

Accidental Art?

an urban photo essay in Cleveland
by Robert N. Brown

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 art created by 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.



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.



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 less of an 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 very 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.



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 former 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 2017. 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.







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, rocks and debris on a vacant lot, a discarded bottle cap and cigarette in the gravel next to the curb of a neglected city street, shattered glass and stone fragments, and glass disks letting sunlight through a city sidewalk (the latter image being one of only two in this essay not taken in the city of Cleveland).

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.











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 or faded paint that has taken on the appearance of abstract art, spooky or ghostlike images that have arisen from the surface of forgotten wood siding, and hands seeming to pray for better times.

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.











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 people walking across a grassy lawn.











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 - 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.

These pages display images that include the shadow of a tree with "real" leaves, an imaginary stairway climbing up a masonry wall, stairs along the side of an industrial utility tank, the ghostly shadow of an (almost) unseen person walking down a set of stairs, and a grid of shadows in an art museum atrium.











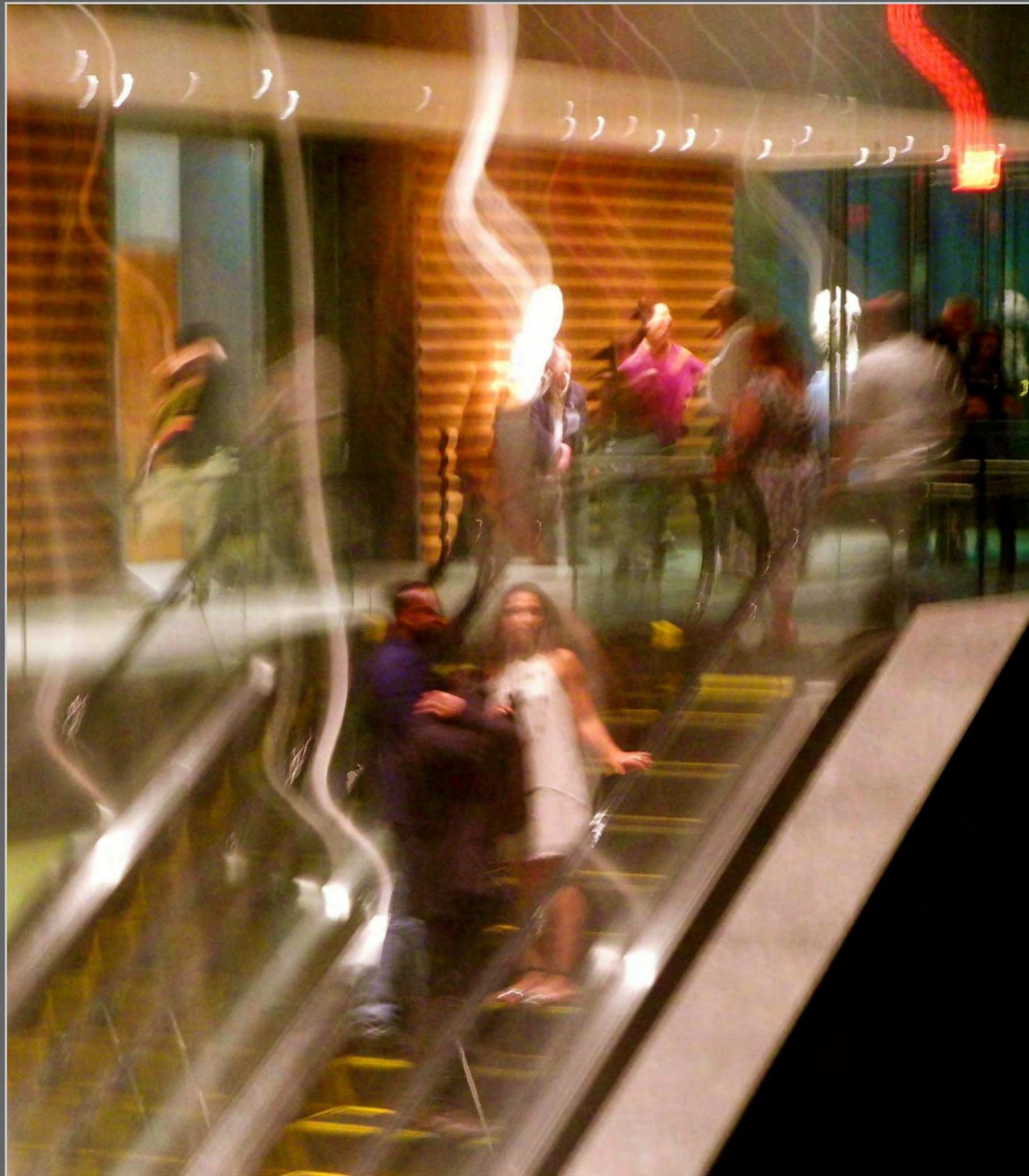
DARKNESS

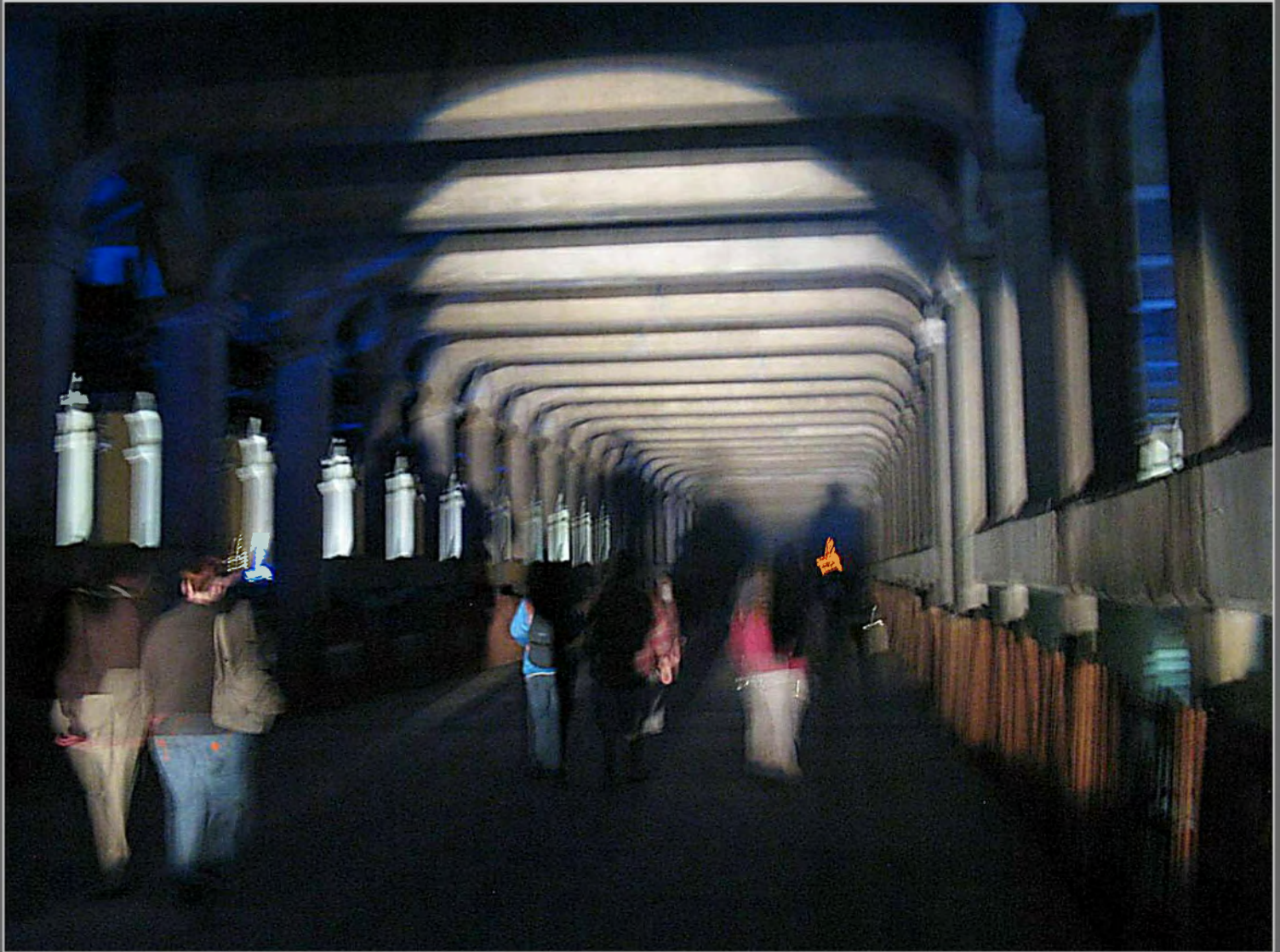
In many respects, photography is all about light. After all, it is light that makes objects visible to us. Ironically, though, some of the most intriguing photos are those taken in relative darkness, where the light, often minimal, is generated by artificial means.

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, a cafe window reflecting activity across the street, party-goers on an escalator at a nighttime art museum event, people walking across an unused streetcar bridge, a statue silhouetted against a background of illuminated leaves, and the changing colors of an outdoor crystal lit by a small solar disk.

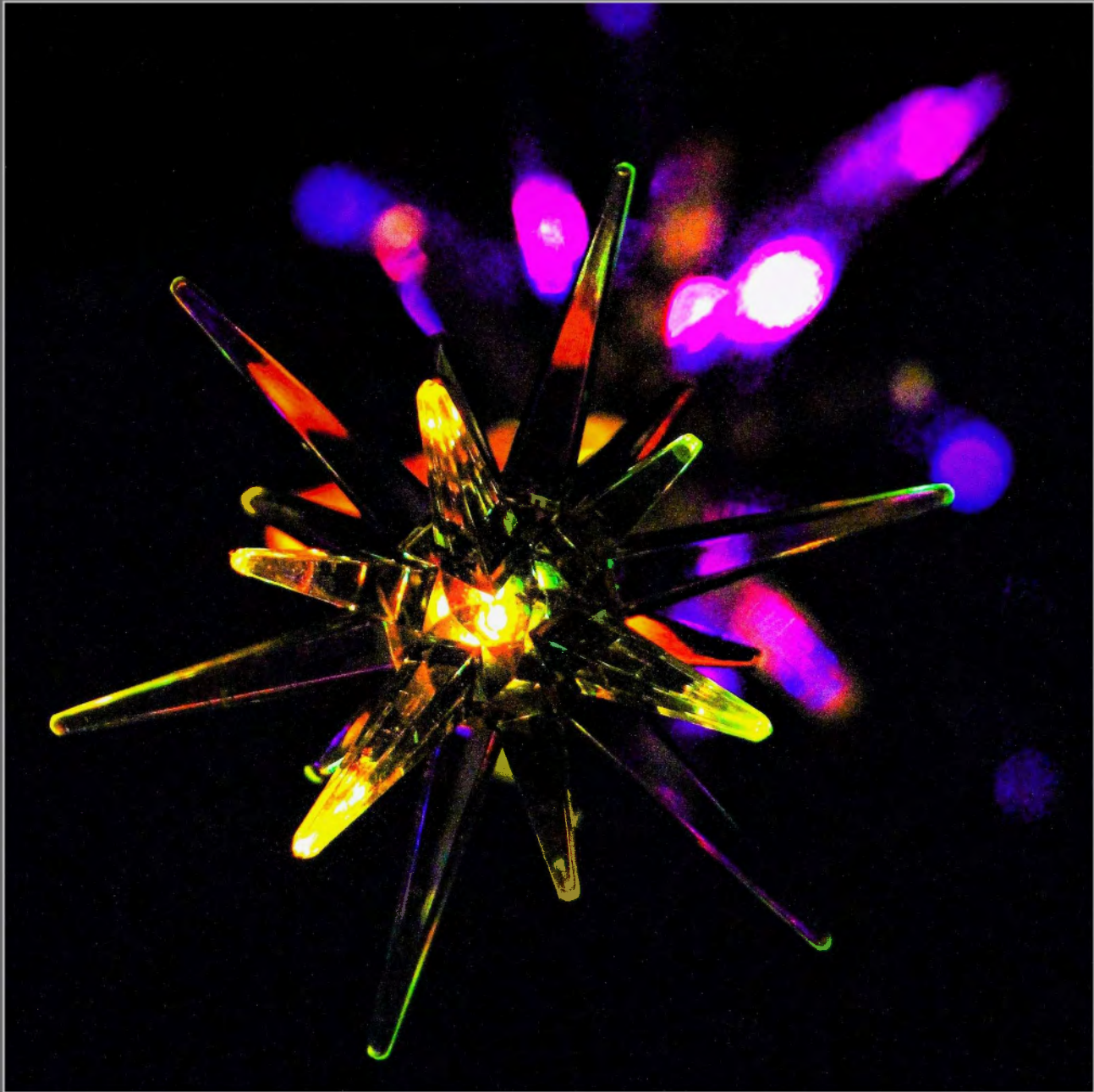














RUST & RENEWAL

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. Amazingly, though, these same processes of rust and decay can sometimes, inexplicably, create objects of stunning beauty.

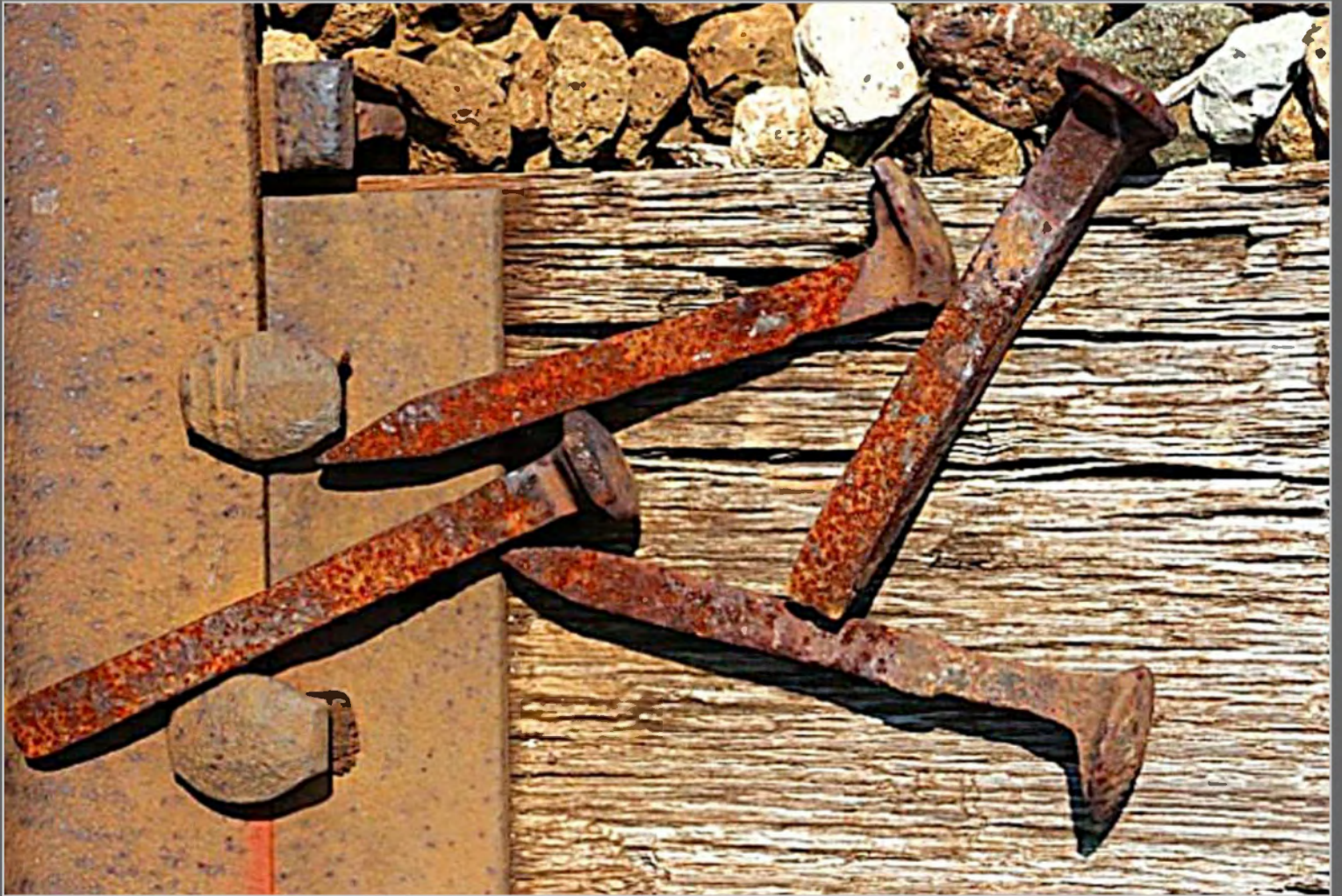
From my perspective as a city planner working in what some would call the rustbelt city of Cleveland, our ability to see beauty in blight seems like a metaphor for our ability to see opportunities for renewal and regeneration in cities that have fallen victim to decline and deterioration. As a photographer, 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, a face taking shape on the side of the same railroad car ("smiling in the face of adversity"), light streaming through a discarded rusted barrel (another face?), the colorful rusting of a metal surface, rusty railroad spikes lying next to an unused rail line, an aging tire on the floor of a vacant warehouse, and random splashes of paint creating an abstract composition on a wooden wallboard.















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 the wall of a century-old building onto the glass panels of a modern parking garage, people-like images formed by multi-colored wall panels on a nearby building, a college building onto the a glass block unit across the street, a Cuyahoga River scene on the front of a waterside restaurant, a building and lights shimmering onto the black stainless steel of the MOCA building, bold colors onto the stainless steel of a Frank Gehry-designed building, and a woman passing by a mirror for sale in an outdoor flea market.



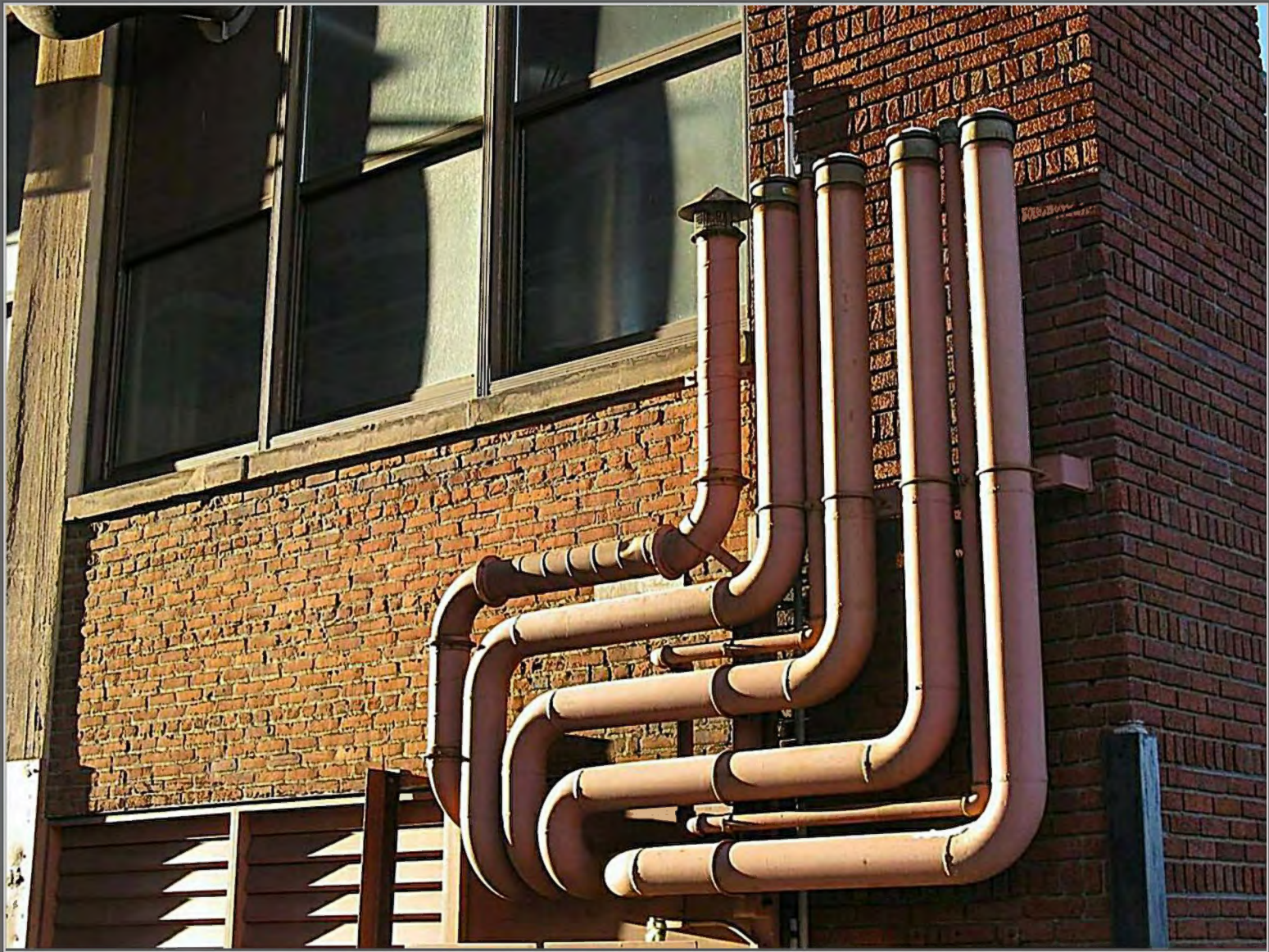










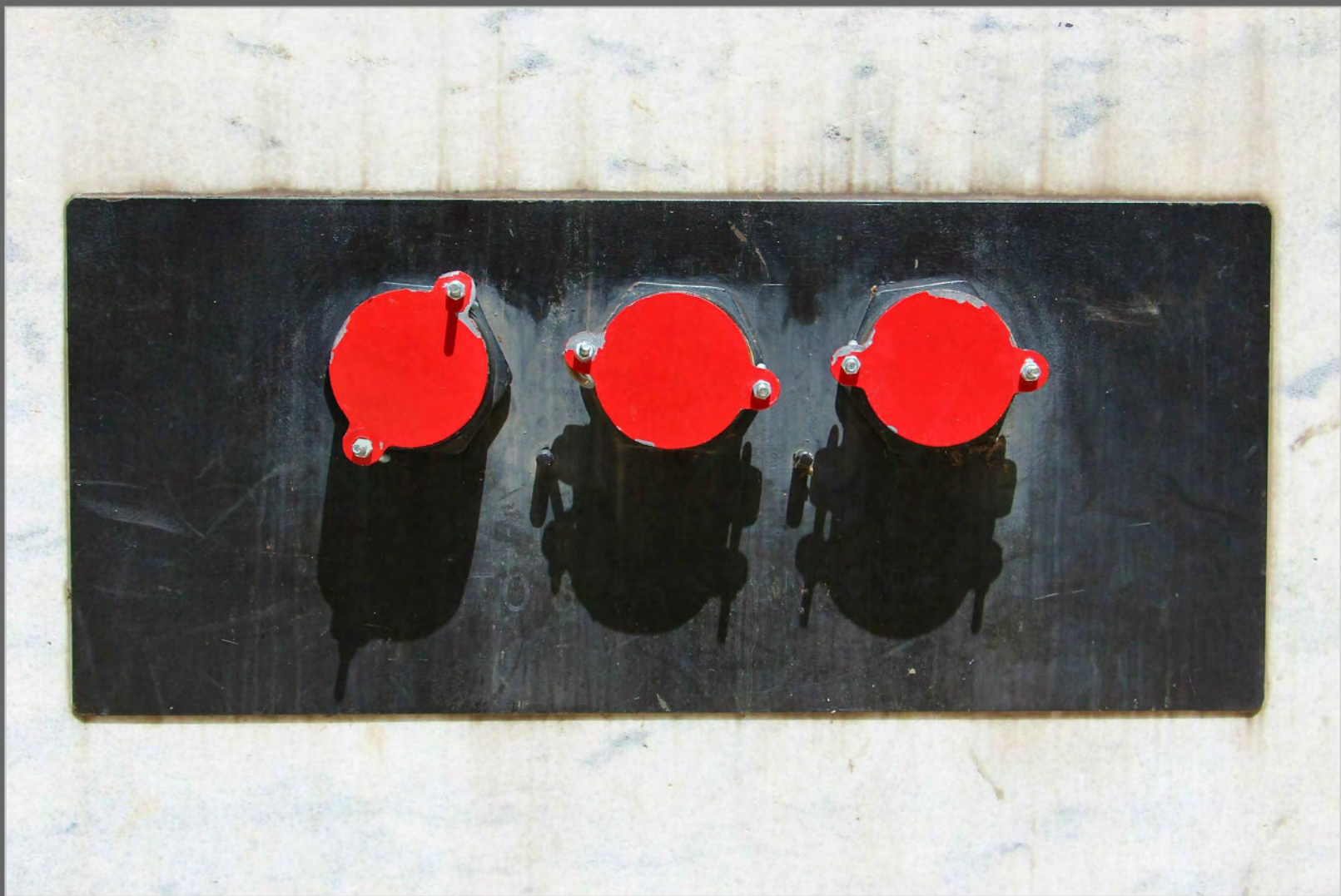


FORM & FUNCTION

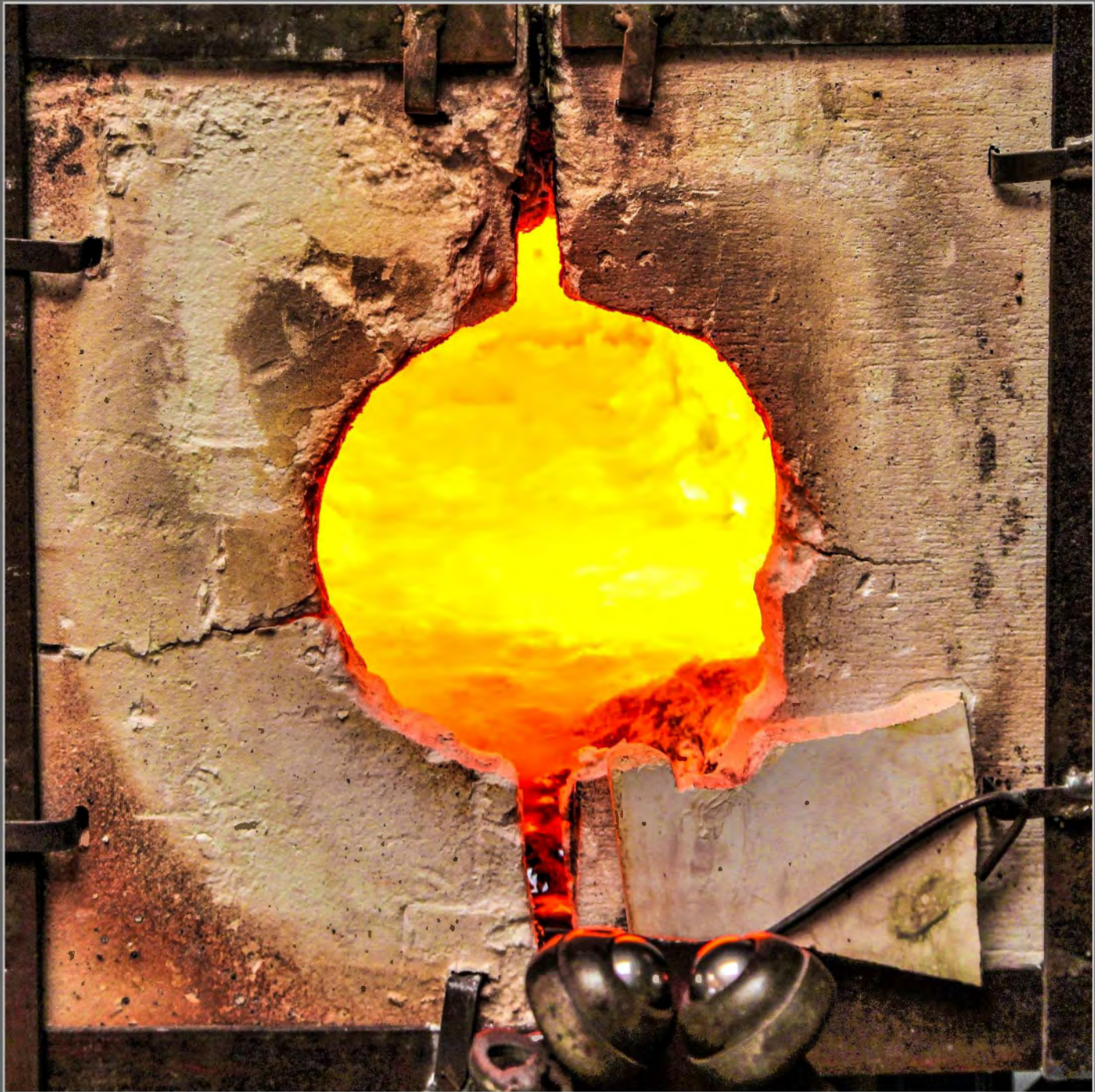
Architects have been known to say that "form follows function." In other words, the form of a building should be determined largely by the function that the building is meant to perform.

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, a fiery kiln, the filaments of a light bulb, wood beams piled in a storage yard, and clearance-priced shoes piled in an outdoor bin.















SOLITUDE

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

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, the image of a dog taking shape in moss on a stone ledge, the remnant of an abandoned freight train wheel, a very solitary chair that I found sitting in a small wooded area on the grounds of a cemetery, and, finally, a forgotten mannequin left 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 photographs will help build bridges of empathy between us - replacing some of the loneliness with feelings of connectedness and acceptance.









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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