

A RAY OF LIGHT



Todd Bertolaet has 40 photos on display in St. Marks Revisited at the Artport Gallery through March. TODD BERTOLAET

St. Marks Revisited: Pandemic launched photographer's return to the wild

The pause brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 became one of the most productive times for photographer Todd Bertolaet.

Always captivated by the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge, he found solace walking the trails during quarantine and taking in north Florida's unique landscapes from behind his panoramic camera lens.

For Bertolaet, these excursions marked a re-

turn to a series he began in 1987, capturing the vistas and waterways of the refuge and the Hickory Mound Impoundment about 30 miles southeast of St. Marks on Apalachee Bay. These images were originally included in his monograph titled "Crescent Rivers" published in 1998 by The University Press of Florida.

"My three daughters grew up in the canoe I took when I was photographing the St. Marks River and Wacissa River for what ended up being my monograph," remembers Bertolaet. "For me, it has been about going out, seeing things, and being captivated by light, patterns, and textures. There's a drive to photograph that or to recreate that."

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Todd Bertolaet, a retired professor of photography from The School of Journalism and Graphic Communication at Florida A&M University, revisits St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in new exhibit. TODD BERTOLAET



For St. Marks Revisited, Todd Bertolaet used a panoramic camera, which he describes as a brick with a toilet paper roll stuck through the middle. TODD BERTOLAET



Todd Bertolaet's St. Marks Revisited exhibit will showcase 40 images from this series at the Artport Gallery, open now through March 28. PROVIDED

If you go

What: St. Marks Revisited

When: 8 a.m.-11:30 p.m., Sunday-Saturday through March 28

Where: Artport Gallery, 3300 Capital Circle SW

Cost: Free and open to the public

Contact: For more information, visit coca.tallahasseearts.org. These works can be seen virtually in COCA's Online Gallery at cocaonlinegallery.zenfolio.com. For more on Todd Bertolaet, please visit toddbertolaetphotography.com.

Bertolaet

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40 images in St. Marks Revisited

Between October 2020 and April 2021, Bertolaet uncovered new interpretations of his surroundings with his Noblex 35mm panorama camera and Kentmere 400 B&W 35mm film. His St. Mark's Revisited exhibit will showcase 40 images from this series at the Artport Gallery, open now through March 28. These works can also be accessed virtually by visiting COCA's Online Gallery.

"I went down to St. Mark's to get out because everybody was told you can't go anywhere, you have to quarantine, but you can be out in nature," says Bertolaet. "When I got down to the refuge there were more people there in the last three years than I've witnessed in 30 years. Once you get a quarter mile onto the trails though you have the whole place to yourself. I thought, 'this is great, this is what I'm going to do.' That's why I revisited it."

Bertolaet is a retired professor of photography from The School of Journalism and Graphic Communication at Florida A&M University. During his tenure, he was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Memorial Fellowship along with three Individual Artist Fellowships from The State of Florida, Division of Cultural Affairs. His work has been exhibited in over 200 hundred juried, invitational, group and solo exhibitions.

Learning from grandfather

Bertolaet has been behind a camera since 1971 when he took his first photography class in high school. He was inspired by his grandfather, who had been a small-town doctor, and was made the head of public health over two Wisconsin counties.

Bertolaet recalls being taken along to various town events, and his grandfather always had his camera equipment handy.

"During that time period when I was a kid there was all the vaccinations that were going on, and of course he was in charge of that," recalls Bertolaet, who eventually inherited his grandfather's equipment. "He'd take his camera with him and photograph the measles vaccinations leading up to the polio vaccinations. I've got tons of (photo) negatives of kids getting vaccinated in schools. No one thought anything of it. They were being patriotic."

In spite of his guidance counselors who cautioned against a career in the arts, Bertolaet attended Utah State University to simultaneously study fine arts and commercial photography. During graduate school, he fell into teaching and decided to get his K-12 teaching certificate.

Students came first

When he was designing the program at FAMU, Ber-

When developing his film, Bertolaet uses the Agfa Rodinal formula, a liquid black-and-white film developer, which dates back to 1890s. Since the manufacturer no longer exists, he creates the solution from scratch.

tolaet was resolved to provide a multi-dimensional program situated within the School of Journalism, and include classes in portraiture, commercial illustration, black and white photography, and more.

He's proud to have had former graduates flourish and eventually become photography professors and program coordinators at several colleges and universities.

"During my 38 years of teaching, it was about my students first, and then photography later," says Bertolaet. "It's not about subject matter. It's about your students."

As a practitioner, Bertolaet always remains open to several types of subject matter. He's photographed city squares throughout the southeast, and more recently has decided to focus closer to home, photographing Gaines Street and Tallahassee's downtown.

However, the intricacies of Florida's outdoor landscapes remain a strong draw.

Best of old and new

When developing his film, Bertolaet uses the Agfa Rodinal formula, a liquid black-and-white film developer, which dates back to 1890s. Since the manufacturer no longer exists, he creates the solution from scratch. Bertolaet enjoys utilizing the best of all worlds however, and will also scan his photographs into computer programs to digitally edit and print them.

For St. Mark's Revisited, Bertolaet used a panoramic camera, which he describes as a brick with a toilet paper roll stuck through the middle — there are slits at both ends, so that when the camera is rotated, it exposes the film to capture vast horizons.

Bertolaet is most proud of a vertical image he was able to capture in this series, which he believes encapsulates Florida's true nature.

"I've been trying to do it successfully for years," says Bertolaet. "In this photograph I have the ferns in the foreground and they're down where my toes would be right at the bottom of that photograph. When it exposed, it worked its way up to the treetops above me. That's what I've been trying to do because the Florida landscape is so packed, it's so primordial. I wanted to get something that really shows how the Florida landscape is so macro, and what's going on in the big picture."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



Todd Bertolaet's Hickory Mound shot captures everything from ferns to pine trees.