

DH How did you find yourself in the Sawtooth Valley in Idaho?  
LM The Alturas Foundation asked if I would be interested in a residency in central Idaho. I was to visit four times across one year for a couple of weeks at a time. Initially, I felt some trepidation about taking the residency though there were no specific requirements attached to it. By the end of the project I had visited nine times over five years, from 2003 to 2008.

DH Why trepidation?

LM That part of Idaho is very picturesque, it's emblematic of what the West looks like in the popular imagination: tall mountains, a valley, a river runs through it. My concern was that I was going into a world that was well defined in the work of artists like Ansel Adams. I wasn't sure that I would have a lot to add to the dialogue about place that had already occurred in the history of photography in the nineteenth-century—photographers like Edward Muybridge, Timothy O'Sullivan, Carleton Watkins—all of them described the West. They were on the upward curve of manifest destiny.

DH And where are you on that curve?

LM I think we've come over the top, and the roller coaster is headed in a different direction. Gravity is pulling us. Still, most Americans have some notion of what the West looks like and what it represents. The myth of a big open space where the deer and the antelope play is part of our collective

imagination even if, in reality, most of that space now has cul-de-sacs on it. The series of photographs that I found myself making considers conflicting, paradoxical ideas about landscape in America and about values and beliefs concerning the natural world.

DH You bring the photographic dialogue about the American West into the twenty-first century. What was your initial response to the Sawtooth Valley?

LM I had the reaction that I always have when I arrive someplace and want to make pictures: I panic. And then, as I relax, I meet people and I imagine myself into the environment, through a combination of research, and intuition, and sensitivity to the visual world.

My personal route into the Western landscape was through my grandmother and the stories she told us as children. She always wanted to write a book called *Sweetpeas and Rattlesnakes*. At any rate, her mother, my great-grandmother, Glenna Ideallia Stewart, was a restless person. That runs in the family. Sometime around 1912 she decided she'd had enough of married, Midwestern life. She got on a train and went West with her two young daughters, leaving her husband in Ohio. Glenna became an itinerant schoolteacher working mostly in mining towns in Montana, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. She'd often leave her two children for weeks at a time in a log cabin outside of town with a gun and some supplies.



DH She was the female version of some Western archetypes—the explorer or the loner.

LM Yes, absolutely. Even before I left Massachusetts for Idaho, I started to imagine my grandmother's childhood and what the West would have meant to her. I read about girls and women living as they did. When I arrived at the local airport to begin my residency, I was driven to the Sawtooth Valley in a white Suburban, not exactly how my grandmother would have traveled. We stopped at eight thousand feet, at an overlook on Galena Pass, and stood taking in the view. I envisioned my grandmother standing in such a place, and I thought about how different her experience must have been, how she might have been exhausted from hours of walking or riding. As we drove down to the valley floor, we passed a small brown Forest Service sign which read, "Headwaters, River of No Return." I wrote it down, *River of No Return*.

I thought then that her subjective experience was lost to me, that actually we only get glimmers of one another in any case. But still, she could stand beside me there. This is one of the things that so compels me about photography: the medium has the ability to appear to fix fact and time, but you are aware it is an illusion, that time marches on and meaning and truth are momentary and elusive.

DH Yes, photography can be overwhelmingly reflective in the sense that the moment it captures is only retrievable through the fragment of the picture: there is no return. Yet on the other hand, your work has an overtly political edge as well, one rooted very much in the present time and current debates around mining, dams, global warming, and the management of species. It makes visible the tension between the natural world, or the world as we humans find it, and how we are currently trying to shape and control it.

LM We are nature, but we tend to see ourselves outside of it. We are the vines growing around the tree. In my work I look both at the ways that we exploit nature and also the ways in which we attempt to preserve it.

DH What is a landscape, for you?

LM I like J. B. Jackson's ideas. In his book *Vernacular Landscape*, he tells us that the dictionary defines landscape as "a portion of the land which the eye can comprehend at a glance." The word was introduced into English in the seventeenth century as a way to talk about an artist's interpretation of a view.

But if you go further back (as Jackson does), to the Gothic meaning, you find that *land* denoted a plowed field. The second syllable, *scape*, meant a collection of similar things. So it seems that landscape was understood as a collection of lands, or, in other words, an assemblage of spaces on the land organized by people. He also writes, and I love this, that landscape is "a space deliberately created to speed up or slow down the process of nature . . . it represents man taking upon himself the role of time."

DH One way to frame the *River of No Return* photographs is as a multifaceted, ambitious narrative in pictures, with intertwining plots, settings, and characters. Which of the Valley's stories emerged first as you came to know this place as it is today?

LM An overarching story is the impulse to manage the natural world: this is something particularly human, of course. We weave ourselves an impossibly intricate web. In the Sawtooth Valley, people are living—have very consciously chosen to live—at the edge of what is habitable. Even the Indians only used it as summer hunting ground. It's high; it's dry in summer, and during winter it snows incessantly and temperatures can drop to fifty below. Snowfall might occur in any month of the year, including July. Wolves visit the front yard and the chicken coop. Elk and antelope on the hillside can mean food during hunting season, but, at other times, people find themselves feeding the elk. The tiny population—only a few hundred people in the Sawtooth Valley—as well as government agencies argue over every aspect of the management of the land and the species that dwell there, including the humans.

DH Why are they so divided?

LM People divide over the best methods for management, in part because they have different ideas about what constitutes the ideal



landscape and how that land should be used. Is it a landscape that includes ranching and is thus irrigated? Or should it be in its natural state, full of sagebrush and aspens and camas lilies? Do wolves belong back in these parts because they were once here? And now that they've reproduced enough by some people's standards, is it right that they should be hunted again? Should grizzlies be reintroduced? They were once here, too.

**DH** How did you go about making images of the landscape in this part of the country, and how did you find that reflected in the questions raised as you worked?

**LM** I was surprised to discover that though I was in my own country, I was in a new culture—a place where animals far outnumbered people, a place of intense beauty and severe weather, a place where some species lived in abundance and others were on the verge of extinction. In aggregate, the photographs pose many questions. First, of course, each asks, what is it exactly that I am seeing and on what levels do I understand it? Then there are the facts of each image, about which I can tell you a lot and which are referenced in the titles, but there is also the presence of beauty and metaphor, which are every bit as important, though harder to relate in words. Each photograph has to marry all those elements together.

**DH** Let's look at *Winter Sampling to Study Growth and Diet of Endangered Snake River Sockeye Salmon, Pettit Lake, Blaine County, Idaho, 2004*. This picture beautifully combines the two primary concerns of your work: the image provides immense, specific detail but translates those facts into metaphor, like a visual form of the literary genre of magic realism. From what I understand it's a scientific procedure—but I've also heard you compare it to an image of outer space.

**LM** This photograph was made on a very cold day in March on Pettit Lake. Scientists put gill nets down a long trench that they cut through a couple of feet of ice with a chain saw. They examine the stomachs of the captured sockeye salmon, an endangered species, to see what they've been eating and to find better ways to get nutrients to them. These fish are wintering over their first year

and are very tiny, only about four inches long. What you see in the image is the fish with their stomachs removed for study. They were thrown back but fell onto a very thin layer of ice that formed in the open trench. So the camera is looking into the abyss, but also the sun is refracting countless times in the ice itself. There are a million little suns in there. As a result the fish appear to be in a dark sky, amid constellations, or a galaxy. And at the same time they're part of a scientific study.

**DH** These tiny fish represent a dying species and the whole universe at once.

**LM** The story of the Snake River sockeye is the double-edged sword you find everywhere in the Sawtooth Valley, in any environment these days, really. The salmon leave the lakes when they are not much bigger than the ones in the photograph. They swim nine hundred miles to the Pacific, crossing eight dams, four on the Snake River and four on the Columbia River, and through four hundred and fifty miles of slack water, the water behind the dams. They spend two years in the ocean, where they grow to twenty inches, and then they make the return journey, finding first the Columbia, then the Snake, then the Salmon River and return to the lake where they originated. That same season, they spawn and die. Before the dams, they returned in such profusion that it was said that you could cross the river on their bodies. Now, the dams interrupt their journey. Only a few return; some years there are none at all.

**DH** Is it even possible to save them, as the fish biologists are attempting?

**LM** That's not clear, but the government, which owns the dams, also spends large sums of money to conduct studies, build fish ladders, put nutrients in lakes, and build hatcheries in which genetically compromised fish are raised. We want the fish to survive. And we want to flip on our hydro-powered electric lights. We're walking a fine line, trying to have things both ways. It's that prismatic, paradoxical effect. How do we hold conflicting desires in our heads or in a photograph at the same time? As we control and manage streams and rivers and species right out of existence in the interest of electricity and ranching and recreation and so forth, how



do we make peace with these decisions? How do we get what we believe we need yet protect the world that sustains us simultaneously? We face these ideological battles no matter where we live, but in the microcosm of a place that seems untouched, such as this idyllic, protected valley, these issues stand out in sharp relief.

DH It's a complicated web of choices.

LM Each choice shadows another choice and implies five more, and unintended consequences often follow each decision.

DH Let's look at another image, *Judy Tracking Radio-Collared Wolves from Her Yard, Summer Range, H-Hook Ranch, Custer County, Idaho, 2004*. This one has to do with the reintroduction of wolves to the West. What was compelling about that situation?

LM Wolves were brought back to Idaho about ten years ago. Before 1950, wolves were hunted out by ranchers essentially because they eat sheep and cows. Environmentalists wanted to reintroduce wolves because they value the idea that at one time the West was intact in its ecology. Now we have altered things—changed the surface of the land, changed the relationship between one species and another. So some are trying to turn back the clock. The question is, what point in time do you choose? Environmentalists and ranchers see this very differently—and they are at each other's throats over it—quite literally. Just now the state of Idaho has made it legal to hunt wolves again.

In the image of Judy in the field, she's standing outside her house using a radio and an antenna given to ranchers by the government in order to help reduce wolf/livestock conflict. Every day she listened with this equipment to see if radio-collared wolves were in proximity and, because she was a biologist as well as a caretaker on a ranch, she collected data.

DH But the image goes far beyond a representation of data collection. It looks like a spiritual act, as though she's summoning natural powers or participating in some kind of ritual.

LM Yes, she's wearing her nightgown, because she regularly did this early, and she raises this strange equipment to the sky. That's why

I wanted to make this picture: it doesn't look like science or cattle protection, but it is.

DH The elk population is also managed—permitted to reproduce enough to allow hunting. Your photographs of a flayed elk are magnificent, even ceremonial. In some ways, they're the most visceral images in the book, yet hunting may be the least invasive activity in terms of the impact on the ecology, compared to dams, mines, ranches, and so on.

LM Hunting is part of human culture. It was a revelation to me that some people really love to hunt, not for trophies, but for the food it provides. People choose to do it in order to remain connected to the land. I hoped to convey the power and beauty of this elk's death and its transformation into food. The color is very important here: the whitish blues of the snow, the bloodred of the meat.

DH The picture of the scene as a whole is baroque, reminiscent of the European tradition of paintings of hunting scenes or still lifes with carcasses. It's monumental.

LM It's a monumental act. Hunters are highly skilled. They make a commitment to being good at the hunt as well as cleaning animals. It's actually a beautiful experience to watch as someone works when you're around a hunter who is respectful of the animal and very accomplished.

DH What about the Valley's small human population? Your work includes people, either in the form of portraits or in the evidence of their activities.

LM Yes, each person can represent an aspect of the social and environmental web and they are all loosely connected: for instance, the Peruvian shepherd living in a covered wagon tending sheep barbecues lamb for the home-schooled girl who plays with the child of the landowners who are related to the irrigator who socializes with the fish biologists who occasionally employ the guy eking out his living panning for gold in the tailings of a mine, one that was originally searched by nineteenth-century miners and, later, the Chinese. That is what is so fantastic about such a small community. You can really see all the connections.



There are no degrees of separation, but each person has a slightly different relationship to the environment of the Valley. Each represents a different set of answers to the question of the contested landscape.

- DH In particular, portraits of Mattie punctuate the book's narrative. She's often emerging from blackness and appears on the cusp of adulthood. She is the central human character in this book, yet she's not an adult.
- LM Mattie became central to this series as I worked. A young girl on the verge of adulthood, she had an extraordinary childhood, a life quite different from most children in the twenty-first century, maybe closer to children at the beginning of the twentieth century in many regards. She can hunt and fish; she can raise and kill a turkey and pluck it. She rides, and though her life was solitary when she was younger, it was richly imaginative. In the picture of Mattie holding her Thanksgiving Day turkey upside down with the wings spread out, she becomes for me a kind of inverted angel. I like my work to function metaphorically, yet with lots of attention to fact and detail. You can see every thread in her jacket and every feather on the bird.

In the photographs, Mattie is both a twenty-first-century teenager and also an incarnation of my grandmother, a girl born at the dawn of the twentieth century who came of age in the West. She also represents her own generation, my daughter's generation: they are the inheritors of all the beauty and the predicaments described in this work.

- DH These photographs relate to early photographic portraiture, just as some of your landscapes call to mind the explorations of Muybridge or Watkins. Why did you choose this format?
- LM I was thinking about August Sander and Mike Disfarmer in particular. I was also thinking of paintings of standing females, such as Manet's portrait of Victorine Meurent with a parrot. I love photographic studio portraiture from around the world, especially pictures in which people have not been conditioned to smile for the camera as an automatic response. I loved the idea of the barn as a studio and the sun as lighting.



DH I've watched you make a photograph. I know it's a very physical, time-consuming process. I also understand that, in your final prints, retaining the integrity of the image you see in the ground glass is of the utmost importance to you. You don't alter or crop much.

LM I work with an 8 × 10 view camera, which is essentially a mahogany box on a tripod. I like that technology because it's very simple. It's a box with a lens on the front and a ground glass on the back. That's about it. Using nineteenth-century technology in the twenty-first, I feel as if I am able to slow time down and open space up, just through the process. And because of the size of the negative, you see an almost surreal level of detail.

DH It transforms beholding.

LM I'm completely mesmerized by the idea of that kind of extended looking.

DH The journey you take viewers on was very differently presented in your recent exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, than in this book. The photographs were printed at 8 × 6 feet. At this huge size, they maintained extraordinary clarity. Why did you choose that size for the exhibition, and what did you hope for in terms of the viewer's experience?

LM I hoped that the size would draw the viewer into a vortex of color and form and darkness and light. The physicality of the experience drops you through a window—but also informs the way the light travels, or the way you perceive the needles on the branch of a fir tree, or the ferns and moss on the bank of a stream. In a book, you have a more intimate experience, and I think you can follow a narrative in a sustained way.

DH I think also that the scale of the exhibition prints suits the place depicted: the epic mythology of the West is here reconsidered and reimaged. In some ways, the most spectacular event pictured in this work is the forest fire. Would you talk about the fire, and the idea of loss that pervades those pictures?

LM The forest fire was for me the cataclysmic culmination of this work. In a big space you get big, dramatic events, at once natural

and human-induced. As we know, fire is an inevitable part of nature's cycle in western forests. In the past, before the land was managed, forest fires would ignite, often lit by a bolt of lightning, and dead trees burned, leaving the land open and providing a diversity of habitat for animals and opportunities for the natural succession of plants. Now we suppress fire, but still, conflagrations occur, often when conditions are extreme.

DH How did this fire start?

LM A man who was spending his last day in the Valley before moving away was burning a cardboard box in a burn barrel. It was very dry, right around Labor Day. The wind was blowing and sparks escaped from the barrel. Imagine those moments as you begin to recognize the enormity of what is happening and the fact that there is nothing you can do about it. By the time I arrived, the valley was like a war zone, full of helicopters dangling buckets and planes dropping pink fire retardant. Every effort looked insignificant in the face of the power of that fire. Within a matter of days forty thousand acres had burned.

DH How did you achieve the intimacy and drama of *Understory Flareups*? I find it terrifying to enter a burning forest, yet, at the same time, it's a tranquil, comforting scene. After looking at this photograph for a while, I feel an overwhelming sense of tragedy.

LM I enlisted the aid of a woman in the Forest Service, who had an idea where it would be safe to stand, which allowed me to be very close to the fire, the sound of it and the experience of it, which I hope is visually translated in the photograph.

DH Why are the fire photographs the concluding suite of images?

LM In part it's a matter of chronology but more importantly I think those images reflect that we have constructed a world where we live in a perpetual state of cognitive dissonance. Any one of us can make mistakes like the man with the burn barrel. But we're good at convincing ourselves that the little allowances we make every day, the use of fossil fuels or chemicals in the kitchen or on the lawn, for instance, won't really make any difference.

But when there are enough chemicals or enough CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere or enough dams or fuel on the ground in the form of dead trees, the implications of our actions, the unintended consequences, become clear. A process gets started and we are largely powerless to stop it. We're not even sure we want to. I don't think I understood all this so profoundly before I watched life, all kinds of life, unfold during the years I spent visiting the Valley.

DH These photographs draw attention to and disrupt the cognitive dissonance you describe; they allow us to see the physical, conceptual, and spiritual constructions we've overlaid onto the landscape—the ways we use it to tell ourselves often contradictory stories about who we are, what nature is.

LM I hope that viewers will understand the pictures as a way of talking about the veils and layers there are in life itself. Our decisions about each other, the land, animals. . . . I seek to portray the profound beauty of life and at the same time the deep darkness that can accompany that. In a mere couple of centuries the face of this land has changed radically. To return to my own personal narrative, the country my grandmother saw was already being defaced. It was already a world of mining. Now we are better at covering things up, at keeping things out of view. Much of the damage we are doing is invisible to the casual observer. The challenge for me was to make images that made our dilemmas visible. We all have a little piece of understanding but to really see the whole layered picture is just impossible. This is really the Achilles' heel of the human race: no one of us has the ability to truly synthesize all the elements, and, even if we could, no one else would agree with the analysis.

DH Yet you give us a glimpse, a chance for awareness.

LM Maybe we will learn to make different decisions, that's the thing we can hope for.

DH The three pictures that appear after this interview are more recent and form a coda for the book. The images are tragic yet they show signs of hope as well. Two years after the fire, and a year after the *River of No Return* work was first exhibited, you returned to

photograph some of the burned areas. These photographs intertwine imagery of devastation and regeneration.

LM I revisited two canyons where the fire burned very hot. The resulting pictures are a meditation on ruin and loss but also on the possibilities that follow overwhelming change. They're aftermath images, but in their details you can see signs of the resurgence of life in all its beauty and intricacy. I find them reassuring.