

An exhibition of landscape photography.

---

EACH PHOTOGRAPH IN THE CARLSON GALLERY REPRESENTS A SAMPLE OF THREE DIFFERENT PORTFOLIOS:  
LANDSCAPES, STORMS AND URBAN ...

Landscapes are living eco systems and environments. They have existed well before, and will hopefully be here way beyond the time we are here. When taking photographs, time and space seem hard for me to measure. Whenever I photograph, things are quiet, seem simple again – and I obtain a respect and reverence for the world that is hard to communicate through words.

For me those moments happen when the exterior environment and my interior world combine. Hopefully the images help communicate what is visualized during those times.

Storms have always seemed to be living, breathing beings to me. They are born when the conditions are right, they gain strength as they grow, they fight against the environment to stay alive, they change form and mature as they age, and eventually they get old and die.

The great storms in the Mid-West are amazing sights to witness. They're totally surreal. Through my images I just try to do justice to what I've witnessed.

Urban environments: I always have to remind myself that what seems to be is not always as it really is, that the Earth is just a rock spinning through Space. If I could shoot a time-lapse of Los Angeles we'd see that everything here is temporary. We'd see that the landscape itself wouldn't change but what mankind has built on top of it would rise and fall. We're here for only a short moment in time. The house and land we think we own we actually only borrow.

I love Los Angeles. One of my first experiences here (in 1981) was looking down from Mulholland Drive into the San Fernando Valley. What I saw that day was one of most beautiful sights I've ever seen. The spirit of that first sighting is all I've been trying to capture ever since.

ABOUT MITCH DOBROWNER...

Growing up on Long Island (Bethpage), NY, lost in my late teens, worried about my future direction in life.... my father gave me an old Argus rangefinder to fool around with. Little did he realize what an important gesture that would turn out to be for me.

After doing some research and seeing the images of Minor White and Ansel Adams I quickly became addicted to photography.

I left home at 21, quitting my job, leaving my friends and family to see the American Southwest for myself. In California I met my wife, and together we had 3 children, and created our own design studio - and the tasks of running a business and raising a family took a priority over photography. During that time I stopped taking pictures.

Years later, in early 2005, inspired by my wife, children and friends, I again picked up my cameras. Today I see myself on a passionate mission to make up for years of lost time - creating images that help evoke how I see our wonderful planet.

I feel I owe much to the great photographers of the past, especially Ansel Adams, for their dedication to the craft and for inspiring me in my late teens. Though I have never met them, their inspiration helped me determine the course my life would take.

Mitch Dobrowner  
February 4, 2013

Ruminations on Mitch Dobrowner's Vital Firmament

David Chappell, Ph. D.  
Associate Professor of Physics  
University of La Verne

Had Ansel Adams photographed clouds, he might have produced images similar to those in Mitch Dobrowner's breathtaking series, *Vital Firmament*. Dobrowner tips his camera upward to bring the sky into full view, often leaving just glimpses of the horizon at the bottom of the frame. The cloud formations are spectacular. Rendered with a full tonal range and set against black skies, they take on a sculptural three-dimensionality infused with movement and energy.

*Vital Firmament* is a refreshing take on contemporary landscape photography, which has struggled to find a coherent vision that speaks to both the beauty of nature and the harsh realities of environmental degradation. In a 1990 review for the New York Times, writer Andy Grundberg summarized the situation thus:

One of the tasks of the art of the last 10 years has been to reconstruct the notion of natural beauty in the face of a seemingly endless onslaught against nature. Mankind's alteration of previously pristine spaces, from tropical rain forests to the very air we breathe, poses a challenge that is not only environmental, but also esthetic: can art reflect what is happening to the natural world while retaining its traditional attachment to the sublime?

Grundberg's observations were written fifteen years after the seminal exhibition, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*, which has had a lasting impact on how landscape photography is viewed and discussed in America. Within this narrative, photographs of pristine landscapes such as those taken by Adams no longer conjure feelings of awe for the grandeur of nature, but instead produce feelings of loss and nostalgia as if we were viewing an endangered species. Landscape photography becomes more a critical examination of our attitudes and beliefs than a way of celebrating the transcendent beauty of the wild. And so the question is how to "reconstruct the notion of natural beauty" in the wake of the New Topographics movement. How can we in the present age look at a photograph of wild nature and feel a sense of the sublime?

Dobrowner suggests that we look up. His cloudscapes are free from many of the associations and judgments that we now instinctively make when we look at traditional landscapes. Despite our increasing impact on the environment, clouds and storm fronts remain "wild." Thus, we do not feel that we are viewing an "endangered species" when we look at the cloudburst in *Monsoon, Lordsburg, New Mexico 2010*. The cloud floats above the desert floor epitomizing freedom and conveying a sense of boundless space. The image captures the ephemeral nature of the moment and a deep impression of timelessness. It is a meditation on beauty in nature.

While Dobrowner focuses on the sky, he does not lose sight of the ground. His cloudscapes show the surrounding landscape, firmly establishing his photographs as documents made at a specific time and place rather than as purely abstract studies of tone and form. His landscapes are rendered with remarkable equanimity. The urban sprawl in *Power Plant, Los Angeles, California 2010* is presented with the same compassion and sensitivity as the tufa spires in *Moonrise, Trona Pinnacles, California 2009*. The clouds suggest a unifying principle for the series: they encourage non-attachment (in the Buddhist sense) to the problems of the world because all is transitory. It is not that we should ignore the problems facing the environment, rather we should not let them obscure deeper and more fundamental truths. Consider the image, *Big Cloud, Los Angeles, California 2010*. This remarkable rendering of Los Angeles could not be more dissimilar from the everyday suburban scenes typical of the New Topographics

Mitch Dobrowner  
Vital Firmament

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography  
February 4 through April 5, 2013

An exhibition of landscape photography.

---

photographers. It is as if we are seeing the city as a cloud might, rich in forms and tonalities, yet stripped of the usual associations we normally make. Traffic congestion, Hollywood, urban sprawl—none of it matters to the Big Cloud as it surveys the scene with its big Cyclops eye. As Dobrowner suggests in his statement, the cloud will soon dissipate and so too will Los Angeles. And that will be that.

Linked In: The Interplay of the Macro and Micro in Mitch Dobrowner's *Vital Firmament*

Judy M. Holiday, Ph. D.  
Assistant Professor of Writing  
University of La Verne

At first glance, Mitch Dobrowner's photographs, even when viewed on a small-sized computer monitor as the one I have used, provide a perspective and a mood that is both awe-inspiring and difficult to shake: humans and all their artifice seem relatively insignificant, microbes on a magnificent mud-ball. Dwarfed by the awesome power of the natural landscape, viewers have little choice but to speculate upon the fragility of human existence—their own mortality and that of their entire species. From this perspective, human life becomes a gossamer thread that magically co-exists within a much larger web of planetary forces. Earth doesn't belong to us—we belong to it. We do not nurture the planet; rather, the planet nurtures us.

These photographs demonstrate the incredible power of visual rhetoric to inform and transform our views, in this case, sending a powerful message that humans are microbial parts of a vastly larger and more powerful organism. Whether or not our relationship with this larger organism is parasitic or symbiotic is up to us. Much like standing in an immense cathedral, when viewing Mr. Dobrowner's work, we are gripped by the silliness and arrogance of humanity's overblown sense of importance and immortality, even as we are simultaneously imbued with an awareness of the gravity of human-caused climate change and its interference with the harmony of the natural world. What an important and timely message to drive home. If challenging our human-centeredness were the only outcome of this exhibit, it would be enough. However, by flipping humanity's perceived place as being at the center of all things, this exhibit also makes viewers acutely aware of themselves—ourselves—as perceptual beings, who can occupy various positions and who can try on a variety of perspectives in the pursuit of understanding ourselves and others.

After the intimidating effects of the photographs' first impressions wear off, a closer look at the photographs encourages viewers to ponder the human disposition to personify the non-human world. Since humanity is currently poised at a critical juncture in time when clear and scientific understanding of humanity's relationship to the planet is vital to our future and the future of countless other species, the human propensity to personify (to attach human meaning and characteristics to objects and other living beings) appears foolish and even dangerous. For example, ascribing a friendly disposition to a hedgehog or mole, both wild animals, can be risky, a lesson I painfully learned at the age of twelve when I picked up an especially "cute" mole whose bite sent me to the hospital for rabies shots. Why then do many of the photographs invite viewers to personify the natural world? As I pondered how the "big cloud" over L.A. can be viewed as either an immense puffer fish or as the spirit of the Great White Buffalo hovering over the city or how the Minnesotan funnel cloud looks like a genie and how the Jupiter lightening and cloud look like a coiled serpent whose tongue is lashing the earth, I realized that these images forcefully remind viewers of our intimate connection with the natural world. Cloud gazing provides a perfect means by which to contemplate the big and the small. Cloud gazing through photography, then, offers a mode of contemplation that reminds humans of their "place" while also celebrating human inventiveness, creativity, and empathy—our ability to imagine, to see patterns and similarities, to connect with the natural world, and to dream. Again, Dobrowner does viewers an immense service by reminding us of our ability to become part of something larger and our responsibility to honor that interconnectedness.

At the micro-level, the photographs provide the added boon of depicting exquisite detail. Pointillism, layering, and the interplay of light and dark not only please the senses, but also provide an underlying order to the

Mitch Dobrowner  
Vital Firmament

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography  
February 4 through April 5, 2013

An exhibition of landscape photography.

---

realm of the cosmic. Reminiscent of a saying from the Western Hermetic tradition “As above, so below,” the layering of clouds, for instance, evokes images of the sedimentation of the earth’s crust. Such detail again reinforces the constant interplay of the macro and the micro (i.e., the local and the global). These photographs, which are both visually and philosophically stimulating, forcefully shed light on the importance of our reciprocal relationships with the rest of the natural world and help make us more aware of our miraculous good fortune in being able to relish and revere our interconnectedness with everything around us.

Well done and thank you, Mr. Dobrowner.

Mitch Dobrowner  
Vital Firmament

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography  
February 4 through April 5, 2013

An exhibition of landscape photography.

---



Trees, clouds, Texline, Texas 2009



Wall cloud, Davidson, Wyoming 2009



Funnel, cornfield, Northfield, Minnesota 2010



Big cloud, Los Angeles, California 2010

Mitch Dobrowner  
Vital Firmament

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography  
February 4 through April 5, 2013

An exhibition of landscape photography.

---



Power plant, Los Angeles, California 2010



Monsoon, Lordsburg, New Mexico 2010



Rope out, Regan, North Dakota 2011



Storm over field, Lake Poinsett, South Dakota 2010

An exhibition of landscape photography.

---



Arcus clouds, Eads, Colorado 2010



Shiprock storm, Navajo Nation, New Mexico 2008



Jupiter, Mobridge, South Dakota 2011



Bear's claw, Moorcroft, Wyoming 2010



Mitch Dobrowner  
Vital Firmament

Irene Carlson Gallery of Photography  
February 4 through April 5, 2013

An exhibition of landscape photography.

---



Civilization, Los Angeles, California 2006



Moonrise, Trona Pinnacles, California 2009



Winter storm, Black Rock Hills, Utah 2010



Hollywood Hills, California 2007