



Portrait Photographer Receives NSF Grant to Capture the Souls of the Arctic

The LiveWire sat down with the Director of LaGuardia's Photography Department Scott Sternbach who is the recipient of a 2008 National Science Foundation (NSF) grant from the foundation's Antarctic Artists and Writers Program. The program provides funding for art, research, and educational initiatives that exemplify the Antarctic heritage of humankind and help increase public understanding of the region. The accomplished portrait photographer will journey this fall to the remote Palmer Research Station, located on the peninsula that juts out near the southern tip of South America, where he will photograph the "souls" of Antarctica: a group of 30 researchers, biologists, cooks, pilots and boat captains who are working on a federal project to study the effects of global warming on the region.

LW: Over the past six years, you've carried this 12-pound field camera through the backwoods of Delaware County to capture the endangered culture and lifestyle of the small dairy farmer, you've documented the eerily desolate sites of pre-war industrial ruins in and around New York City, and you explored Jersey City's poor neighborhood shops, churches and streets. What motivates you?

SS: Forging new ground in fragile, yet hostile, environments is what drives me on this quest to photograph Antarctica. I have also been inspired to take on the challenge of photographing the people of Antarctica with a view camera by Frank Hurley, an Australian photographer who accompanied Ernest Shackleton, an Antarctic explorer, on his 1914 expedition to the region.

LW: What is your primary goal for this project?

SS: Ultimately, I'm hoping to create a typology of the people who work in Antarctica by looking at their individual characteristics. The viewer can then begin to understand the place, since people are a reflection of what they do and where they exist.

LW: How do you plan to use Antarctica's magnificent and pristine landscape as a backdrop to document your subjects' daily adventures?

SS: Even before stepping onto the polar ice, I can envision myself photographing a researcher surrounded by scores of penguins, a diver emerging from the ice as it

freezes around him and a boat captain out on the deck of an icebreaker in the middle of the Antarctic Sea.

LW: You'll be viewing your subjects through a restored, vintage camera that produces large, richly detailed black and white images. What makes photos produced with this type of manual camera so special?

SS: The 8"x10" camera can provide a fresh exploration into subjects that allows the viewer to enter into the scene, or in some cases, the lives of those being photographed. It tends to distill and reveal the poetry of the place in a different way than when viewed in color.

LW: Why do you believe that no other camera captures the essence of the subject like a large format camera?

SS: Part of reason has to do with the slow and deliberate process of setting up and positioning the camera and tripod; it gives me a chance to establish a relationship with the subjects. During this period, I am talking to them and by the time I am ready to take the picture they have forgotten the camera and they are somewhere else in their mind, so you get a very natural photo.

LW: How will you showcase your work when you return?

SS: I plan on increasing public understanding about the Antarctic in a number of ways. I will present my collection of life-size photographs at LaGuardia, as well as at high schools and colleges in the tri-state area. I would also like to display the prints at a large format print exhibition, in a website gallery and as a published book.

LW: What sort of impact do you hope your photographs will have on viewers?

SS: The heroes of this effort to help save the Earth need to be seen by students and those who visit the galleries and museums in New York and beyond. I hope this experience will raise the level of awareness of this broad swath of our diverse populous and inspire people to become involved and active in the global work to save not only Antarctica, but the world's ecosystem as well.