RIVERRUN

Photography by Ray Carofano

Exhibition reflection essays by

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Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography
April 4 through May 27, 2016

L.A. River #43, © April 2016 Ray Carofano

The River Narrates Itself, a panel discussion, will take place at 4:00 p.m. Thursday, April 28, 2016, Ballroom A, Abraham Campus Center. A reception will follow from 5:30-7:00 p.m. in the Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography, Miller Hall.

Ray Carofano describes this work…

As often happens, the subject chooses the artist. Frequent forays along the riverrun, mostly on bicycle sans camera, revealed its aesthetic potential. I became aware of the geometric shapes, muted color, and reflections that developed into abstraction. The images play with one's perception; are we looking at a bridge or the shadow of a bridge? And could that be a reflection of a shadow? Some images resemble aerial photographs with little reference to scale, others beg the question: painting or photograph? A slow read is required to deconstruct just what is before us.

That being said, I was also drawn to the history of the river: fifty-one miles in length and wide as a football field is long, walls 33 feet high, made with 3.5 million barrels of cement, 147 million pounds of reinforced steel, and 460,000 tons of stone. The average amount of water that ends up in the ocean is over 146 million gallons per day. In a drought prone area like Los Angeles, with population rising and water being scarce, it makes one wonder why we don't recycle some of this water. The landscape changes very rapidly because of the unpredictable water flow coming from industrial and residential discharge, and of course rain. Makes for strange visuals for anyone who looks hard enough.

-Ray Carofano
April, 2016

About Ray Carofano: How I Ended up Becoming a Photographer

When I was around eight years old I remember my mother and father liked looking at pictures of family gatherings, old friends, and vacations. What they didn't like was taking them. So the old 616 Ansco, and the job, was handed over to me. By the age of twelve, I was out photographing whatever I could find of interest. I was "on my way" to becoming a "photographer."

At age sixteen, a cousin of mine lent me his Petri Rangefinder camera, which was far superior to the old Ansco. I started photographing motorcycle races and landscapes. I saved up some money for a camera of my own and bought a new 35 mm SLR Pentax with a 50mm lens. A few years later, I talked my father into buying a darkroom kit, including a Beseler 23C, safelight, trays, and everything I needed. I recall him saying, "So how long do you think this is going to last?" I can now say it started out as a hobby but became the passion of my life.

For Christmas that year my parents gave me the full set of *The Encyclopedia of Photography*. Everything I needed to know was in these books. I read, experimented, read, and experimented until I got it right. In the early 1960s, there were few photography classes at universities or colleges.

I started photographing the down and outs: homeless and alcoholics living on the streets, mostly in lower Manhattan and the Bowery (now called Soho). I left my hometown of Hamden, Connecticut, in 1966 and drove deep into Mexico with the ultimate destination of California on my mind. I photographed all along the way. I ended up in Los Angeles with a wife who was pregnant and no job. I had this idea I could make a living selling my photographs, like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, but soon reality set in and survival became the most important issue.

I got a job in a photography studio in Compton, mostly doing dark room work. Then, while photographing under the Manhattan Beach pier, I met a Filipino photographer named Emilio Mercado. He had about ten years experience on me and was a far superior photographer than I was. He took me under his wing and taught me a lot. He was doing mostly his own personal work but also took on some commercial jobs as well. He showed me photographs of hubcaps he had taken for an advertising agency. When he told me how much he'd been paid for the work, I couldn't believe it. It was way more than I got paid in a week! The seed was planted. I figured I could do commercial work and my own work, like Emilio.

I was hired for a job photographing children for a company that made the appointments for me. I would drive all over Los Angeles County on these portrait appointments. In between, I would photograph whatever I found interesting. My next job was working in a camera store and there were some good benefits. I was able to buy cameras and lenses at 10% below wholesale. I got everything I needed. I started to get photo jobs through the store and I would take whatever work came my way: photographing weddings and bar mitzvahs, candid shots of families, and even a dead man in a mortuary. I was finally making a living with my camera.

I met the owner of an advertising agency at the store and started getting assignments from him too. I was now making more money than ever and no longer needed to work at the camera store. I was finally working on my own.

I converted a three-car garage into a studio and bought lighting equipment. Then I bought high-end designer products to photograph and put together a portfolio of the images. I then started calling advertising agencies and graphic designers. This was in the early 70s, before photography had become digital, and competition was not so fierce. Thus my phone calls turned into meetings and more assignments. By 1975, I needed a real studio and more space. I ended up with 2400 square feet of shooting area, a darkroom, and offices. I stayed in that studio on 190th Street in Gardena for twenty-five years, shooting mostly products with special effects for catalogs, brochures, and advertising, along with going on location shoots.

In 1991, whenever I had the chance, I began to focus more seriously than ever before on my personal work. After remarrying in 1994, my wife and I bought an old bank building in downtown San Pedro in 1997. We renovated the place into a studio and living space consisting of two shooting areas, a darkroom, a kitchen, an office and a gallery with a living area in the upstairs loft.

In the last fifteen years I have gone back to where I was in 1960, photographing what I find interesting and not what someone else wants me to shoot. And the idea I had back then has come to fruition: that with my passion for photography, I could survive by creating my own images, which have been sold in galleries and collected in museums.

I will continue to work, shoot, and make prints. It is what I do, it's who I am: I have become the photographer I imagined myself to be at age twelve.

-Ray Carofano
April, 2016

"My soul has grown deep like the rivers.": The Re/Presentation of a Wasteland in Ray Carofano's Riverrun Exhibition

Lawrence T. Potter, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
University of La Verne

Growing up in the American south, I was surrounded by waterways, causeways, Lake Ponchartrain, and the mighty **Mississippi River**. The "Mississippi" is known as a ferocious river, primarily because it was set against its natural flow pattern when they built levies to prevent New Orleans from flooding during hurricane season. The natural flow of the Mississippi River begins in Bemidji, Minnesota, and ends with its dispersion into the Gulf of Mexico.

Mexico is important to this reflection essay in two ways: its proximity to California and Langston Hughes. In 1921, Hughes traveled by train to Mexico to live with his father after graduating from high school. When his train crossed the Mississippi River, Hughes was inspired by its beauty and was reminded of its 'spirit' in sustaining slavery in America. The sun was setting, and Hughes had a long journey ahead of him. He took out a letter his father had written him and wrote his famous poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," on the back of its pages. He writes:

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.[1]

Upon reflecting on Carofano's *Riverrun,* I am reminded how beautiful rivers are and their part in sustaining communities since creation. Interestingly, Carofano's images document the absence, or loss, of fullness (body) in the L.A. River. The images illustrate how a once oozing wetland is now a barren wasteland. *L.A. River #33* shows a sense of deep time in which a river (as a body of water) is nearly empty. I could only imagine if the L.A. River were an oasis rising from a sandy wasteland it could replenish the life (fish and other wildlife) that once inhabited its use. What does it mean growing up in this community without a river? I could not imagine New Orleans without the Mississippi River and all that comes with it.

Rivers are like major arteries or veins in the body—they provide a constant flow of many things—commerce, culture, cuisine, calm, and curiosity. To see the erosion and decay suggests to me, that once upon a time, the L.A. River was the heart of the listening earth in southern California. Now, it is a river frozen in silence that no longer ripples and rolls into the misty moonlight. The uncovering in Carofano's images reveal silt laden prairie curves and constellations of land that uncoils like a concrete python.

The curiosity of the onlooker swells ever more intently towards images #35 and #36. Could this be a diverse constellation or eukaryotes that are not necessarily closely related and are thus polyphyletic; or, is it sewage sludge from water treatment processes or settled suspension obtained from conventional drinking water treatment and numerous other industrial processes excreted on a concrete stratum? I am reminded of the **Flint River**.

[1] Langston Hughes, The Collected Works of Langston Hughes Volume 13, ed. Arnold Rampersad et al, http://books.google.com/books

The barren placements of earth that remain as afterthoughts in the larger landscape are mind-numbing. How is time—in these two images—relative to life? What is the effervescent form in the photographs drawing the onlooker in to look more closely? Is it hazy or vapor-like rising as the hotness from volcanoes? What might these images tell us about history and decaying memory? Is it a "waste land" as T.S. Eliot describes in part five, "What the Thunder Said," of his long poem:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water
If there were water we should stop and drink
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand
If there were only water amongst the rock (lines 332-339).[2]

Clearly, rivers are metaphors of life and represent a range of activities which capture tensions between Earth, space, heaven, hell and humankind. Waterways are symbolic channels that tell a story. Often, the waterways can't speak but their remains are indelible marks on nature's wrestle against creation. Carofano's images in the *Riverrun* exhibit, captures the unspoken, unknown, and unimaginable—in my mind!

Carofano's pictures are poetic and imaginative statements on nature and loss. On the one hand, Hughes' poem describes "rivers" and we hear a voice concerned with history: struggles, injustices, slavery, and hope for the future in the United States. On the other hand, Eliot's long complex poem is about the psychological and cultural crisis that came with the loss of moral and cultural identity after World War I in Europe. In both instances, there is a moral crisis at the center. Hughes uses the river metaphor; Eliot uses the wasteland metaphor. Similarly, Carofano's images address a moral crisis. The images are literal and metaphorical and they illustrate a sense of cultural death in the L.A. River. How can we allow the ecosystem to decay? The answer is we have a personal responsibility to make sure nature is preserved in its most natural sense if we plan to endow future generations with a world full of soul, life, and living things—not a wasteland!

I implore the Mississippi River, a metaphorical representation in much of America's history, does not become what Carofano shows us in his work on the L.A. River.

[2] Eliot, Thomas Stearns. The Waste Land. New York: Horace Liveright, 1922; Bartleby.com, 2011. www.bartleby.com/201

Between Mountain Springs and the Sea:
Reflections on Ray Carofano's, *Riverrun*
Sheridan V. "Dan" Merritt, Professor Emeritus
Zoology and Environmental Science
University of La Verne

Someone unfamiliar with Southern California's urban flood control structures and practices, upon viewing Ray Carofano's, *Riverrun*, photographs captured from within the 51-mile Los Angeles City section of the Los Angeles River Channel, might ask: "Where's the river?"

Even an aerial view over the upper reaches of the Los Angeles River Watershed could leave the visitor puzzled by the network of intermittent curving streams and rectilinear concrete channels, basins, washes, and reservoirs that escort the aquifer and rain-fed stream waters from their origins in the Santa Monica, Santa Suzanna, and San Gabriel Mountains past and through the forty three cities that lie within the Los Angeles River Watershed.

They also might not be aware that the watershed runoff flowing through these cities, past farms, factories, and highways, picks up trash, industrial chemical waste (metals and solvents), nutrients, pesticides, PCBs, and bacteria, and pours them out the river channel mouth into the Pacific Ocean at Long Beach Harbor.

Since the 1930s, when these waterways began to be routinely encased in concrete and the waters rushed the sea, we have learned that natural, healthy, and resilient river and wetland ecosystems are the most effective and sustainable ways to treat our polluted surface water and to provide water for the future by recharging underground aquifers.

We have also learned that dilution is not the solution to pollution. We now understand better the dynamic transformation, transfer, and concentration of chemical pollutants happening in marine and freshwater ecosystems.

When these toxic PCBs, pesticides, and heavy metals reach the ocean, they accumulate in the bodies of fish, marine mammals, birds and filter-feeding shellfish. Dissolved nutrients, such as nitrates and phosphates spur the explosive growth of ocean phytoplankton (blooms), which then die and decay, creating low-oxygen "dead zones" off our coast. High levels of bacteria in our untreated waste-water render nearby beach waters unhealthy for human contact. Plastics litter our coastline and drift out into the open sea, where they are gathered together by spinning oceanic gyres to form great "garbage patches." Sea turtles mistake plastic bags for jellyfish prey and sea birds regurgitate plastic shards and microbeads (from our personal-care products) into the eager throats of their young.

I must admit, when I began viewing Ray Carofano's images of the Los Angeles Flood Channel I did not expect—did not intend—to find beauty, tenderness, resilience, or reason for optimism there. I was pleasantly surprised.

For example, in images #19, #62 and #64, using the concrete channel walls and floor as backdrop and reflective sheets of water as mirrors, Carofano captures haunting kaleidoscopic images that lift the virtual conversation above the mundane coarseness of rebar, concrete slabs, and engineering genius to the possibility of transformation, even restoration.

There is an abundance of irony. For example, in *L.A. River #6* we see in the foreground a five-gallon drinking-water jug, representative of the millions of gallons of bottled water imported by the residents living above, resting on the bottom of this concrete conduit, which whisks away millions of gallons of undrinkable water on even the driest of days.

L.A. River #60 shows us twin movie screens. On the left screen, the fading bird shadows recall the gradual disappearance of the rich river ecosystem: consisting of tiny macroinvertebrates (insect larvae, snails, worms, crustaceans) living in river-bottom microhabitats, rich riverbank soil, and resilient interdependent plant and animal communities along shore.

Images #32, #35, #36 present soft earthen mounds (deposited sediment?) grown over by a thin film of algae—a 2-dimensional wetland. A beautiful Ibis-like bird (*L.A. River #36*) is seen probing a small pool for morsels of food. It is an enchanting, uplifting, or achingly sad image. How do we relate to it? Do we mourn loss or celebrate resilience?

The future form and function of the Los Angeles River Flood Control Channel is now in play. As a result of recent citizen activism including law suits by Heal the Bay, Environmental Defense Fund and the Friends of the Los Angeles River against the Army Corp of Engineers (which manages the river), voter-approved ballot measures, and lobbying of local city councils and state and federal representatives, funding is becoming available and plans are being developed for limited restoration, recreation, and repurposing of the Los Angeles River Channel and corridor.

Concurrently, communities and watershed organizations concerned about the health and resilience of the entire watershed ecosystem are helping to bring awareness of the need to coordinate habitat preservation and restoration and sustainable natural resource management among all stakeholders.

Carofano's stark, poetic and ironic images may serve to nurture and sustain that process.

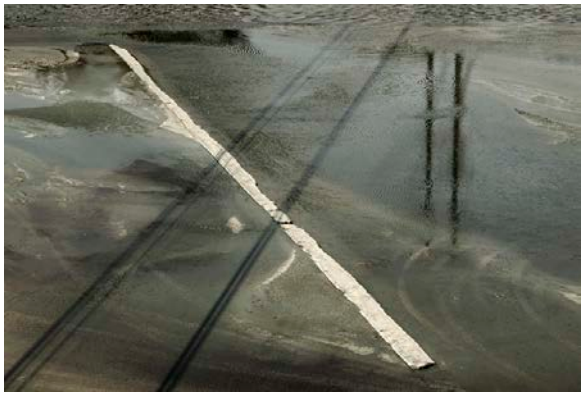
L.A. River #45

L.A. River #67

L.A. River #35

L.A. River #6

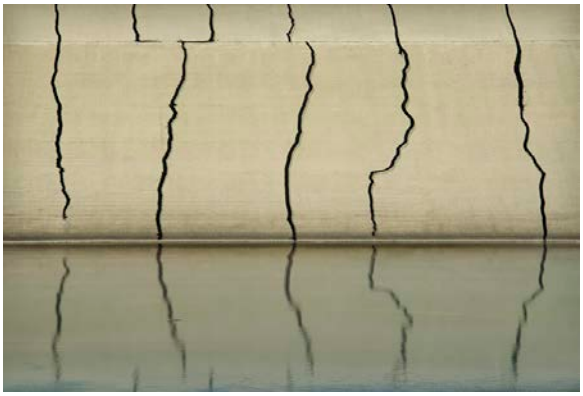
L.A. River #32



L.A. River #19

L.A. River #43

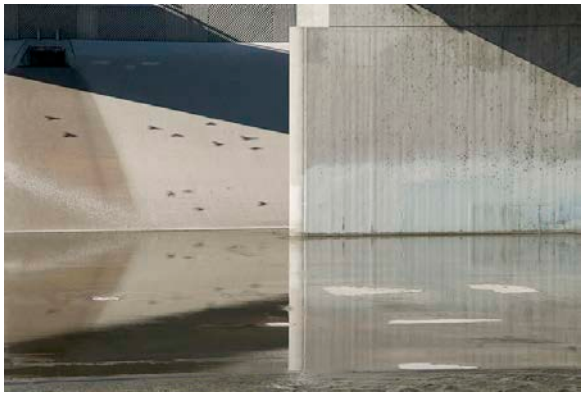
L.A. River #38



L.A. River #29

L.A. River #17

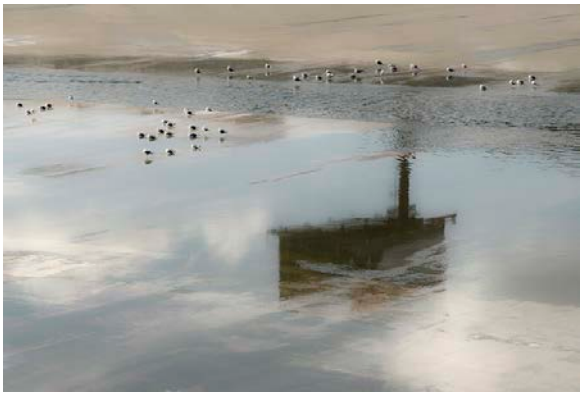
L.A. River #36



L.A. River #60

L.A. River #33

L.A. River #62



L.A. River #49

L.A. River #64

The River Narrates Itself

Thursday, April 28, 4:00-5:30 p.m. Abraham Campus Center, Ballroom A

A panel discussion on the Los Angeles River inspired by the photography exhibition *Riverrun*, by Ray Carofano, at the Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography, Miller Hall, the University of La Verne, April 4 - May 27, 2016. The panel will be followed by a reception and viewing of *Riverrun* in the Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography from 5:30-7:00 p.m.

Moderator

Alfred P. Clark, Professor of Humanities, University of La Verne
Al Clark has taught at the University of La Verne since 1976. His scholarship in water began with his college senior thesis, and his interest in art began seriously while researching his dissertation in Europe. He currently is writing an environmental history of the San Gabriel Watershed since 1642.

Panelists

Ray Carofano, Photographer, San Pedro, California
Ray Carofano was born in New Haven, Connecticut, and currently resides in the Los Angeles port town of San Pedro, California. Self-taught in photography, he studied at Quinnipiac College, Southern Connecticut State College, and the Paier College of Art. He established Ray Carofano Photography, Inc. in Los Angeles in 1969, specializing in commercial photography. Carofano has exhibited his work nationally and internationally, and his photographs are included in the permanent collections at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the University of Texas, Austin, the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, and the Fototeca de Cuba, Havana.

Pablo Weaver, Biology Instructor, University of La Verne
Pablo Weaver is an aquatic biologist who is passionate about the preservation of freshwater habitats and specializes in aquatic insect and fish communities. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Colorado, Boulder, studying the ecology and evolution of freshwater fishes of Hispaniola. His current research involves the influence of mining activities on aquatic communities in Montana. He currently co-teaches the Marine and Freshwater Biology course at the University of La Verne.

Char Miller, W. M. Keck Professor of Environmental Analysis, Pomona College
Char Miller is the Director of the Environmental Analysis Program at Pomona College. Author of *Gifford Pinchot and the Making of Modern Environmentalism* (2004) and *Public Lands, Public Debates: A Century of Controversy* (2012), his latest books include *America's Great National Forests, Wilderness, and Grasslands* (2016), *Not So Golden State: Sustainability vs. the California Dream* (2016), *On the Edge: Water, Immigration, and Politics in the Southwest* (2013) and *Seeking the Greatest Good: The Conservation Legacy of Gifford Pinchot* (2013); he is the co-author of *Death Valley National Park: A History* (2013) and co-editor of *Forest Conservation in the Anthropocene: Science, Policy, and Practice* (2016).

Shelly Backlar, Vice President of Programs, Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR)
FoLAR is a non-profit organization founded in 1986, to protect and restore the natural and historic heritage of the Los Angeles River and its habitat through inclusive planning, education, and stewardship. Once home to steelhead and grizzlies, the Los Angeles River meandered through wetlands, marshes, willow, alder, and sycamore, providing desperately needed water for the region. Now running over 50 miles long—from the suburbs of the San Fernando Valley to the ocean in Long Beach—the Los Angeles River flows through fourteen cities and countless neighborhoods. When the Army Corps of Engineers initiated a flood control project in the late 1930s, they began the process of paving eighty percent of the river, creating the world's largest storm drain. With the cement came a perceptual shift: the river no longer existed. Instead, it was a "flood control channel," a no-man's land, surrounded by fences and signs. Over the ensuing decades, the Los Angeles River almost disappeared from public consciousness.