

Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, & Letters



Overlooks and Perspectives

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN KOHL-RIGGS

OVERLOOKS & PERSPECTIVES

Artist's Statement

This collection of sixteen large format color photographic ink prints called *Overlooks and Perspectives* is a study of one ridge-top system in the driftless region of rural western Iowa County in Southwestern Wisconsin. It is a portion of a larger three year project entitled *Succession* now nearing completion.

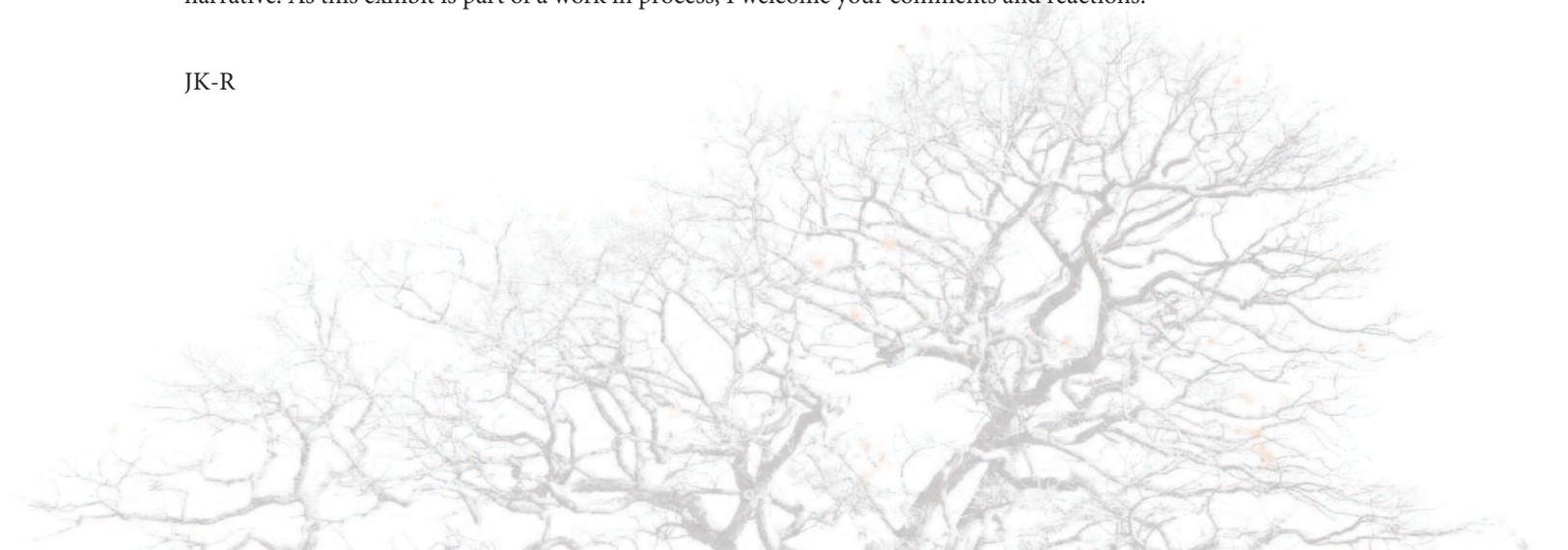
This larger work is my attempt to portray, on one level, the natural succession stages of the land as the result of both natural and manmade forces. As such, it is a loving look at a landscape I know well, having lived, worked and played within the walls of its bowl-like beauty since 1969. But more importantly, *Succession* is a record of my personal journey as a photographer from an essentially self-absorbed, reflexive view of the world to a more relational view.

There is nothing special, or unique about this journey. Since most people have had to make it in one way or another the journey can appear mundane, but on an individual level it contains elements of the heroic and sublime. For me this journey has been lifelong, littered with milestones that feel variously mundane, heroic, and sublime.

Though the journey is not yet concluded, I have discovered that I must live and work in deep, intimate, and direct relationship with the world outside myself. My mission as a photographer has become to nurture the conditions of openness and receptivity within, to unmask and examine the inherent bias and filters of my own stories, and thereby to participate in the on-going act of creation. That mission is then fulfilled by capturing raw representations of that world and its objects, using light, lenses, sensors, and computers as tools in presenting my experience, hopefully casting a light for others in their own search for beauty.

What follows by way of an exhibit catalogue with captions, is a narrative story-line, a snapshot of my internal journey as I conclude this project. I offer it as anecdotal musings that may (or may not) enhance the enjoyment and appreciation of the works themselves, which in any case are quite capable of standing on their own without need for additional narrative. As this exhibit is part of a work in process, I welcome your comments and reactions.

JK-R





Succession_0642 This little 70 acre farm perched above Smoky Hollow is the very end of the Great Plains. As I stand facing northeast on the pre-Cambrian sandstone remnants that have resisted the long-terms effects of water, weather, and time on the land, I have the persistent feeling that the winds blowing on my back arrive fresh from the Rocky Mountains over a thousand miles behind me.

Succession_0682 Smoky Hollow Farm in western Iowa County lies some forty miles west of the great terminal moraine of Cross Plains, where ended the violent scraping by the last Glacier. More gradual forces shape this driftless topography. Gentle rains, the endless



winds, gravity, and the annual freeze/thaw cycles slowly nibble away the edges of the Great Plains. Like a rich brocade, the upland edges become laced with a raised pattern of delicate, dendritic ridges and valleys flowing in leisurely, predictable meanderings to the Wisconsin River to the north.



Succession_0680 What renders the Wisconsin landscape beautiful has a lot to do with the intimacy of our relationship with it—the fact that we live and love and work and play within it. It invites us to come up close, contains us, and then requires that we get physical with it. After a lifetime working

around this fencerow of honey locust, watching it grow to maturity, to be stunned into aesthetic arrest on a foggy winter afternoon is to submit to the felt realization of how fully the meaning of our lives is framed by the shapes, colors, weather, and geography about us.



Succession_0677 Becoming aware of that meaning is the process of entering into relationship, and for me, creating a photograph. To the self-absorbed eye the world “out there” is but a mirror reflecting a monologue, endlessly dreary and draining, with no issue. Opening up to relationship is the recognition of that which is not me, and acknowledging the “other” requires nourishment, husbandry, and discipline. There is nothing mystical about this. It’s simply coming

to see the otherwise dull and washed-out colors of an uplands hardwood forest in winter as a stunning array of form and color, a kaleidoscope ever turning with the weather, season, and time of day.

Succession_0768 As the cows leave the pastures, the barns gently sink into the ground, and the maples and oaks—freed from the annual harvest of chainsaws—finally are able to gain some girth once again, so indeed do we experience internal growth and change. The photographs in *Succession* are the result of such internal changes. As the landscape continually composes and recomposes itself before my eyes, my job as a photographer today is to live and work in intimate and direct relationship with this continually new, dynamic, and empathic world.



Succession_0788 We don’t have grandeur here in Wisconsin—we have everyday rocks, trees, and hills, close at hand. The dramatic tectonic uplifts required to form mountains and grand vistas, thankfully, took their business elsewhere, leaving the great granite Wisconsin Shield to slowly develop a more stable, more subtle temperament. The Overlooks and Perspectives presented here were produced by much gentler forces, and the resultant topography is always up close and personal,

with a middle distance that you can reach out for, but never quite touch.

Succession_0781 The soul has its own trajectory. The Buddhists say it continues through endless lives until its final stage—enlightenment. I don’t know about that. All I can know about is what I experience as I trudge these woods now is very, very different than what happened to me thirty-five years ago when I lived here. The photographs in *Succession* tell the story not only of changes in the landscape; they are the tracks in the sand of changes in my internal landscape as well.



Succession_0655 And how is it that we can walk around a rock and see the results of a million photons bouncing off its surface at all angles and not only know that it is a rock, but have that uniquely human aesthetic experience of beauty? Is not beauty but the natural and necessary by-product of the recognition of the awesome fact of existence outside ourselves?



Succession_0291 By succession, I mean more than just what happens to a pasture when you take the cows to the auction barn for the last time; more than planning who is going to take the controls when we're gone; more than just the stages of a forest as it moves towards maturity and its millennial orgasm. And I mean more than what happened to the Great Plains as water, wind, and time carved out these precious valleys and hillsides of Northern Iowa County, leaving these remnant pre-Cambrian sandstone promontories and rock tumbles for me to wander about in and learn about awe, and color.

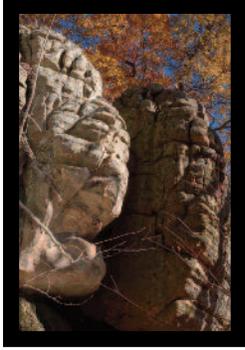
Succession_0097 By succession I mean more. I mean what happens inside us when, humbled by the passage of time and its agents, we move through our own succession of successes and failures, of love and its loss, until we come to a higher plain of understanding and we can know beauty as it exists only in the very first moment of creation, directly and unfiltered by intermediaries or the stories we tell ourselves.



Succession_0398 It is sometimes dangerous to talk about what goes on inside, because in the telling, if we are lucky enough to find adequate words, the experience solidifies into a story. As the stories we tell ourselves and each other gain power the danger is we then begin to substitute the stories for life itself. If we like the stories we tell they become entrenched, and we repeat them until they ossify into philosophy and myth. Ultimately our stories lead us into lifestyle, then into culture, into architecture, and religion. Finally, in their end stage, these stories are used to create wealth, armies, patriotism, and empire.



Succession_0539 The living experience of beauty in life is so fragile, so ephemeral and fleeting, yet powerful, that it seems to call out for such a succession into the tangible. But if allowed to substitute for the living experience of beauty the stories and their tangible progeny end up, ironically, deadening life. So art is called on to re-enliven life, reasserting the legitimacy and authority of the direct experience of the sublime within the mundane.



Succession_0316 Wisconsin-sized remnant exposures of pre-Cambrian sandstone were left to stand watch as the valleys receded beneath them. With furrowed brows these facial witnesses to the process of succession—whether it be the long-wave changes from rock to soil, or the shorter term process of a pasture converting back to a living forest—resist the forces arrayed against them until they too succumb and become pasture, forest, or streambed, and ultimately, us.

Succession_0511 Without an intimate relationship with the land, with each other, and with the source of life - without an understanding of how a stone is alive and how the basic building blocks of matter continually change and move freely both physically and spiritually between that rock and our very blood, marrow, and dreams, I cannot be fully alive. Without being in relationship I can neither exist as an individual nor can we continue to survive as a species in a viable environment. Art, and specifically photography for me, is a primary survival tool.



Succession_0412 There is a shock of recognition upon the entry into relationship— like a fusion reaction setting loose a free radical—that generates the energy and motivation to proceed. Thereafter comes all the technical and detailed work of capturing the raw representations of that world and its objects, using light, lenses, sensors, computers and printers as tools in developing that raw data into an overlook of my perspective.

Ideally this process casts light for others in their own search for beauty and meaning.



Succession_0365 In sum, photography for me is the movement into right relationship with the landscape in which I live, which is the discovery of what is sublime within the mundane. My intention has less to do with creating representations of what I think I see “out there” than it is to communicate an aesthetic of wonder and awe, expressing the feelings of engagement and gratitude I experience upon entering into relationship with the world. The prints in this collection are intended and serve for me as objects of meditation, to be hung on walls and lived with for awhile.

JOHN KOHL-RIGGS

Student Attended Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio; L'Universite Besancon, Besancon, France; and the Universities of Tubingen and Berlin in Germany before graduating from the University of Wisconsin, Madison with a BA in Comparative Literature in 1969.

Photographer Held various Solo Photography shows in Chicago, UW Madison Memorial Union, and University of Minnesota Mankato Art Department Gallery 1967 thru 1974, plus hung in a dozen various juried exhibitions long forgotten. During this period specialized in large format black and white landscape, nudes, and candid portraiture in nature.

Stone Mason Finished masonry apprenticeship in 1975 and for five years built stone fireplaces, homes, and walls in the landscape of Frank Lloyd Wright, building on his masonry tradition and aesthetic.

Engineer and Businessman Hung up my camera and trowel in my thirties to go into the Engineering Business and raise a family, designing and building precision automation equipment and distributing machined parts to manufacturers. Founding member/partner in Isthmus Engineering and Manufacturing Cooperative in 1980, and in 1999 started my own business, SourceOne Automation LLC.

Photographer After some thirty years in the Engineering business, bought a Canon 5D and began exploring the brave new world of Digital Color, finally selling my business in December of 2007, returning full time to my original love, photography.



Contact Information

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Overlooks and Perspectives, Price List

- Succession_0642** Panorama, 27 x 82, \$1640
Succession_0682 Foggy Bluff, w/Cornrows, 21 x 43, \$640
Succession_0680 Locust Fencerow w/Cornrows, 24 x 43, \$680
Succession_0677 Forest Bank in Fog, 31 x 43, \$860
Succession_0768 Hickory Grove and Woodpile at Dusk, 25 x 32, \$530
Succession_0788 Mounded Snow Overlook, 31 x 43, \$860
Succession_0781 Oaks and Snow Overlook, 31 x 43, \$860
Succession_0655 Leviathan Rock, 25 x 42, \$720
Succession_0291 Barn and Road Overlook, 31 x 43, \$860
Succession_0097 Wright Cornfield and Burr Oaks, 24 x 38, \$640
Succession_0398 Sunrise over Smokey Hollow, 22 x 31, \$480
Succession_0539 Grassy Plain w/ Cedars, 31 x 43 \$860
Succession_0316 Stone Chief, 25 x 35, \$580
Succession_0511 Four Acre Cornfield, 23 x 24, \$400
Succession_0412 Four Acre Snowfield, 21 x 25, \$380
Succession_0365 Smokey Hollow Overlook in Fog, 16 x 21, \$320

All images are sold as signed, numbered editions limited to one hundred prints. Prints are produced using the most archivally sound materials available. Pricing includes framing under optical, non-glare glass per standards as seen in the exhibit. If you wish to purchase the image only, to have mounted and framed or frame yourself, reduce the above pricing by 15%. We cannot be held responsible however to damage to the image surface before it goes under glass. All pricing refers to images as sized in this exhibit. Other sizes are available. Contact the artist for a quote for a specific size.

Viewing of more of the images in *Succession* is possible through a private studio or on-site portfolio viewing, to be arranged with the photographer.

