

ADAMS STATE UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE STUDIES
THESIS APPROVAL

This is to certify that

Christian Stearns
Name of Student

Has satisfactorily completed
A graduate creative research project
And supporting paper on the topic:

"Land"

Approved by

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2. [Signature]

Member

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3. [Signature]

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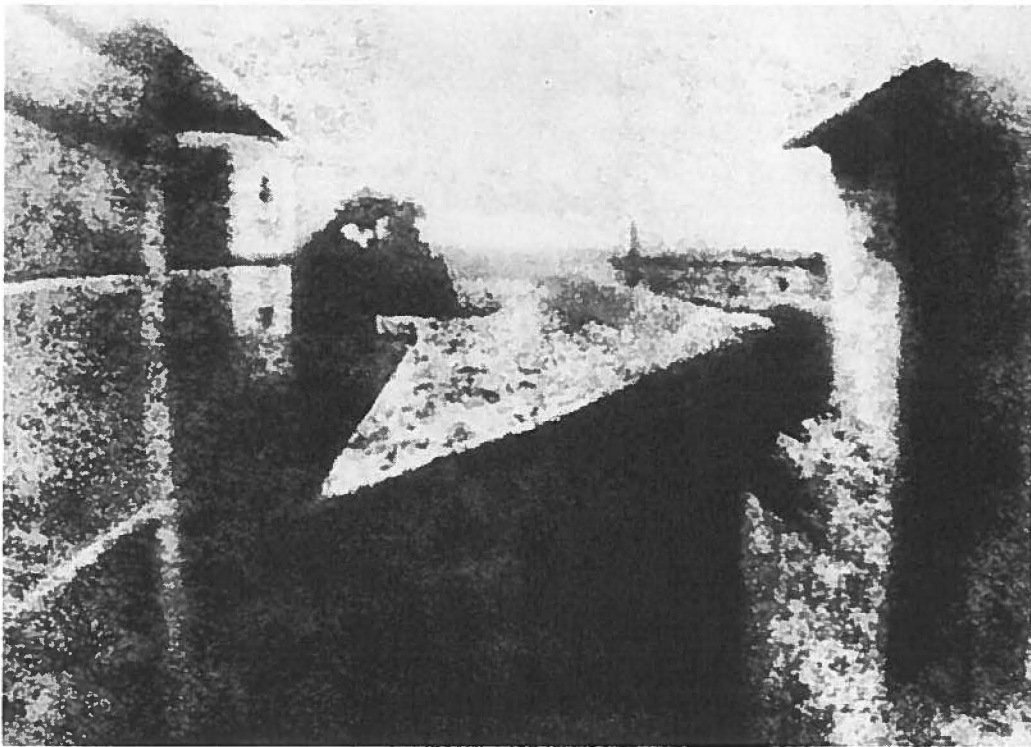
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Christian Stearns
MA Thesis
Spring 2017

**Rendering the Invisible:
Time, Scale & Spectrum in the Work of Christian Stearns**

A photograph is nothing more than a physical, 2-d representation of space and time. Photography has evolved significantly over the course of the past two centuries, from a blurry, people-less impression of farm buildings, by Niepce that took eight hours to expose to ultra-high definition camera-phones that reside in everyone's pockets. Though modern technology allows the capture of ever higher amounts of detail and colors, monochrome photography is still a more effective way of conveying drama in landscapes. Infrared capture of the landscape amplifies that drama producing surreal imagery that reflects my interpretation of the land.



Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, View from the Window at Le Gras, 1826

One major development to film was the introduction of color in the mid-twentieth century. No longer were photographs bound to the tonal values of black and white. Color brought the promise of realistic and accurate depictions of the world, but also brought emotional baggage. As humans, we react emotionally to color. If color is subtracted from the photograph, we end up with monochromatic tonalities absent of any emotional attachments to certain colors that may exist. Infrared light is invisible to the human eye. I reveal this band of the spectrum by using filters that isolate infrared waves from visible light. Long exposures are necessary, bringing time into the process. Ripples in the water disappear and the leaves, grass and clouds blur, but the land remains solid and sharp. Using techniques that I have been developing over the last several years, I capture the essence of the surrounding landscapes. I finish my work in black and white, giving the viewer a surreal experience with the landscape. I present my work not as a record of a place, but as an invitation into my imagination. My infrared landscapes are parallel worlds that exist just beyond the limits of human perception.

Alfred Stieglitz and Man Ray revealed the creative potential of photography elevating photography to high art. Stieglitz advanced photography as an art form, and was a key promoter of European Modern Avant Garde art in America. In 1896, Stieglitz had successfully consolidated the two photographic clubs in New York, the Society of Amateur Photographers and the New York Camera Club. Stieglitz was offered the position of presidency of the newly formed Camera Club of New York. He declined and instead took the position of vice-president and set about turning the Camera Club's newsletter into the photographic publication, Camera Notes. In Camera Notes, Stieglitz aspired to elevate photography to an art form equal to the traditional mediums of painting, printmaking, and sculpture. He included articles about art and aesthetics along side of prints from American and European photographers. This was met with

resistance from the old guard at the Camera Club, and by the turn of the century Stieglitz had had enough of challenges to his authority and formed his own Photo-Secession. This group of photographers, hand-picked by Stieglitz, put on a show that met with critical acclaim in 1902.



Alfred Stieglitz, Mountain and Sky, Lake George, 1924

It was through this success that Stieglitz, with the help of friend Edward Steichen, was able to secure gallery space at 291 Fifth Avenue in New York. The Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession (later known simply as 291) would go on to show works of sculpture, paintings, prints, drawings, as well as photography. This mixing of disciplines would, in the mind of Stieglitz, finally allow photography to share the same esteem as other mediums of fine art. 291 was a

great success, and for the first time, American audiences were exposed to avant-garde European artists like Picasso, Cezanne, Rodin, Rousseau, Matisse, and Duchamp.

The 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art (known as The Armory Show due to its location), was the first American showing of Modern Art. With over 1300 works from European and American artists, it was seen by an estimated 290,000 people by the time it had travelled to Chicago and Boston. Stieglitz had laid the groundwork for the Armory Show in the previous years with his shows at 291, and continued to be a champion of modern artists for the next three decades.

From 1922 and into the thirties Alfred Stieglitz shot clouds with minimal, if any, points of reference. His *Equivalent*s focused on how abstract forms, lines, and tonality can reflect one's inner emotions, ideas and feelings. Much of my detailed landscape work also removes any points of reference in order to suspend the viewers' sense of place, enhancing the other-worldliness of my photographs.



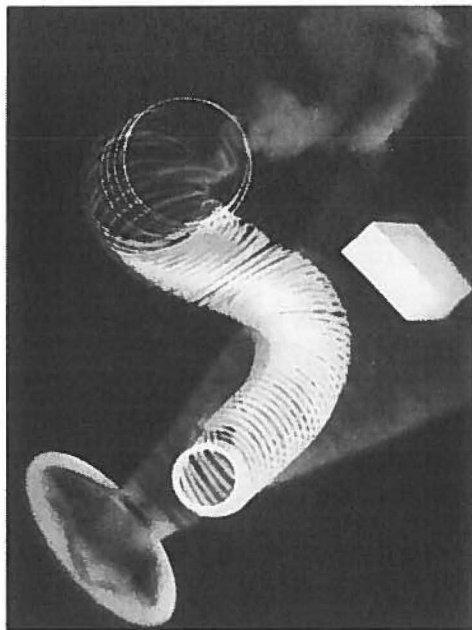
Alfred Stieglitz, Equivalent. 1926



Christian Stearns, Eagles, 2017

Born in New York in 1890, Man Ray was the son of Russian Jewish refugees. He declined a scholarship from Columbia University to study architecture and instead followed his dream to become an artist. Studying life drawing and painting, he took commercial jobs to get by. Ray met Stieglitz at his 291 gallery in New York City, also meeting Duchamp. “Duchamp did more than anyone to strengthen Man Ray's resolve - reinforcing his impatience with naturalism, and also encouraging him to diversify his talent.” (Motion 42) During his early years in New York City, Ray had learned the fundamentals of photography from Stieglitz. He was also deeply affected during this time by the collection of modern art at the Armory Show in 1913.

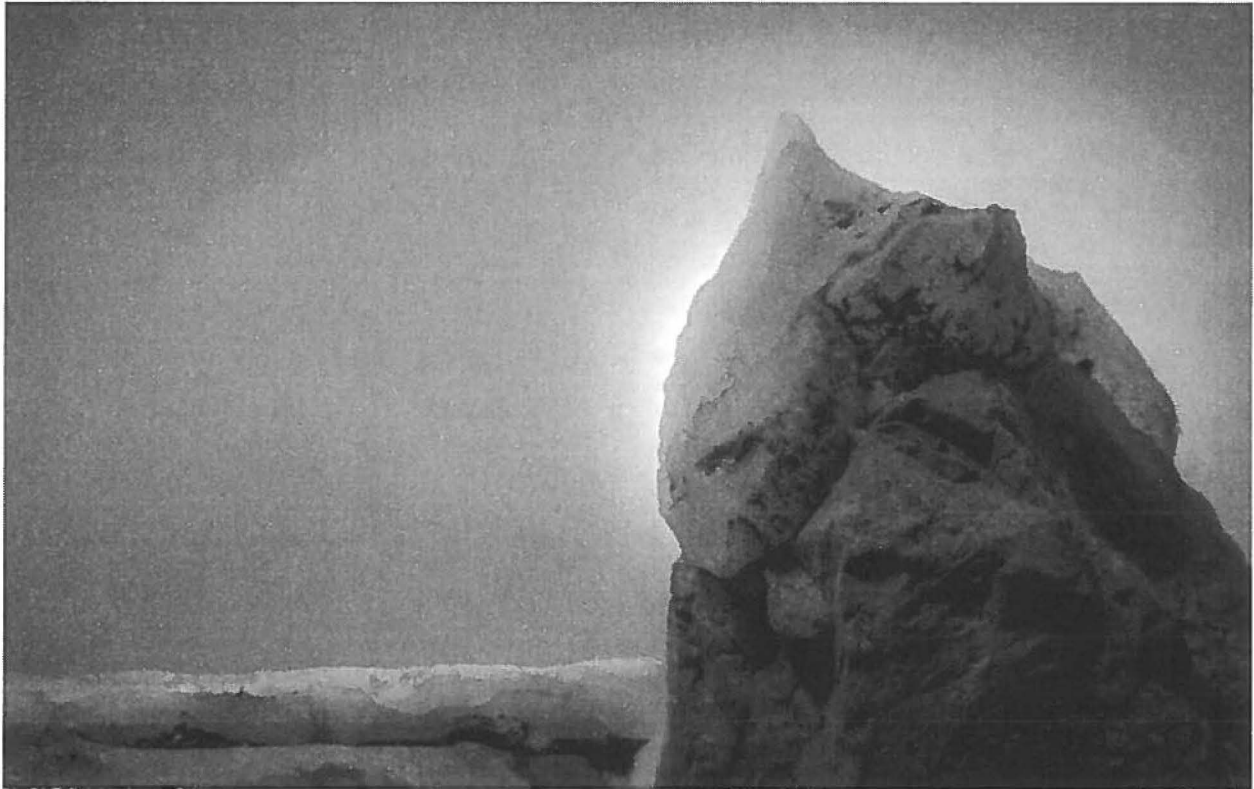
Ray moved to Paris in 1921 and persisting as a painter, his work was met with a lukewarm reception. Struggling to gain a foothold as a painter, it was his photography where he made the biggest impact. He soon became one of the most sought after portraitists of his time, photographing artists, celebrities, and writers. His portrait commissions earned him significant monies, and he was soon established in a large studio in Paris. In Paris, he began experimenting with many different photographic techniques. He first began making photograms in 1922. Rayographs (as he would call them) are a camera-less process that involves placing different items onto a sheet of photographic paper and briefly exposing them to light before developing them as one would a regular photographic print. The results are ghostly images consisting of hard and soft shapes.



Man Ray, Untitled Rayograph, 1922

Ray went on to perfect this process, having an alchemist's knowledge of materials and tonal values of various objects. It was during his early years in Paris when he also discovered the process of solarization. In this process, he deliberately exposed negatives or prints to a bright

light during the development stage, the resulting image having very defined edges and had the look of being both part negative and part positive.



Christian Stearns, South Twin Mountain Agate no. 2, 2017

“Compared to his photography, his paintings seem merely the products of his time; compared to his paintings, his photographs are marvelously free; still making it new after all these years.” (Motion 45) Ray’s photographic work during this period is the most valuable work of his in today’s fine art world. “Of course, Man Ray had ambitions in the fine art field, too. But the fact that it was his photographs, not his paintings, that were forged indicates the aesthetic judgment of the market.” (Geben 75)

Ray did not limit himself to the still image, and his films also had an impact on the art world. Using many techniques that he used on still negatives and prints, he was able to achieve moving imagery unlike anything that had been seen before. “The legacy of early filmmakers

such as Man Ray can perhaps be best appreciated in light of his experiments with camera-less photography (rayographs) and optical illusion that led to the elaboration of an “aesthetics of spectrality,” with reference to static as well as moving images.” (Fotiade 90) His films were a mixture of camera-less techniques and footage shot in a more traditional fashion. Films also allowed Ray to present narratives in a relatively linear fashion while exploring aspects of duality, masculinity, and directly referencing the filmmaking process. “It is hard to classify his films; they are provocative in their originality and pioneering in their content [...] they are products of his deep-rooted individuality and independence. His films anticipated moods and modes. It may be said that they are the most Dada of the Surrealist films, the most Surrealist of the Dada films.” (Knowles 90) Filmmaking was also in-line with Ray’s attitudes towards the uniqueness of the art “object.” Films were shown and experienced without being themselves objects to be bought and possessed.

“Man Ray had no patience with the art market's preoccupation with originals.

When someone would ask him for a ‘vintage print’ of one of his photographs, he'd reply, ‘I'm not a wine.’ He made prints from negatives he had created years earlier, gave duplicates of negatives to labs, allowed assistants to make prints and neglected, during his peripatetic life among New York, Paris and Los Angeles, his personal cache of negatives and contact prints, today safeguarded in the Centre Pompidou, in Paris.”

(Greiben 75)

Ray began his career as a painter, but quickly realized that diversification was more conducive to the principals of modern art. He was a painter, printer, sculptor, filmmaker, poet, and most notably a photographer. Ray and Stieglitz both changed the way that photography was perceived in the early 20th century. With Stieglitz, it was both elevating photography into fine

art as well as bringing the modern art movement to America. Ray proved that one can push beyond the boundaries of the camera to produce imagery that had never been seen before. Ray's ability to produce compelling photographs with and without a camera informs my own experience with digital photography.

Experimentation with digital processes leads me towards pushing the medium beyond its basic purpose of capturing the world in color and sharp details. No longer do I view the camera as a recording mechanism, but as an abstract image generator. Combining infrared capture and long exposures I achieve imagery that is a unique representation of landscapes. With these techniques, the landscape moves past representation and into the realm of the imagination.



Christian Stearns, Sangre de Cristo Mountains no. 1, 2017

When one considers formalism in photography the subject becomes second to the overall composition. With an ambiguous, and undefined standard, explaining what makes one photograph successful compared to others is a difficult endeavor. I work through trial and error in the field and the studio, and often rely on instinct when composing a shot. I find that when I get to the studio and edit, the images that I had expected to compel fail, while other less well-thought out photos end up succeeding. Digital capture allows me to shoot as many images as I feel necessary so I have a broad pallet of photos to work with in Lightroom and Photoshop.



Christian Stearns, South Twin Mountain Agate no. 2, 2017

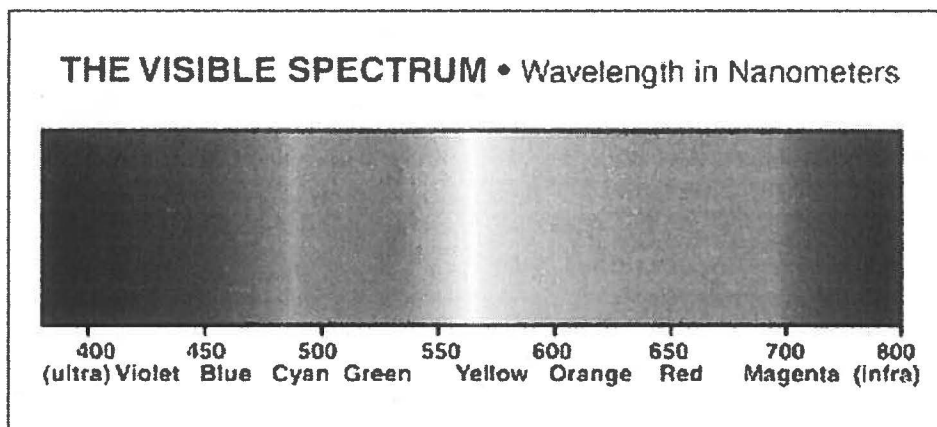
For my Thesis show I have produced a series of infrared landscapes as well as photographs of the finer details to impart an intimate experience of the land to the viewer. These

images consist of features in Colorado's San Luis Valley such as the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Mt. Blanca, the Pinion Hills, the San Juan Mountains, the Rio Grande Gorge, and Ute Mountain. I have also included macro photographs of rocks and minerals that I have gathered from surrounding locations. Experimenting with lighting and placements, I created miniature landscapes in my studio. To challenge the definition of landscape I have finished this show with a series of photographs that do not include any land, only sky and clouds. These five photographs are a tribute to Stieglitz's *Equivalents* series from a century ago, and question whether a landscape must contain land in the composition or not.



Christian Stearns, Sunrise, 2017

For this project a shooting day would begin with an assessment of the sky. Clouds play an important role in my compositions, so I observed and photographed only the sky with my iPhone. I included these photos because they were the initial inspiration that launched a day of shooting. When conditions were favorable I would travel to a location and shoot with a tripod, a Pentax K-01 digital camera outfitted with a 50mm f/1.4 lens, and an attached R72 infrared filter. The R72 filter blocks all light below 720 nanometers and only allows infrared light of wavelengths above 720 nanometers to pass onto the camera sensor. Most modern digital cameras have an infrared blocking filter built into the sensor that enhances the accuracy of autofocus systems. The strength of these blocking filters varies from camera to camera, and through testing several camera bodies I found that the Pentax K-01 had the weakest infrared blocking filter. A live view through the K-01's display with the R72 filter attached was crucial to me achieving sharp focus.



Shooting with an APS-C sized sensor, 50mm is equivalent to roughly 75mm on a 35mm film camera. This setup allows me to capture several detailed, long-exposure photographs of one location. Exposures range from two to six seconds depending on cloud cover and the aperture used. Later, I stitch these images together in Photoshop. The resulting image is a wide-angle perspective containing deep detail.



Christian Stearns, Greenie Mountain, 2017

While in the field, I also collected mineral and rock specimens to bring into my studio. I set these up in a shadowbox and experimented with lighting and steam to create atmospheric miniature landscapes. I photographed these with a Nikon D7000 and a 40mm f/2.8 macro lens. Initially, I shot these with the R72 infrared filter, but I found that exposures were too long and detail in the vapor would be lost. I removed the filter and found that ideal exposure times were between half a second and two seconds with an aperture of f/8.

I choose to make photographs using digital processes for many reasons including convenience, but mainly because utilizing infrared filters with digital cameras allows me to review the images in the field and adjust accordingly to capture the best digital information before editing the images at home. I find that the iPhone camera is approaching the quality of my larger camera bodies, and having a camera in my pocket means that I'm always ready when a

photographic opportunity presents itself. The way I have constructed the broader landscapes is also a purely digital process involving capturing many images with telephoto lenses and stitching them together using Photoshop to create wide, expansive photographs of the landscape. Another defining quality of the digital format is the ability to easily and consistently reproduce identical prints.

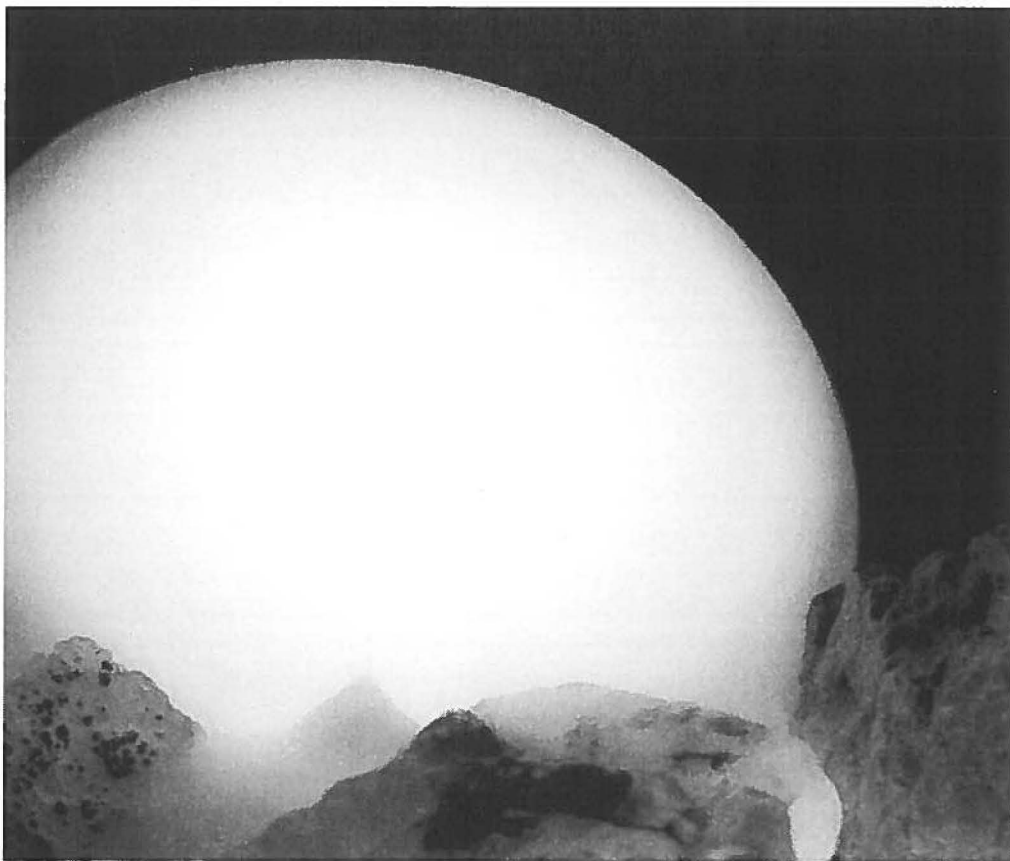


Christian Stearns, Sugarloaf and Ute Mountain, 2017

Photography has evolved significantly over the last century. Elevating the medium from a method of mechanical reproduction to fine art, Stieglitz and Ray revealed the true potential of photography as a means of creative expression. Stieglitz's attention to detail in his work has informed my own processes in that I am always striving for the highest detail in my broader landscape photographs. Ray's work in the darkroom inspired me to experiment with lighting,

atmosphere, and macrophotography in the studio.

In today's world of selfies and social media, the printed photograph is coming under threat. Though more photographs are being taken, fewer are being experienced further than through our phone screens. With my work, I hope to remind the viewer and fellow photographers alike, that photographs should be allowed to exist beyond the limits of our digital screens. Digital displays, even at 4k, fail to resolve the finer details of a large, digital photograph. A physical print is still the best way to experience photography. Screens are low resolution compared to the detail that can be achieved with modern printers. Phones, tablets and computers are convenient ways to view photographs, but a properly lit, large print on a wall invites the viewer into the photograph without the distractions that media devices offer.



Christian Stearns, Moonrise, 2017

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