

Accidental Art?

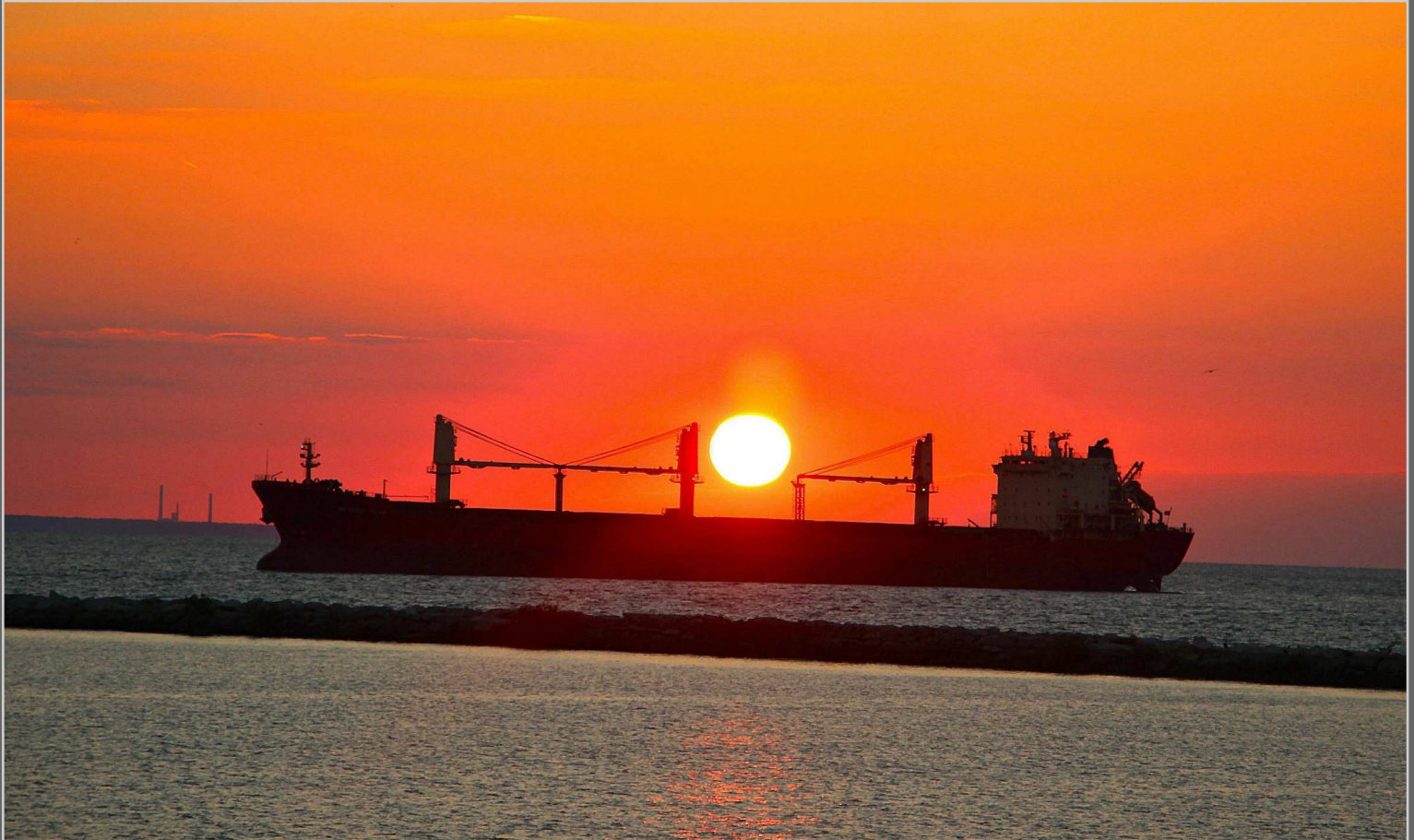
an urban photo essay in Cleveland
by Robert N. Brown

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April 2020



"light cargo" bound for Cleveland harbor

Accidental Art?

When thinking about my photography, I have sometimes wondered to what degree I am creating art as opposed to simply capturing the art created by others (like architects) or capturing the beauty that exists in nature. In other words, am I, as a photographer, an artist creating a work of art or am I more of an accidental artist, simply a chronicler of art, stumbling upon aesthetically pleasing or interesting scenes and then using the camera to capture and record them as photographic images?

I realize that these questions have been vexing photographers since the invention of photography in the early 1800's. Back then, the obvious comparison was between photography and painting. Many observers at that time concluded that the painter was an artist and that the photographer was more of a technician, operating one of the era's many new machines - in this case, the camera.

It seemed apparent that a person with no particular aesthetic sensibility could occasionally take a truly beautiful photograph, whereas the same could not be said of the creation of a painting.



sidewalk sale

Some early photographers argued that the art of painting is just as much in the eye of the painter - the aesthetic vision of the painter - as it is in the act of using paint to reproduce that vision. In fact, some would argue that the act of reproducing that vision by skillfully applying paint to a canvas is a lesser art than is the initial act of envisioning that image. In this respect, the ability of a photographer to see an image that has an aesthetically interesting quality can be considered to be the act of creating art.

This thinking has definitely influenced my work as a photographer. I tend to shy away from taking photos of scenes that are obviously beautiful, like a classic sunset or a landmark building. Although I realize that a technically skilled photographer (which I am not) can use those skills to make particularly beautiful representations of these images, I find more satisfaction in photographing images whose aesthetically interesting qualities may not be quite so obvious to the casual observer.

These images can be created by photographing a scene from a novel perspective or by viewing particular elements of a scene in an interesting juxtaposition or by focusing on a small detail that could be easily overlooked.



contents of a drawer in an art supply store

The title of the current photo essay, "Accidental Art?," reflects my ambivalence over the distinction between art and accident in my photography. When I go out on a photo shoot in the city, sometimes intending to capture big images of beautiful buildings and striking street scenes (the stuff of my city planning profession), I often find myself focusing instead on odd little images that are literally underfoot or that appear on the wall of a building in front of me. These are images that I perceive to have taken on an unintended aesthetic quality through the process of aging or through the presence of a well-placed shadow, an odd reflection or a random coming together of objects.

You could call these images found art, accidental art or maybe even self-generating art, where the environment itself, or simply happenstance, is the artist. I hope that to some degree I too am the artist, a person who recognized the beauty in these images and captured them in a photograph. Often, when I return home at the end of a photo shoot, I find that my favorite images of the day are not the images I planned to take but are those unexpected little images that presented themselves to me while others had been looking elsewhere.



leaves and sand on icy sidewalk

Ultimately, I appreciate these images because they demonstrate that beauty can be found all around us - not just in museums or in the work of great architects or in a gorgeous sunset - but in the peeling paint of an old building, a reflection that appears on a glassy building façade, a tree that has grown around debris in a dumping site or in the presence of a forgotten mannequin in the back of an old warehouse.

I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to discover these images and to share them with others.

NOTE: Almost all of these images were taken in the city of Cleveland between 2014 and 2020. The discussion on the history of photography as art was based on a reading of the book *Photography and the Art of Chance*, by Robin Kelsey, 2015.



lacquered floor of an old industrial building converted to artist studio

UNDERFOOT

When I go out with my camera, walking through the city, wearing my "city planner's hat," I tend to cast my gaze upward and outward, focusing on buildings and streetscapes - larger-than-life images that fully fill the field of my vision. Occasionally, though, my eyes are drawn downward to notice unexpectedly complex little images that lay on the ground, literally under my feet.

Examples of these images include a lacquered concrete floor in an industrial building turned into an art studio, a discarded bottle cap and cigarette in the gravel next to the curb of a neglected city street, rocks and debris on a vacant lot, shattered glass and stone fragments, and glass disks letting sunlight through a city sidewalk (in NYC).

Capturing images like these is often more gratifying to me than capturing images of beautifully designed buildings and streetscapes because these ordinary little images - not designed to be beautiful - reveal the extraordinary beauty that is hidden in rarely noticed elements of our everyday world.



“still life” with discarded bottle cap and cigarette butt on vacant lot



rocks, debris and a little life on a vacant city lot



shattered



glassy sidewalk providing daylight to underground space (in NYC)



revealing

STRAIGHT AHEAD

During my walks on the streets of Cleveland, I often find that my gaze is pulled away from the iconic buildings rising above me by inconsequential but intriguing little images that appear at eye level, straight ahead of me.

Examples of these images include an aging concrete surface revealing clay tiles beneath, uninvited vines and leaves bravely clinging to life on a masonry wall, cracked and faded paint that has taken on the appearance of abstract art, and hands seeming to pray for better times on the wall of an inner-city church.

It is amazing to me that I may have passed by these images hundreds of times, without taking any notice of them. After all, no one had designed them to be noteworthy. There was no reason to expect to find beauty here. That, however, is what makes the beauty of these images all the more intriguing. Their beauty just happened.



bravely clinging to life



bird on a wire



accidental mural on boarded-up window



praying for better times, on wall of inner-city church



parking garage stairway railing framing street scene below

FRAMED

Photographs are often displayed in frames. In addition to protecting the photograph, a frame creates a visual border around the photograph, helping to direct the viewer's attention to the image within the frame. Contemporary artist Howard Hodgkin describes a frame as the place "where the picture stops and the world begins."

Occasionally, I've found that the world provides its own frames for images that I encounter when I'm out taking photos. Sometimes these intervening objects block a portion of the subject matter, and I work to shoot around them or through them, like when I insert the camera lens through an opening in a chain link fence to photograph something on the other side of the fence. Other times the intervening object acts like a frame that sets off the subject matter and makes it more interesting.

Displayed on these pages are photos showing objects in the foreground that do, in fact, serve as unintended frames for the images behind them. These include an opening in a parking garage's stairwell railing, a public art sculpture framing a scene at an urban arts festival, a discarded glass disk framing my own image, a framed portrait of decaying wood and metal, and stranded cables framing the blurred images of students walking across a campus lawn.



art framing art



a discarded glass disk framing the photographer



dilapidation, framed



stranded cables framing college students crossing a campus lawn



the photographer's shadow

SHADOWS

Young children are fascinated by shadows. There is a magical quality to shadows. They follow you, they mimic you and then they disappear. Shadows seem to fall somewhere between the world of reality and the world of fantasy. Does the shadow have a life of its own, independent of the object that casts the shadow?

Even those adults who no longer sense the magic in shadows sometime feel the power of shadows, often as dark messengers of impending danger or evil, as in things that "lurk in the shadows."

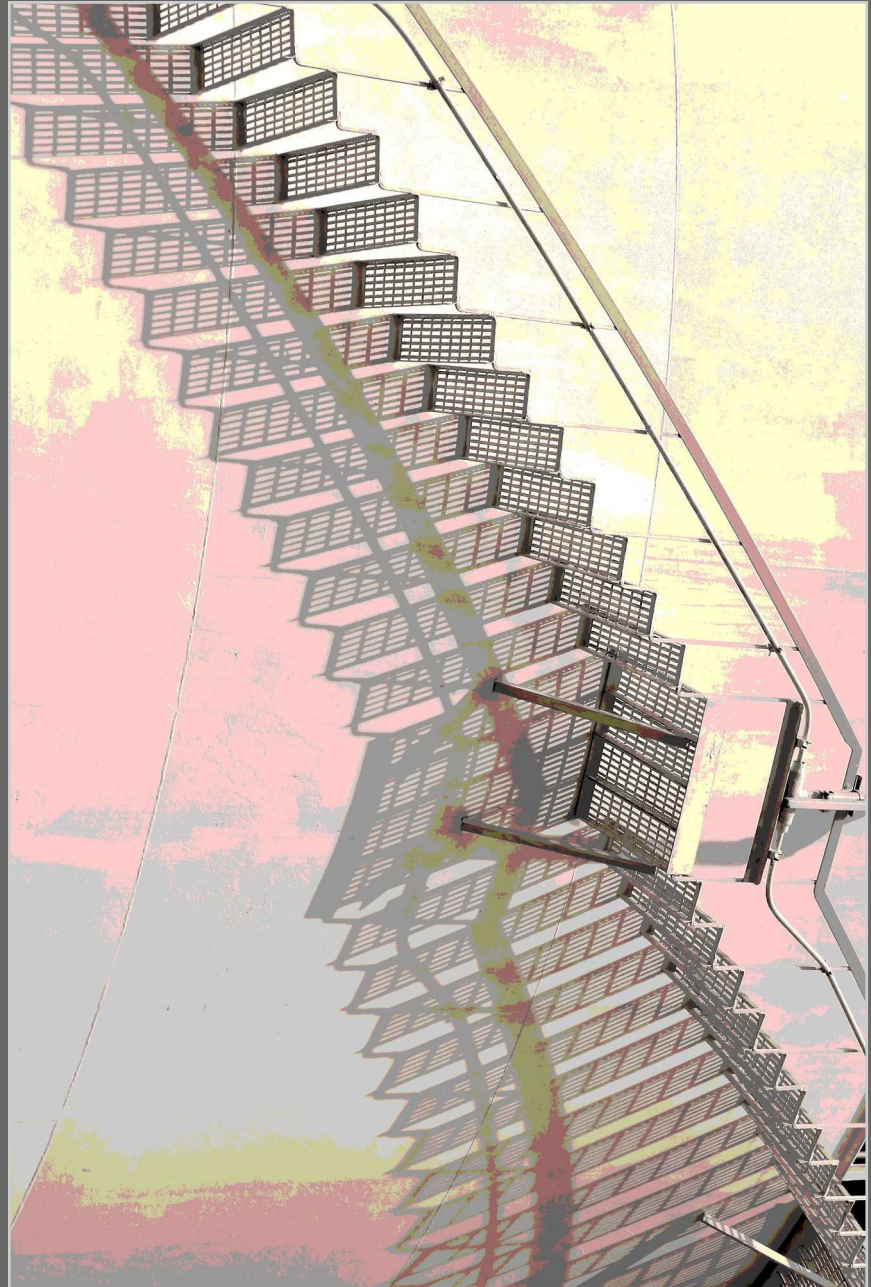
Photography seems to have re-acquainted me with the sense of magic in shadows. Often I will see a shadow without seeing its source, as if the shadow does, indeed, have a life of its own. I take photos in which the shadow is the subject matter of the photo rather than being an appendage of the object that casts the shadow.

Images on these pages include a shadowy figure (me) on a bridge's abandoned lower level, shadows cast by roofing over the Cleveland Art Museum atrium, stairs and their shadows on the side of an industrial utility tank, an eerily empty hallway, the ghostly shadow of an (almost) unseen person descending stairs, the shadow of a tree with real leaves, and an ice shelf casting shadows onto rocks below.



"don't step on the cracks" (in Cleveland's Art Museum atrium)

stairs and shadows
on industrial tank
(color-enhanced)





empty hallways (channeling a Randy Newman lyric)



phantom of Cleveland City Hall stairwell



tree shadow with fall leaves



ice shelf shadows



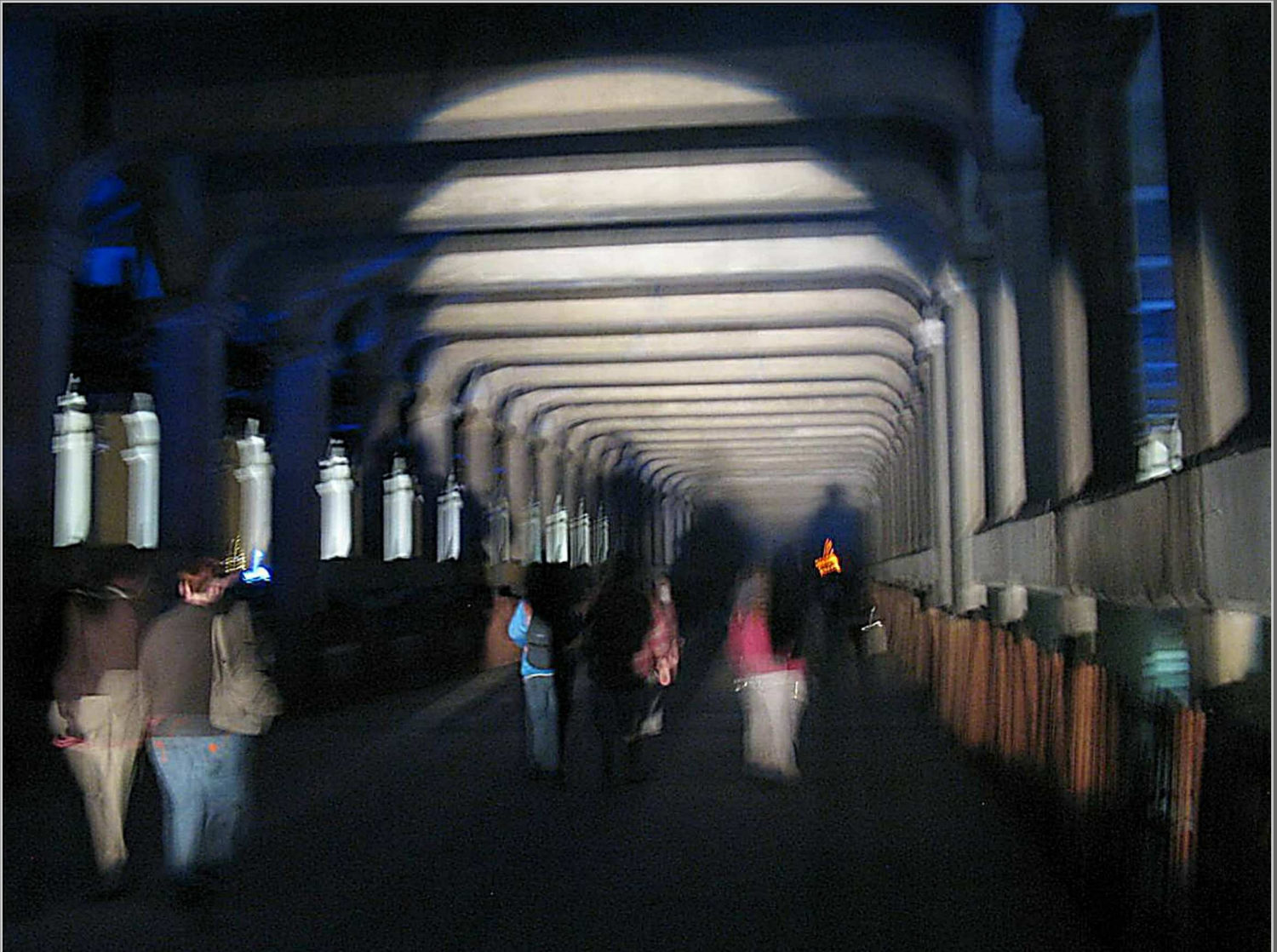
night-lit bridge girders in Cleveland's industrial Flats

DARKNESS

In many respects, photography is all about light. After all, it is light that makes objects visible to us. Ironically, though, some of the most intriguing photos are those taken in relative darkness, where the light, often minimal, is generated by artificial means.

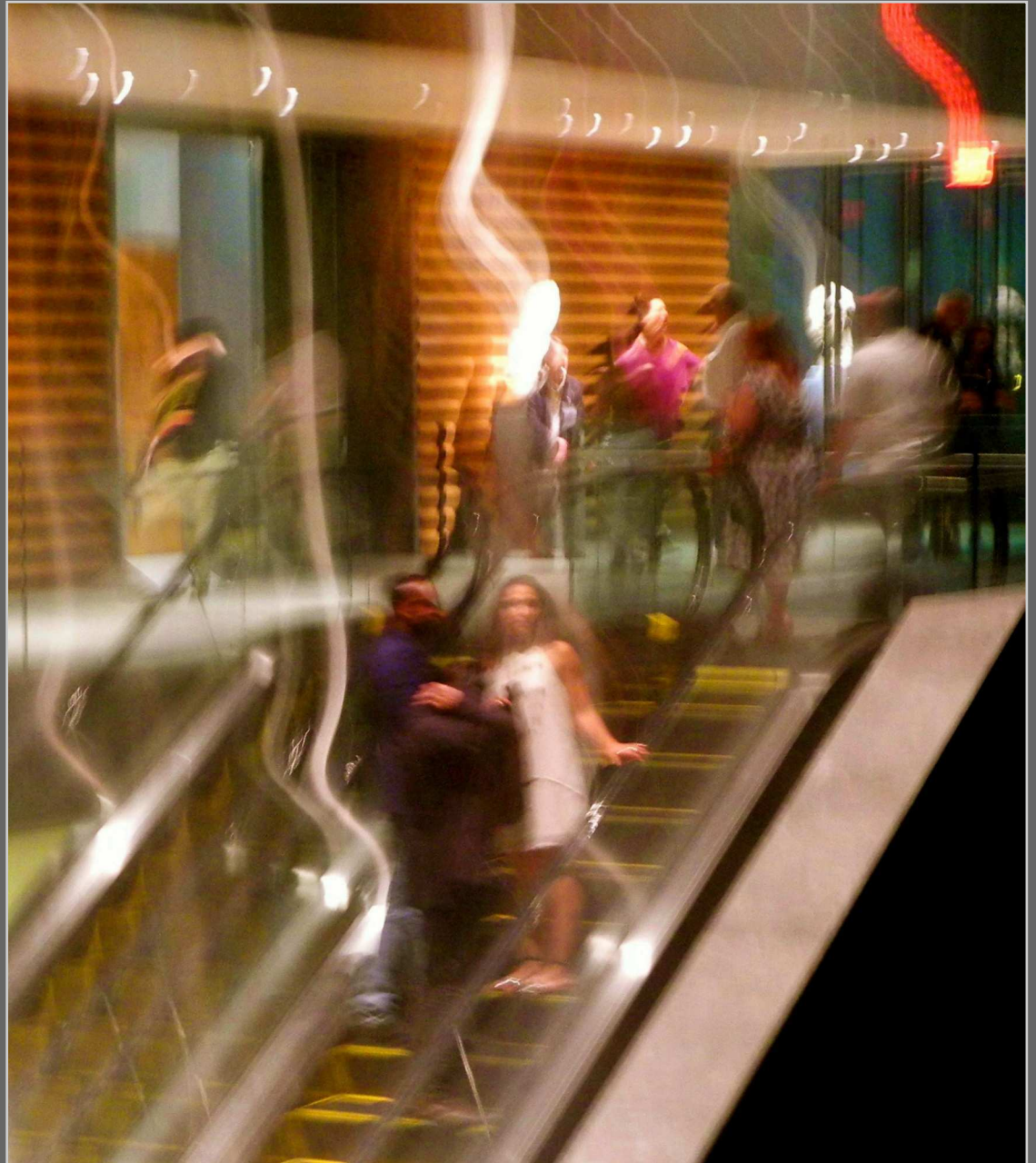
Due to a lack of preparation or simple laziness, I've taken many of my night-time and dark place photos without the benefit of a tri-pod. More often than not, this questionable practice produces an unusably blurry photograph, as the camera's lens stays open longer than my hands can remain still. However, in some cases, these photographs display motion, even if captured accidentally, that reflects the energy and electricity embedded in a nighttime scene.

Examples of these explorations into the dark side of photography include images of the dimly lit girders of a metal railroad bridge, people walking across a bridge's unused streetcar level, party-goers on an escalator at a nighttime art museum event, a young couple whose love seems to be ignited by fireworks, a Norse statue silhouetted against a background of illuminated leaves, and the changing colors of a solar-powered outdoor crystal hanging above a neighborhood green space.



arts event on abandoned lower level of Detroit-Superior bridge

electrifying
night-time
event at
Cleveland
Art Museum

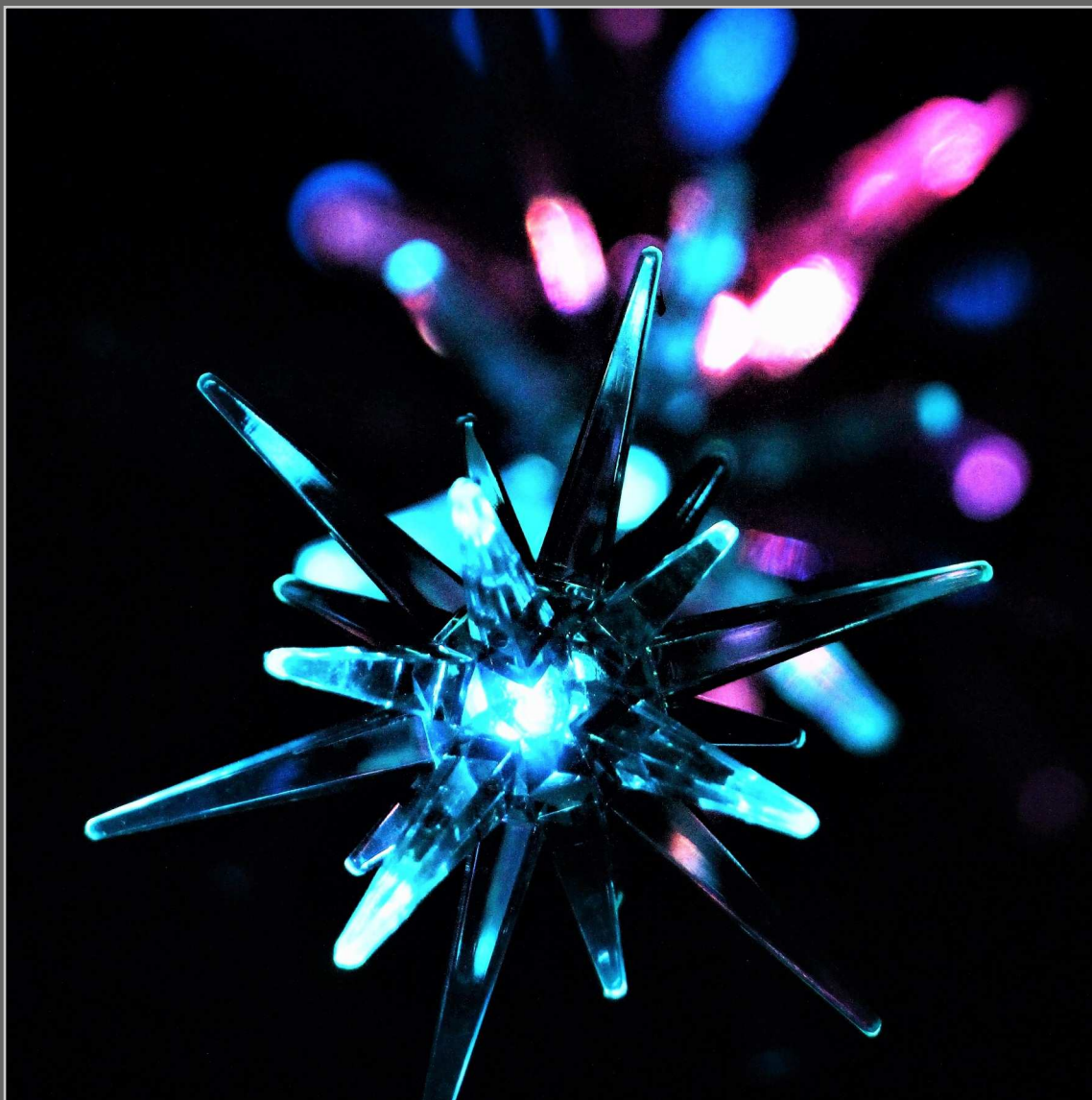




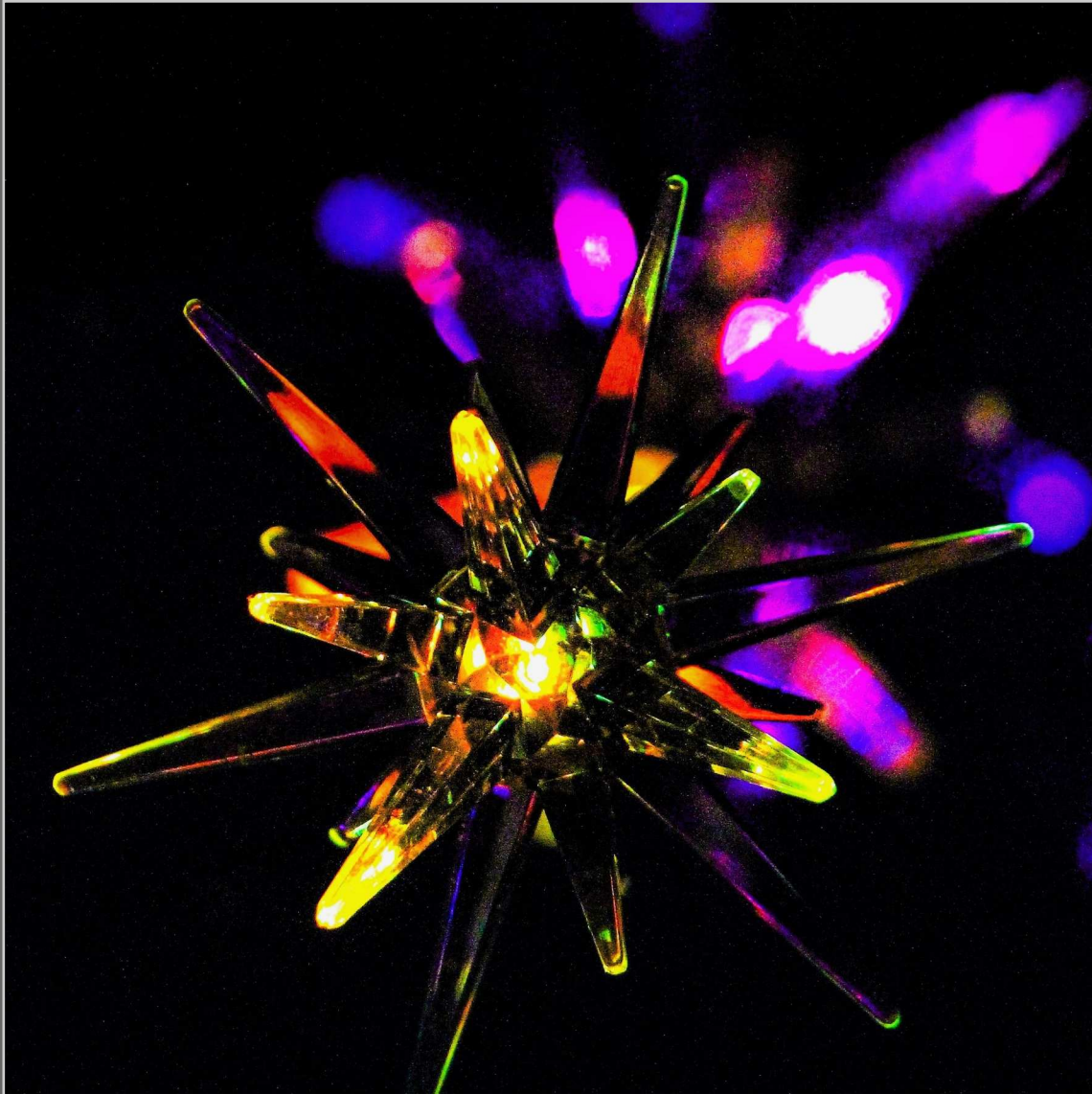
love ignited

"Leaf" Erikson





solar light at community garden (1)



solar light at community garden (2)



hinge on exercise equipment ("push harder!")

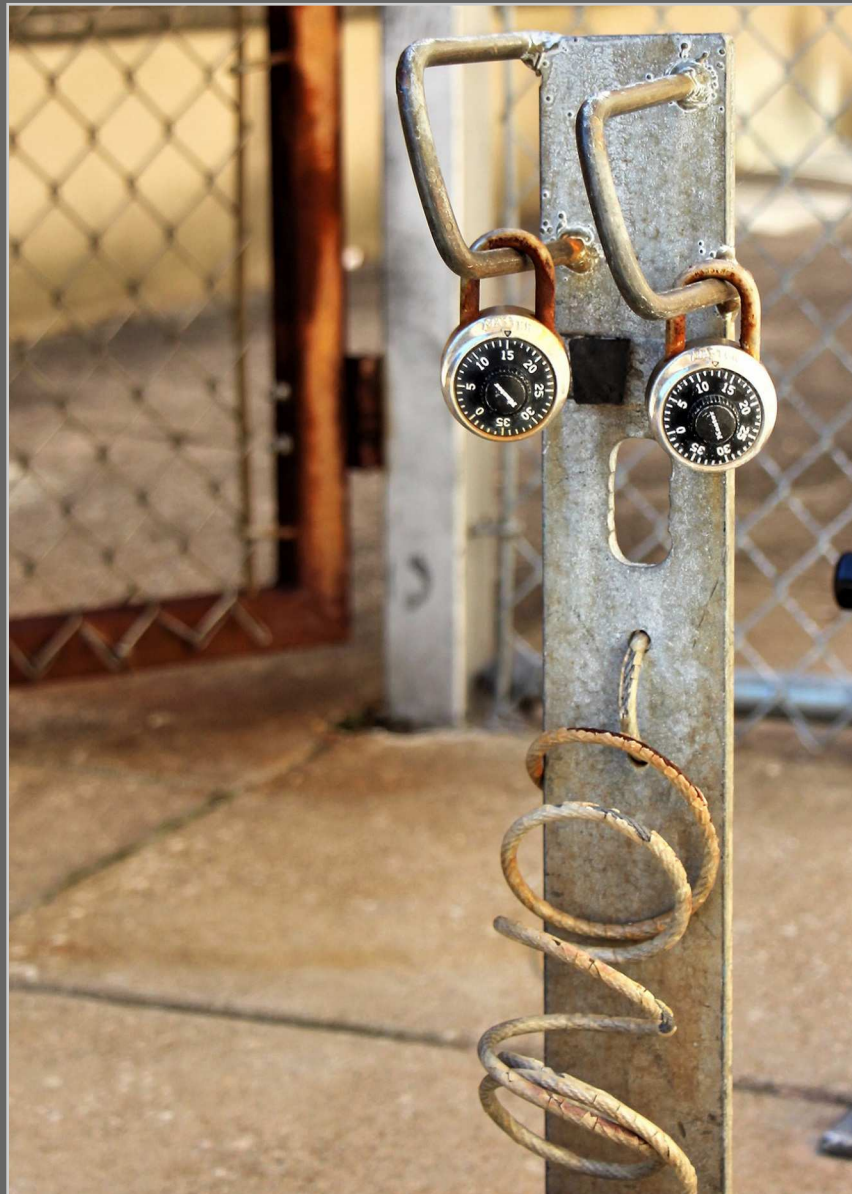
Faces

There is something so compelling about the image of a face that we often see the image in unexpected places. Probably the best-known example is "the man in the moon" – an image that dates back thousands of years and appears in the mythology and religions of many cultures.

As I began looking at the world around me with more attention to detail than I had done before making photography a part of my life, I too started seeing faces! After ruling out psychosis as the explanation for my visions, I decided that it would be fun to start capturing some of these "accidental faces" in photographs.

Among the images on the following pages are faces appearing in such unlikely places as a piece of gym equipment, a bicycle rack, bricks and bolts, ice and leaves, moss on top of a stone wall, aging plywood, a slate roofing shingle, stones, a rusting train car, and drainage pipes.





bike guy



John "Bolt"on



icy pup, with leafy tongue



dog face in moss



deer caught in the headlights (on plywood inside garage)



who?



slate face



stone-faced



smiling in the face of adversity



feeling drained



landscape of rust and moss on an old freight train car

RUST & RENEWAL

Over time, as objects that are subjected to the forces of nature begin to rust and decay, the expected outcome is what we often call blight -- a condition usually characterized by deformity and ugliness. Inexplicably, though, these same processes of rust and decay can sometimes create objects of stunning beauty.

From my perspective as a city planner working in what some would call the rustbelt city of Cleveland, our ability to see beauty in blight seems like a metaphor for our ability to see opportunities for renewal and regeneration in cities that have fallen victim to decline and deterioration. As a photographer, I continue to be amazed at the beauty of this accidental art. As a city planner, I continue to be heartened by both the planned and the almost accidental instances of regeneration taking place in our "legacy cities."

These several pages show some of my favorite images in this odd little genre, including moss growing through the side of a rusted railroad car, an aged train wheel, random splashes of paint creating an abstract composition on a wooden wallboard, light streaming through a rusted industrial barrel, the colorful rusting of a metal surface, rusty railroad spikes lying next to an unused rail line, and a very tired tire left on the floor of a vacant warehouse.



wheel of a decommissioned rail car



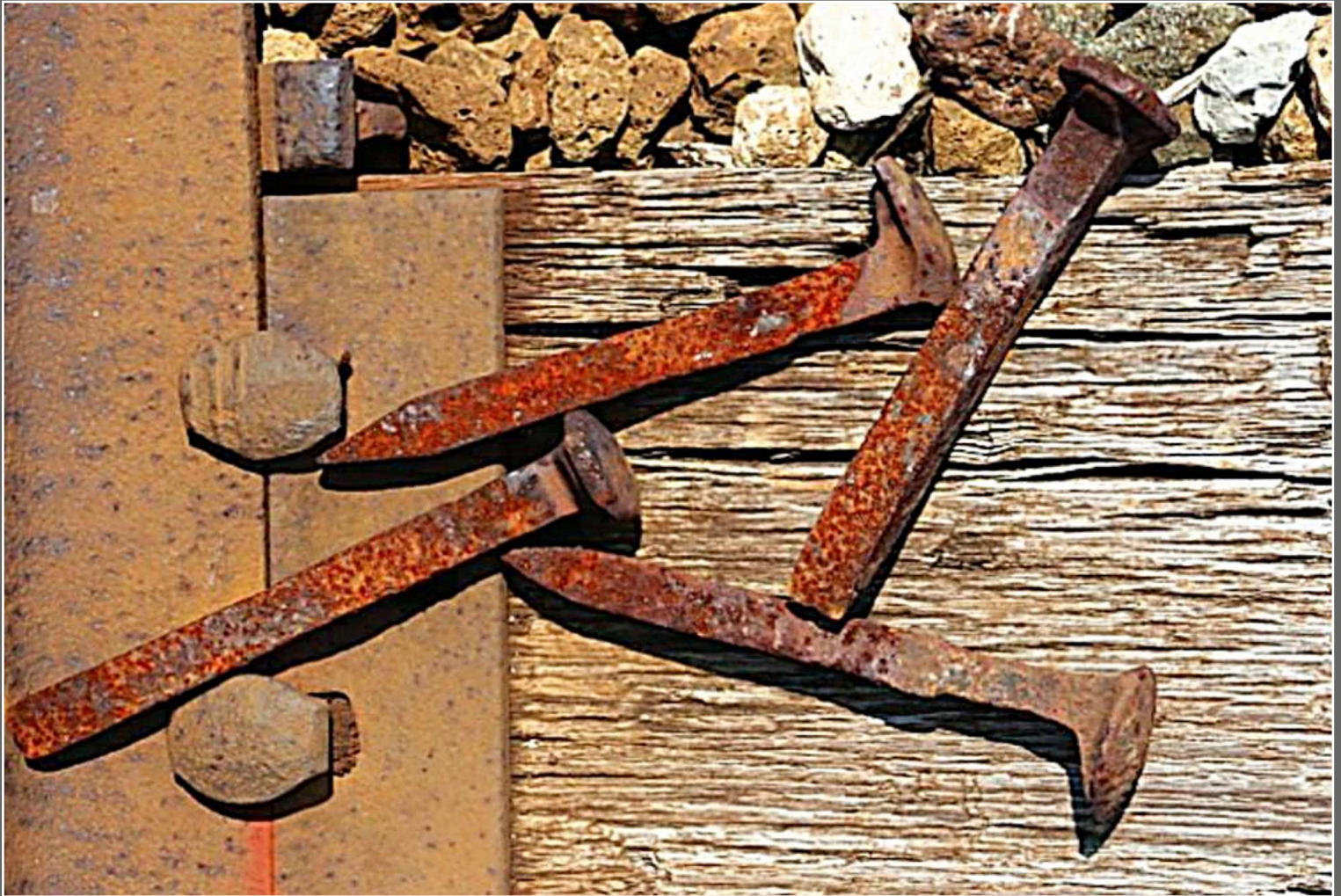
phantom artist



light streaming through a rusted metal barrel



rust rainbow



rusty railroad spikes lying next to an unused rail line



tired!



people-like images reflected onto a downtown Cleveland building

REFLECTIONS

Walk along a downtown street in almost any big city and you'll see reflections on the walls of glassy buildings. In most cases, the architect didn't design the building to pick up these particular reflections. Those reflections just happened.

These reflective surfaces and others are like a funhouse full of opportunities for a photographer intent on capturing images of accidental art! The fact that some glass distorts the reflected images makes for even more fun, as the objects are turned and twisted to create works of abstract art.

On these pages appear reflections of people-like images onto a nearby glass-paneled building, Cleveland City Hall reflected onto a new Hilton Hotel, the wall of a century-old building reflected onto the glass panels of a modern parking garage, a man walking in front of a stainless steel building, bold colors reflected onto the stainless steel of a Frank Gehry-designed building, a distorted reflection of an old diner building, a Cuyahoga River scene reflected onto the front of a Flats restaurant, mixed-use "Uptown" buildings reflected onto the MOCA building, and the reflection of a woman passing by a mirror for sale in an outdoor flea market.

Cleveland City Hall
reflected onto glassy
wall of new Hilton Hotel



historic Garfield building
reflected onto face of
modern parking garage
near East 6th & Euclid





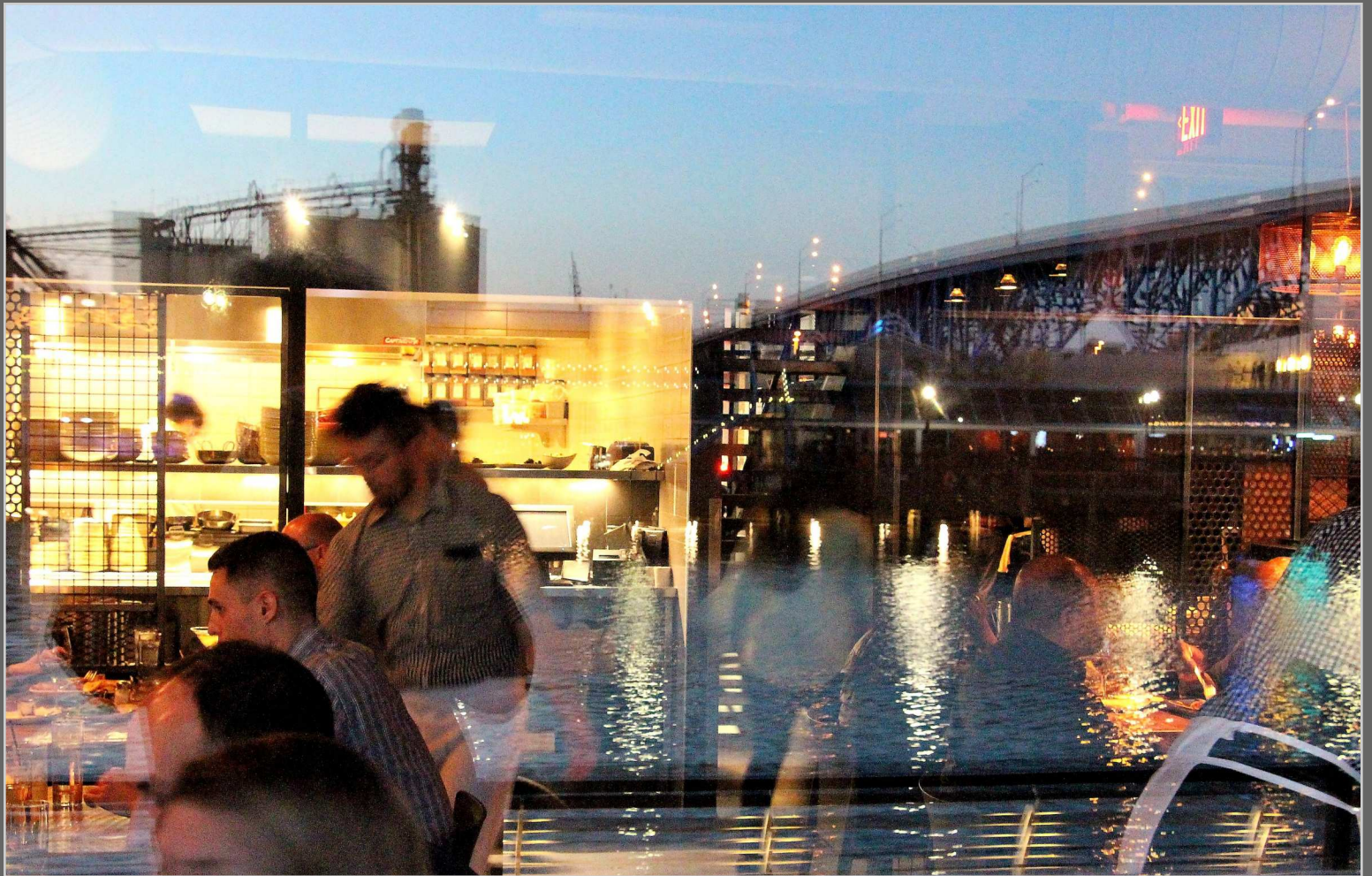
MOCA Man (passing by Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art)



sky and landscape reflected on Frank Gehry metal panel building

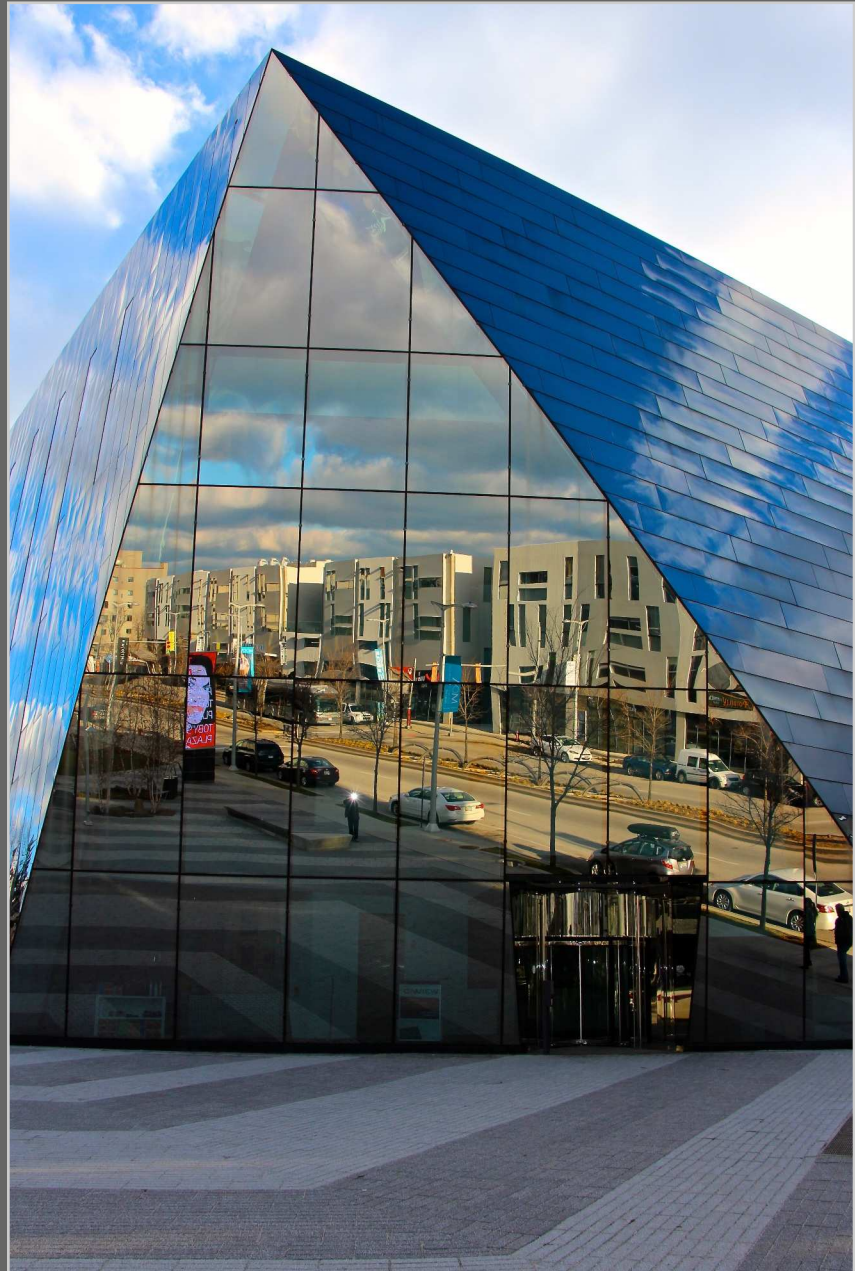
building reflections
near East 55th Street &
St. Clair Avenue diner





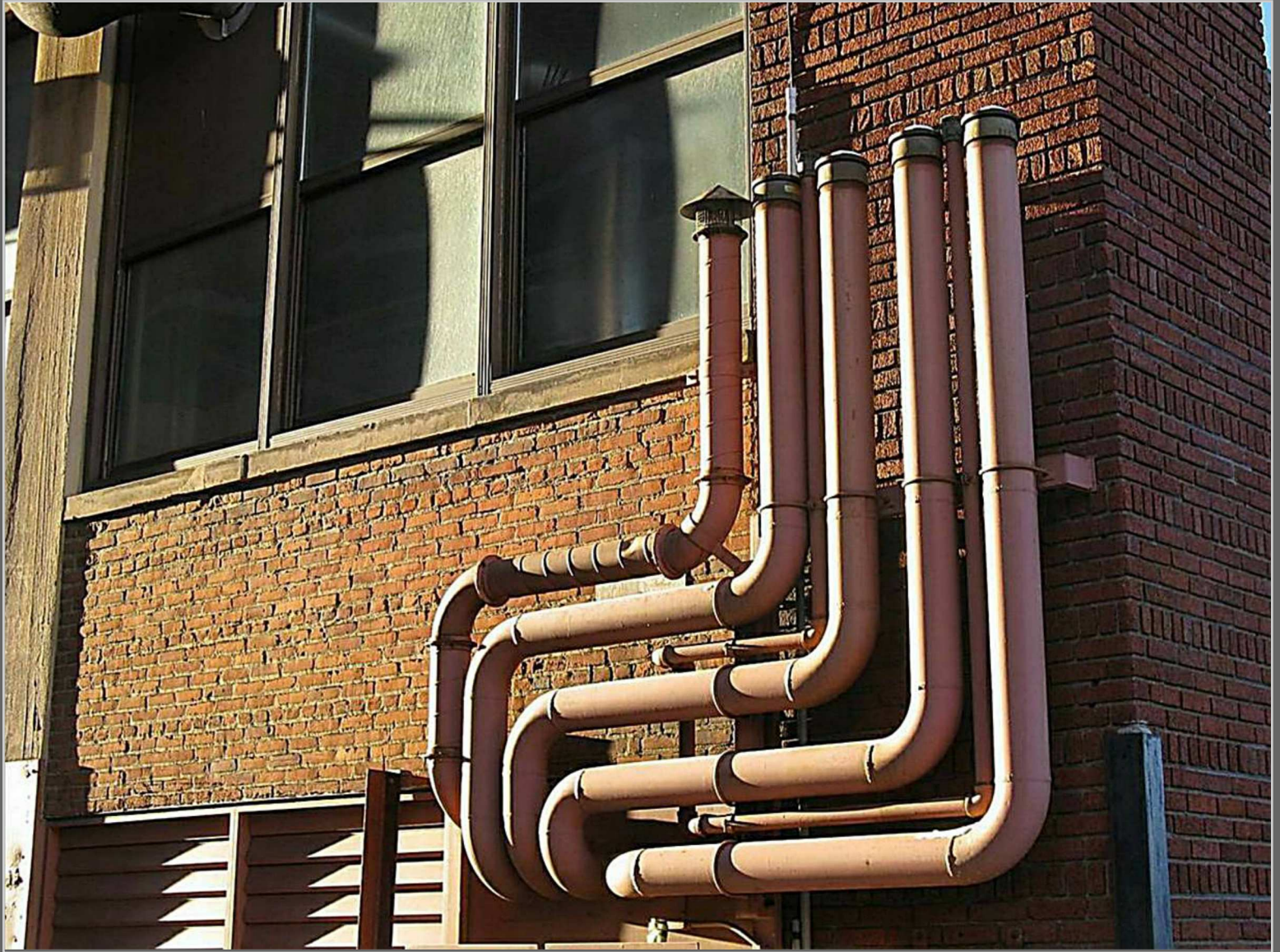
diners reflected in window of Flats restaurant on Cuyahoga River

Uptown Cleveland
buildings reflected
on MOCA in
University Circle





woman passing by mirror for sale at St. Clair-Superior flea market



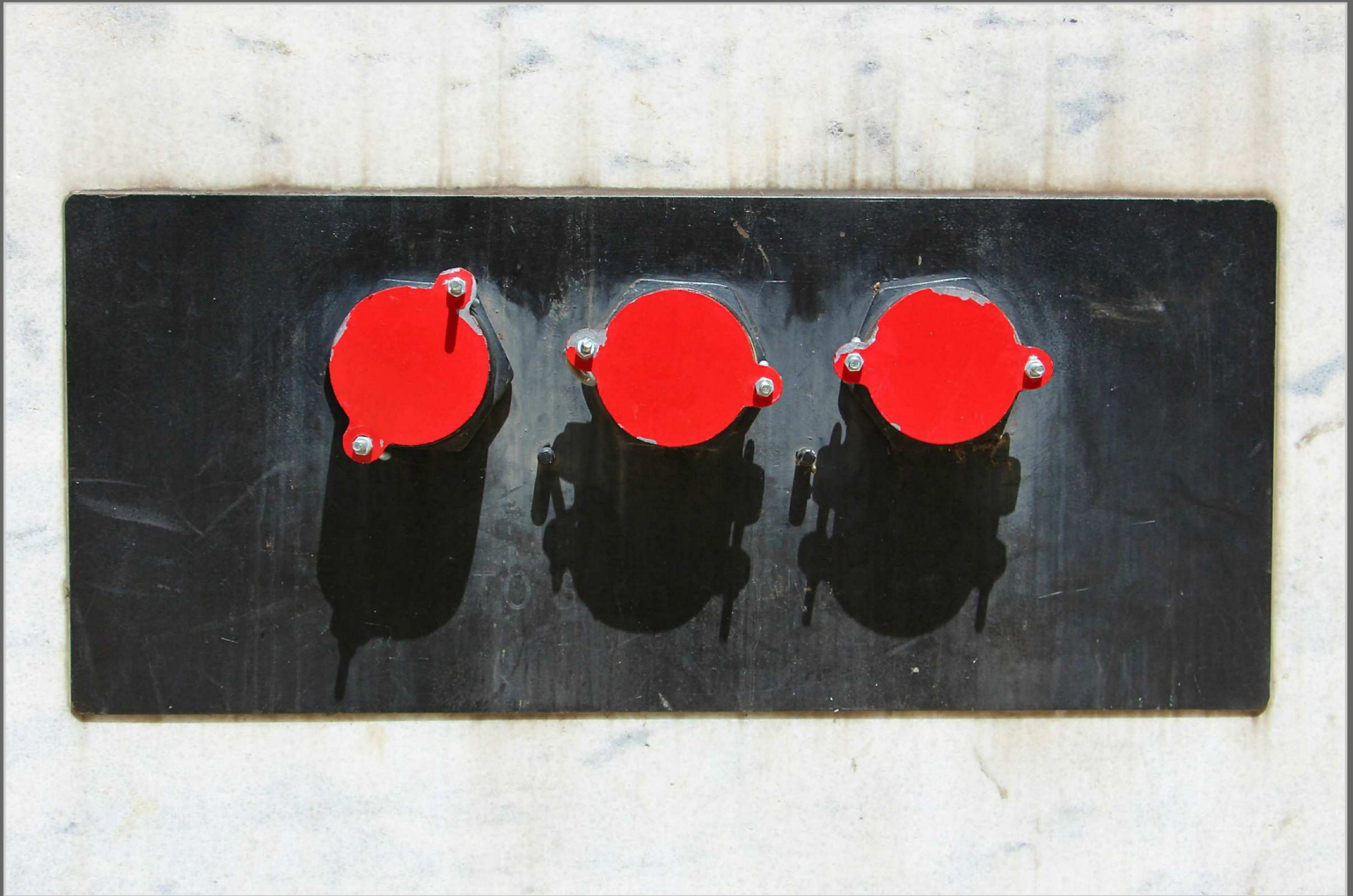
utility player

FORM & FUNCTION

Architects have been known to say that "form follows function." In other words, the form of a building should be determined largely by the function that the building is meant to perform.

As a photographer on the lookout for what I've called accidental art, I sometimes focus on functional objects that seem to have taken on an aesthetically pleasing form, even though aesthetic considerations may have been far from the thoughts of the designer.

Examples of these images include utility pipes looking like a musical instrument, valve openings capped in bright red, a freshly painted plate of bolts, the filaments of a neo-traditional light bulb, a fiery glass-blowing kiln, wood beams piled in a storage yard, and an assemblage of industrial paint cans.



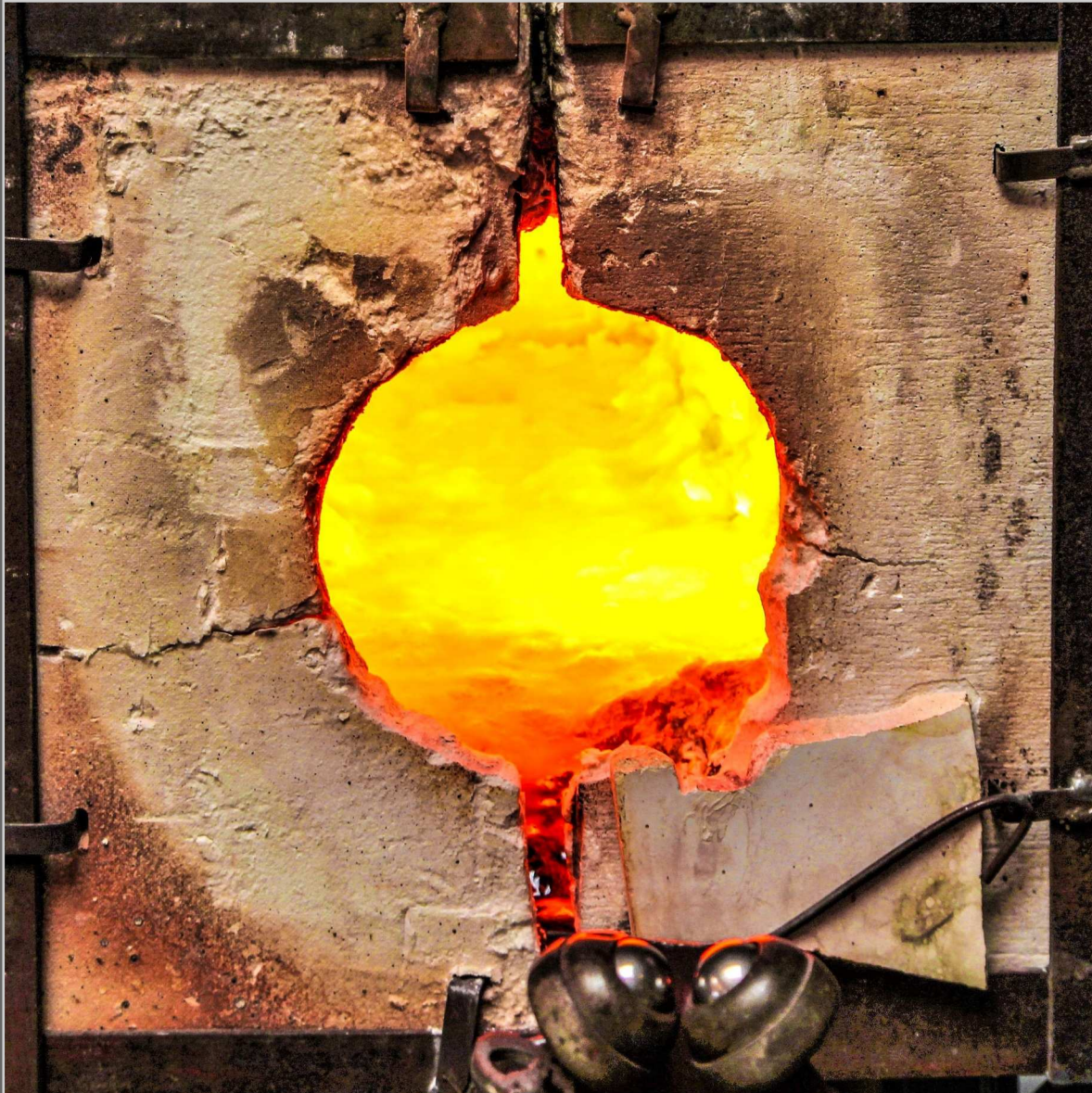
shadow people with red caps



plate of freshly painted bolts (yum!)



filamentia



into the mystic (glass blowing kiln near West Side Market)



beam me up!



outdoor assemblage of industrial paint cans



lonely latte

FORGOTTEN

As a photographer, I have always been drawn to rather lonely images of solitary or forgotten objects and people. What this says about my personality is probably pretty obvious. (I have never been described as an extrovert!)

Lately, given my focus on finding beauty in unexpected places, I have taken some photos of solitary subjects that also exhibit -- I hope -- the quality of the accidental art I have been describing in this essay.

The examples I have selected to display in this photo essay include a woman sitting alone in a city coffee shop, a debris-infused tree oddity, a solitary branch casting its shadow in a river, an old chair left to decay at the edge of a historic cemetery, and a mannequin tossed in the back of a warehouse (which I titled "Saturday night, still no date").

For me, these images pay homage to the loneliness that we all experience at times in our lives. It is my hope, as well, that sharing these images will help, in a small way, build bridges of empathy between us -- replacing some of the loneliness with feelings of connectedness and acceptance.



sad-faced tree grown around dumped
material on abandoned property



solitude



forgotten chair on
the edge of historic
cemetery

discarded mannequin in back
of a warehouse ("Saturday
night, still no date")



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After retiring from full-time work as Cleveland's city planning director, Bob Brown returned to the streets of his adopted home town, this time with a camera in hand rather than a notebook. Freed of the practicalities of analyzing the city as a planner, he is now viewing Cleveland from a different perspective, where aesthetic considerations - and a little fun - have become the focus of his work.



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- Robert N. Brown, January 2020