAW file to look good online is getting easier and easier. Printing is much more demanding. I use LightRoom for 80-90% of my workflow, and go to Photoshop to use masks and more detailed local adjustments. My processing goal is to create an image or print that has an open look, but still reads as night.

Photoshop is useful for stacking images for long star trails, and compositing images where the light painting wasn't quite right. Getting the shot right in the camera is ideal, but some of these techniques allow for greater productivity in the field. Troy Paiva and I talk about this balancing act in our workshops.

⁷ <http://www.thenocturnes.com/>

Interviewer: What was the biggest mistake you ever made while shooting?

Joe Reifer: A few years back I drove to the Mojave and shot a few hot nights in a junkyard, and didn't use in-camera noise reduction. The temperature was in the high-70's [Fahrenheit], and most exposures were in the 4-6 minute range. I didn't bring a laptop on this trip to review images. When I got home I loaded the images on to my computer, and it looked like someone poured salt into the sky there was so much noise.

When the temperature in the 50's [Fahrenheit] or below, noise reduction is typically not necessary on a current dSLR with a CMOS sensor. You just end up cutting your productivity and battery life in half. When the temperature is in the 60's, you may or may not need noise reduction. Depends on your camera and exposure length. If it's still 70 degrees at midnight you better be using noise reduction. The hotter the ambient temperature, the more noise.

Interviewer: How does ICNR⁸ compare against post-processing NR such as Noise Ninja?

Joe Reifer: In-camera noise reduction offers better results than handling noise in post-processing. A few hot pixels are no big deal, but the white salt noise in images with a lot of sky are particularly problematic to remove in post. Any sort of noise reduction in post-processing is a trade-off between loss of detail, and noise removal. The dark frame subtraction utilized in the camera does not have this compromise. Of course, in-camera noise reduction can cut your battery life and productivity in half unless you're shooting with multiple cameras.

Interviewer: So many people are suddenly interested in urban exploration. Do you think that the recent popularity of UrbEx is a benefit to night photography of abandoned buildings? Or is it a going to create a problem?

Joe Reifer: I don't think the interest in UrbEx is sudden. People have been exploring ruins forever. What's relatively new is the huge amount of information available online. Instead of hitting the library for ghost town books and vintage maps before a trip, now we've got Google Earth on an iPhone.

Interviewer: We've seen what has happened at Byron Hot Springs⁹ just east of the Oakland area.

⁸ In-Camera Noise Reduction

⁹ <http://www.byronhotsprings.com/home.html>

Joe Reifer: Night photography and UrbEx aren't what destroyed Byron Hot Springs. The spread of location information online leads to all sorts of people visiting a site: vandals, copper thieves, drunken teenagers.

Over the last two years I shot at a location with photographers Riki Feldmann and Stephen Walsh, who rarely post work online. I agreed not to post any photos of the site before it was torn down. Although there were signs of scrappers pulling metal out of a few places, there were few signs of any other vandalism. If location details and images had been posted online, the increased visitation may have been harmful to the site. More importantly, the artistic impact of the work would have been diluted.¹⁰

Interviewer: A lot of urban explorers say they enjoy the adrenaline rush of sneaking into a location, and then trying not to get caught. Do you prefer to sneak in? Or get permission?

Joe Reifer: Permission is best if possible. Everything else requires some sort of risk assessment. I'm not doing this for the adrenaline rush. I just want to absorb the atmosphere and make some images.

Interviewer: Do you have any desire to go visit Detroit or anywhere in the Rust Belt?

Joe Reifer: I'm glad people are photographing Detroit so I can see it. I'm not interested in being a tourist somewhere for a few days and then presenting the images in the context of the rest of my night work. If I was going to photograph Detroit, I'd need to move there for a year. Photographing closer to home has helped me create a more cohesive body of work.

Julia Solis has been photographing Detroit for a long time, and bought a house there. Jeff Brouws is an interesting photographer who was based in San Francisco for a long time and then moved to the Rust Belt to photograph. His book *Approaching Nowhere* is amazing.

Some photographers get what I call Burtynsky-itis: the desire to photograph the biggest, most shocking and impressive example of a subject. I'm typically interested in more subtle subjects. I usually prefer to invite the viewer into the photograph instead of hitting them over the head with it.

¹⁰ The show of this work *Dark Resort: A Nocturnal Survey of Lake Berryessa in Transition* ran at the Pacific Pinball Museum, Alameda, CA in 2010.:

Interviewer: Does the American Southwest have enough to keep you interested for a long time? Or would you like the chance to shoot somewhere else?

Joe Reifer: I'd like to do more exploring in Nevada, and do some work in Arizona and New Mexico. And there's still a lot more to shoot in the Mojave. Time and money are the limiters for most photographers getting to shoot in interesting places.

Interviewer: And how important is the documentary aspect to your night photography work.

Joe Reifer: Documenting a location over time can often reveal some fascinating insights into the process of decay. A mix of new and old locations seems to work pretty well for planning each full moon. My work is documentary with a touch of the surreal. In Szarkowski's construct of Mirrors and Windows I'm mostly a window.

Interviewer: Any plans to publish a book?

Joe Reifer: I was very excited about the idea of print-on-demand, but got discouraged when I saw the printing quality, especially for night work. Night photography is very difficult to print because you're often dealing with a wide gamut of blue and cyan tones in the sky, and the tricky transition area of the dark zones into areas of black with no detail. I'll be keeping an eye on the technology as it improves.

In the meantime, folios might be an interesting alternative. Any of these options require packaging and marketing your work. That's not the reason I'm doing night photography. Time is limited. I'd much rather be out in the middle of the desert shooting rusty stuff under a full moon than engaging in endless self-promotion. If Gerhard Steidl calls me up, sure, I'll publish a book.

Interviewer: A lot of people get excited about night photography, they start producing some good work, then after a year or so, they burn out and we never hear from them again.

Joe Reifer: Same as any other hobby. People like trying new stuff. I do hear what you're saying about the attrition rate with night photography though. The basics of night photography are easy. Finding subjects to shoot, light painting, and making a consistent body of interesting work is not easy.

Interviewer: Some people have told me they didn't realize how much time it took standing around in the dark with nothing to do.

Joe Reifer: Night photography isn't for everyone. Neither is mountain climbing. Or cricket.

Interviewer: You've already photographed some junkyards, plenty of abandoned buildings, and even an aircraft junkyard. What new challenges are you looking for?

Joe Reifer: Well, I've taken a few months off from shooting vehicles. I love old cars, but I don't consider myself a car photographer. I'm interested in looking at any sort of location, architecture, object, or place that is in the bardo state between abandoned and gone. What insights can we draw by studying a place during this transitional time between the end of one thing and the beginning of another thing?

END OF INTERVIEW