



FAR FROM THE CENTRE

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

THE LIVES AND TRIALS OF PHOTOGRAPHERS
LIVING IN SMALL COMMUNITIES

From the Magdalen Islands in the east to Spirit River further west, some photographers are finding work and inspiration away from the country's major cities.

When Vera Saltzman moved to Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, with her husband, she was apprehensive. While living in the nation's capital, she had honed her photography skills at the School of Photographic Arts: Ottawa (SPA0) and simultaneously developed a tight-knit group of like-minded friends on whom she relied for inspiration, work and encouragement. Leaving this nurturing network behind felt like losing a limb. "It was as if one of my arms had been ripped off," she remembers. Thankfully, modern communication

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technologies allowed her to keep in touch on a weekly basis. But that didn't preclude her from feeling onrushes of loneliness. "The isolation I feel is reflected in the work that I've been doing since I got here. Mostly, I have been exploring what it means to be a transplant, to be searching for my primal landscape as well as where I fit within it," she explains.

Fort Qu'Appelle is home to nearly 2 000 people—a far cry from the 883 000 that make up Ottawa, but not all that different from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where she grew up. Driving around, she saw

sights that brought back memories of her upbringing. For instance, the once-ubiquitous grain elevators are to the Prairies what lighthouses are to the Maritimes: iconic markers that have become obsolete.

After three years in the prairie hamlet, Saltzman is starting to take hold in the community. "I really had to push myself to go out to meet people. For a while, I was relying on social media to fulfill my socializing needs. You can hide behind the computer screen and not encounter the people around you," she recalls. Though there are few photographers in the vicinity, she has found solace in other artists, painters and musicians who face most of the issues she does, whether it's insecurity about one's approach, creator's block or finding ways to disseminate work and be properly remunerated for it. At the same time, getting to know practitioners in a variety of fields has expanded her horizons, forcing her to consider her practice in a new light.

Similarly, not having access to a local photo lab impelled her to learn new skills. Luckily for her, the nearby town of Indian Head is home to Film Rescue International, a small business specialized in processing expired film. The owners taught Saltzman how to develop her own colour film, giving her unparalleled control over the look and feel of her pictures. She also began experimenting with other methods, such as lumen printing.

Hailing from a fishing community, she was distressed when hundreds of fish were found



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dead. Wanting to shed light on the level of contamination in the Fort Qu'Appelle watershed, Saltzman picked them up, laid them on photographic paper and illuminated them with UV rays, creating abstract and haunting images. "The lake is one of the most polluted in Saskatchewan. It's important to be reminded of the fragility of life, whether

it's ours or that of the fauna and flora around us, and of our responsibility to look after our resources," she believes. The resulting series, *Cry of the Lake Dwellers*, is part of Slate Gallery's offering in Regina. "When I went in, I was so starved for people to talk to about photography that I was very, very chatty. I showed them my work, that of my

friends, spoke about my training and they invited me to show. Had I been in Ottawa, that would probably have never happened," she muses. Nevertheless, she's not yet making a living from her craft.

After being in Yellowknife for over a decade, Pat Kane has managed to turn his fascination



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of the North into a full-fledged career. "I drove here from Toronto in five days to come help out a friend and never left," he says. To pay the bills, he does a little bit of everything from government contracts to corporate shoots. "In remote places, you have to be quite polyvalent to make ends meet, whereas in a major urban centre, you need to become highly specialized to stand out," he explains.

Having mastered the former, he's now noticing that the latter holds some truth for him as well. His dedication to the region is helping him make a name for himself in the rest of the country. Few photographers know the area as well as he does. "The city is my blast-off place into other Arctic communities that are rarely covered in the news, or misrepresented," he says. "I've gotten a lot of invitations and opportunities to take part in ceremonies, cultural activities

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and to step inside people's homes because they've seen how invested I am." Last fall, he went by floatplane to a community harvest in Ka'a'gee Tu, south of the Northwest Territories' capital. The traditional home of the Kakisa Dene First Nation, it is a place rife with meaning and history. "They shared wisdom and knowledge about medicinal plants and food gathering with me and gave me a big piece of moose meat when I left. There are strong ties that bond us now," he remarks.

Nevertheless, he acknowledges the difficulty of balancing the desire of locals to emphasize the romantic, pristine quality of the surrounding nature and the journalistic inclination for the tragic. "I find myself having to resist being embedded so much that I'd end up developing a sort of Stockholm syndrome. I constantly reconsider what is the right distance that allows me

to file a good and responsible report and how much I can be friends with people," he adds before stressing the need to be accountable. When you live and work in a small community, you are bound to see some of your subjects regularly. Such proximity reinforces the notion that you should do the story justice without causing harm or prejudice.

Kane is able to walk that thin line because he recognizes that his situation parallels that of those he photographs. Currently working on a long-term personal project about resource conservation, he also has to rely on assignments from the industries that threaten the environment in order to make a living. "Like everyone here, I understand that it's not black and white, that at times you have to work with the devil." Proximity, he has found, breeds not only accountability but also understanding.



NIKON D800, 66 MM, F/2.8, 1/125 S, ISO 800. © PAT KANE

This realization is exactly what brought Chris MacArthur to Spirit River in Alberta. After stints as a commercial and editorial

photographer in New York and London, he felt the need to return to an earlier self, when he worked as an oil rigger, and

document the community as he experienced it. "I had such vivid memories of the different kinds of people and places that I saw there," he says. "As much as I loved London, as a photographer, I couldn't figure out what I was really interested in, what I had in common with it. I wanted to do something that would be my own. Eventually, it got to a boiling point, and I made the snap decision to go to northern Alberta."

At first, it was overwhelming. Banking on his first-hand experience in the community, he dreamt of creating an extensive portrait of the region. It soon proved too ambitious. Not only are the different towns far from one another, people turned out to be a little suspicious of his endeavour. "Everyone's here to work, so when a guy shows up and tells you he's going to make your picture for free, they're a little confused," he remarks. That's why spending two years in the small town became necessary. "If you decide to live in a remote place, you have to really ask yourself what special connection you have to it," advises MacArthur.

His bold move paid off. His work has been published in several national publications and seen internationally, and he's also gained a better sense of direction. "Being away from a major centre has helped me lead a simplified life and focus on the work. I've had the time to figure out what I'm best at and how I want to move forward," he adds. His eyes are now set on Montreal.



CANON EOS 7D, 33 MM, F/11, 1/200 S, ISO 200. © CHRIS MACARTHUR

Unlike him, Yoanis Menge, who lives in the Magdalen Islands, has no intention of moving. "What's important is not where you live, but what you do there," he believes. There was a time when he lived in Paris for most of the year and spent his summers building a house on an estate he inherited in the eastern Quebec archipelago. While going back and forth, he noticed the disparity between the French anti-seal-hunting campaign and the reality of the communities that economically depend on the reviled activity. "It cemented my decision to establish myself on the island. I wanted to dedicate

"What's important is not where you live, but what you do there."

myself to the issue. Getting to the bottom of things would have been

impossible had I not invested myself body and soul," he observes.



CANON EOS 7D, 35 MM, F/8, 1/125 S, ISO 400. © CHRIS MACARTHUR



NIKON D800, 24 MM, F/22, 1/160 S, ISO 400. © YOANIS MENGE

His engagement has been rewarded—especially by the community, which has been supporting him financially and offering opportunities to show his work. Thanks to regional grants, the series was exhibited in the local airport and, this spring, made into a book by the region's publisher, La Morue Verte. "There's a mutually beneficial exchange between the community and me. My work is informed by what I learn being an integral part of it. In turn, I hope the photos will help change minds about the seal hunt," he explains. "It's unlike anything I've done before. When I was working in Africa and had—unbeknownst to

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me—a rather colonialist attitude, I would visit a place, take pictures and leave, never to return. Now, I have a vested interest in what happens to the place that I photograph because it's where I live." Rather than defend an unattainable objectivity, Yoanis Menge champions work that makes a clear and informed stand.

For all these photographers, living away from the country's metropolitan centres has profoundly shaped their practice and their identity. Though it's not a decision to take lightly, it's one that they would recommend to any of their willing colleagues. "There is a need to represent the

diversity of Canadian situations and not just focus on what's happening in the major cities," notes Vera Saltzman. "And, on a personal level, anything you do that pushes your limits or broadens your horizons is a good thing." ■



NIKON D800, 17 MM, F/20, 1/125 S, ISO 200. © YOANIS MENGE