

*SNAG: IMPERMANENCE ON THE
VAST ALBERTA PRAIRIE*

Photography by Wes Bell

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography
January 29 – March 16, 2018

A reception and video chat with Mr. Bell will take place in the Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography beginning at 5:30 p.m. Thursday, February 15, 2018

About Wes Bell...

I was born and raised in a very small city on the Canadian prairies called Medicine Hat. At the time, it was primarily a petroleum and agriculture-based economy where arts and culture didn't have a significant presence unlike hockey or baseball. I was however fascinated by art, which ultimately led me to pursue a studio-intensive program at the Alberta College of Art and Design, in a much larger city, about three and a half hours west on the Trans-Canada Highway. After my foundation year and over the summer months, the Visual Communications Department notified me that a new photography major program was being offered. It captured my curiosity. It was never my intention to study photography as I had envisioned myself as a graphic designer in the advertising world. I enrolled in photography, purchased a new basic 35mm manual camera and was ready for the new school year to begin. Over the following three years my love of photography flourished. Increasingly, I found myself being drawn more and more towards fashion as I enjoyed both the design aspect and the creative experience of photographing models. It was the perfect fit.

After graduating from college, I sought out my career as a fashion photographer. My first job was working for an internationally franchised modeling school. The photo session would be the student's initial photography experience and what an experience it was. I learned to shoot every size, shape and age very quickly as the eager but nervous prospective models queued up outside the makeshift photo studio door ready to pose in front of my camera. For three years, I continued doing this while shooting for local clothing stores and a lifestyle magazine. I regularly visited our international magazine shop and eagerly flipped through European fashion magazines for inspiration, as they were so fashion forward. Looking at them however wasn't enough to satisfy my creative desires. I knew I had to leave and seek out the next step of my career.

One year later, with everything sold except my cameras and clothing, I arrived in Milan, Italy with a couple of large hockey bags stuffed with my belongings. I started shooting new models for their portfolios while building my own. It was a bleak existence and a long struggle. After a few years of struggling, my determination and passion won the battle and it all started to pay off. After living and working in Milan and London for eight years, I eventually relocated to New York, while traveling extensively on assignments to the far corners of the world. I had the great fortune to shoot fashion spreads for editorial publications such as *British GQ* and *Esquire*, *Conde Nast Traveler*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *People*. My celebrity portraits include Channing Tatum and Olivia Wilde, as well as fashion designer/film director Tom Ford. Some of my national advertising campaigns include J. Crew, Nautica, Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus. Looking back thirty-two years later, I can confidently say that it was my acute sense of design, style and aesthetics that was highly respected by art directors and fashion editors. I was extremely well suited for the business as I was disciplined, understood the importance of teamwork, and my all consuming and painful attention to detail allowed me to deliver a beautiful product.

And then came the great recession and economic meltdown of 2008, followed by my own personal meltdown and crisis. Like many industries, the fashion retail market and the publishing business were gutted as advertising budgets evaporated overnight and many creative careers were left in shambles. For too long I continued to look backwards and not forward to the next stage of my photographic journey. In retrospect, the fashion photography business generously paid the bills and it provided for an exciting lifestyle, but it ultimately left me feeling empty as an artist.

Seven years ago, after learning of the restructuring at my college, I learned that I was two academic classes short of my BFA (previously I had received a Diploma in Visual Communications – Photography, a four-year program). I decided to enroll in a History of Photography class at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Enthusiastically, I enrolled in two additional art history classes. Five series later and seven years later, my relentless commitment to producing new interrelated images effortlessly continues.

After residing in New York for more than twenty years, I returned to live in Medicine Hat a little more than three years ago. Since departing the fast-paced world of freelance fashion photography, my passion for fine art photography is reignited and today I photograph on location, responding to the detail and natural beauty in the environments that surround me. No longer are there models, hair and makeup artists, stylists, and art directors. Now it is just my camera, light meter, tripod, notebook, rolls of film and me. Interestingly, shooting shreds of plastic caught on barbed wire as they flutter in the wind often reminds me of photographing a model as she moves on the set or jogs down a beach. In *Snag*, I anticipate the motion, pre-visualize the final photograph, compose it in the viewfinder, look for the pinnacle of its expressive form and then press and release the shutter. It's all photography after all but somehow this feels so much better.

My photographs have been exhibited internationally in numerous group and solo exhibitions. Recognitions include the LensCulture Exposure Awards 2017 – Jurist Award as selected by MaryAnne Golon, Director of Photography at The Washington Post and more recently, the 2017 Bronze Award for the Royal Photographic Society International Photography Exhibition 160 in the United Kingdom.

“The scenes I am often most attracted to are simple and ordinary. They are formalist and modernist. Based on isolating and elevating the unseen, the photographs contain the past, the present and the future.”

About the exhibition...

Snag

Four years ago, I was leaving for the airport after saying goodbye to my mother. She was dying of cancer. On the long drive across the Alberta prairie, I found myself distracted by flapping remnants of plastic bags, caught in barbed-wire fences that lined the ditches. Whipped violently by the wind, they were left shredded and lacerated, but trapped nonetheless in the no man's land of boundary fences, neither here nor there. Thinking about mortality, pain and death in the context of my mother's terminal illness, these forgotten shreds of plastic took on a deeper significance. Snag.

Shooting during the seemingly lifeless seasons between winter and spring in 2015 and 2017, I photographed sixty-eight sites in Southern Alberta, Canada. Some locations required multiple visits to ensure the optimal lighting and wind conditions. All the photographs were shot using analogue film in a medium square format camera. Given the focus of the subject matter on physical, material processes of decomposition by natural forces, it was critical to the logic of this series to maintain the immediacy of their chemical, indexical imprint on the film. Its translation onto a slightly warm toned fiber-based photo paper creates a material, substantial presence that would have been impossible to achieve digitally.

-Wes Bell
January, 2018

Camera and Lens: Hasselblad 503CW, Zeiss Distagon CF 60mm *f*/3.5

Film and Developer: Ilford HP5 120, processed in Kodak Xtol

Paper and Developer: Ilford Multigrade FB Warmtone Semi-Matte, processed in Ilford Warmtone



Snag – 23rd Street N.W., Medicine Hat, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 37, Frame 11



Snag – Trans-Canada Highway, Redcliff, AB, Canada

2016 – 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 20 Frame 13-14



Snag – Box Springs Road, Cypress County, AB, Canada

2016, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 24 Frame 9



Snag – Box Springs Road, Cypress County, AB, Canada
2017, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 21 Frame 10-11



Snag – Box Springs Road, Cypress County, AB, Canada
2017, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 18 Frame 9



Snag – 11th Avenue N.E., Medicine Hat, AB, Canada
2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 46 Frame 18-19



Snag – Broadway Avenue, Medicine Hat, AB, Canada
2016, 16 in x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 18 Frame 2



Snag – Highway 41A, Veinerville, AB, Canada
2016, 16 in., x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 29 Frame 7-8



Snag – 23rd Street N.W., Medicine Hat, AB, Canada
2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 33 Frame 2



Snag – Range Road 70, Redcliff, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 67 Frame 10-11



Snag – TWP Rd. 140, Cypress County, AB, Canada

2017, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 7 Frame 13-14



Snag – Broadway Avenue, Medicine Hat, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 44 Frame 14



Snag – Highway 41, Cypress County, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 7 Frame 18



Snag – Range Road 75, Cypress County, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 75 Frame 1-2



Snag – Trans-Canada Highway, Gleichen, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 74 Frame 17



Snag – 23rd Street N.W., Medicine Hat, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 38 Frame 11



Snag – TWP 121A, Dunmore, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 77 Frame 15



Snag – Trans-Canada Highway, Bowell, AB, Canada

2016, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 21 Frame 17



Snag – Trans-Canada Highway, Ralston, AB, Canada
2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print
Roll 60 Frame 18



Snag – Paul Stober Drive, Medicine Hat, AB, Canada
2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print
Roll 42 Frame 9-10



Snag – 23rd Street N.W., Medicine Hat, AB, Canada
2017, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print
Roll 3 Frame 6



Snag – Broadway Avenue, Medicine Hat, AB, Canada

2016, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 11 Frame 10-11



Snag – Highway 41, Buffalo Trail, Cypress County, AB, Canada

2016, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 9 Frame 17



Snag – Box Springs Road, Cypress County, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 71 Frame 18-19



Snag – Range Road 93, Ralston, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 69 Frame 12-13



Snag – Highway 41, Cypress County, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 12 Frame 9



Snag – Boundary Road, Redcliff, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 32 Frame 15



Snag – Trans-Canada Highway, Howell, AB, Canada
2016, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print
Roll 22 Frame 17



Snag – 23rd Street N.W., Medicine Hat, AB, Canada
2017, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print
Roll 6 Frame 14



TWP Rd. 220 & Range Road 210, Cypress County, AB, Canada
2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print
Roll 18 Frame 1-2



Snag – Range Road 82, Ralston, AB, Canada

2015, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 19 Frame 1-2



Snag – Box Springs Road, Cypress County, AB, Canada

2017, 16 in. x 20 in., Gelatin Silver Print

Roll 26 Frame 12-13