

THOMAS WREDE

the photo I want

Justin McCallum: You first started 20 years ago. Did you start out pursuing more traditional photography? If so, how did you transition to your more abstract, fine art landscapes?

Thomas Wrede: I started off studying painting and drawing. I was at the Art Academy and I always used photography for my paintings and drawings. I started doing photography in 1991, at the art school of Dieter Appelt. He's a German photographer and teacher. I've been taking photos of landscapes now for ten years, not twenty. I've done several other published photography works. In 1998, I completed *Magic Worlds*, artificial landscapes in German amusement parks. After that I took photos of interiors of wallpaper in German living rooms, bathrooms and bedrooms. These photo wallpapers, all around German apartments in 2000 and 2001, I called *Domestic Landscapes*. From 2002-2007, I was doing *Manhattan Picture Worlds* that were billboards in New York. I'm doing the *Real Landscapes* project at the moment. I take five to eight photos a year. It's done very slowly. Sometimes I take one or two years to produce a single photo. Of course, I don't work every day on one image, but I have to wait for just the right light and I'll drive into the landscape and place the small things on the beach. Sometimes it's too rainy or too windy, but those are obstacles you always deal with if you make photos in nature.

You have to use some impressive equipment to produce your work. Do you choose your gear based upon the ideas you have, or had it developed with your interests?

TW: First, there is the idea. Sometimes I make a small drawing or painting in my sketchbook, and then I try to find the right house or car. Sometimes I have a dream, sometimes I see photos in a newspaper or magazine or somewhere in the art world: I get inspired by these types of things. Then I develop the idea in my studio and, with my assistant, build the models to make test photos. Later we place objects in the landscape. I use a large format camera. It's analog, and it's very tradi-

tional because I have to shift the focus to achieve sharpness throughout the entire image. Sometimes objects are just a few meters from the camera, maybe an arms length.

Do you approach the idea of size and presence in your work mathematically, or is your aesthetic something that has come about organically?

It always goes through a long developmental process. I return to the same place several times to evolve my idea of the landscape.

Along the same lines; do you always know what you're going to get in each picture? How do you cope with nature as a creative force limiting control over your final images?

80% of the image is already in my head. I just have to find the right place. Sometimes I wait for natural factors like clouds and rain become present. It's a communication between two: first, I have my idea, then I go into nature and wait for the right elements, and it develops. Sometimes the image I'm striving for is very clear in my head, others aren't. With my technique, a small puddle can become a lake, and I may have that idea from my first drawing. Then it's very clear, I know how to make the photo I want.

Do you have a specific idea or message that you're trying to convey to the viewer of your photographs?

There are different levels. First off, I want to make a good image that surprises you. On the other hand, it's a lot of fun to see the whole world within a small world. In the sense that you don't have to travel because I take all of these images in Germany, at the German North Sea. I found all the things here around my home. There's another idea in my work too; you don't need to travel, everything you need to make quality photographs is around you.

Also, there are some philosophical ideas, that a photograph is always in a place between longing and catastrophe. I use





images that you would find in newspapers and magazines, so there is a communication between the small things that are just toys, very simple things, and then big ideas.

Do you create the models yourself or do others create them for you?

Both. I have a few assistants that help me in my studio. On the other hand, I buy most of my models on eBay. I buy them and we paint them with new colors and add details. A lot of things you can't buy anymore, but they can only be found on eBay. I also like to use recycled or appropriated materials which I find. And everyone can use these simple toys, too.

Since you use models in your work so much, did you ever play with or collect these sort of toys as a child?

No, only a few. I love to do it, but it was not the main subject. I was usually on the football field. But we like to do it. It's very popular in Germany, there's a lot of people playing with these kinds of things. There are lots of shops and business for it.

Sticking with your childhood, a lot of your work feels very isolated or lonely. Did you grow up in a removed or rural area?

No, it's just something that comes out in my work. I think there is a big tradition in German art, the romantic, to be alone in the landscape. In it, the landscape feeds the emotion of the person. There's a longing for the landscape - for a clean place, white places. I think it's a tradition. On the other hand, this minimalism is an aspect of my art. I use very few things in my frames, I don't want too much.

Do you think that idea of German Romanticism translates to other cultures?

Perhaps through the images people will understand. On the other hand, if you look back 150 years ago, it was a political thing for you to 'go back to nature.' I don't know if you can translate all these cultural aspects, but I think the idea of adventure, of danger, can transport you to other countries. I have a lot of exhibitions in China and Korea and I believe they understand my work. There are a lot of movies, American movies, that work with this; with scenic space - often a desert - at the beginning or end of the movie.

You put a lot of thought into the models and scenes you create. Do you base these on places you've been or are they totally unique?

It's both things; there isn't only one way to look. Sometimes I'm inspired by the place and I get new ideas from a story. I don't have all of my ideas inside me. I like to get inspiration from the land-



scape. However, there are a lot of dreams in my head, and I try to find them. It's a communication between me and nature and the landscape. It's a development. Sometimes I drive to the same place three or four times just to find the right light. It's different to make a photo at two or five or six o'clock. Light is very important.

In setting up your models, do you try to create a narrative? You say the images go from idyllic to catastrophic. Is there a message across the series, or a story between the images?

Not between the images, no. A single image maybe. A small story, a beginning of a story, or an end to a story may be in one image, but not in many.

What's going through your head as you set up the vignettes? Is there a theme for them beyond creating that sense of longing for nature?

Yeah, I think there is a theme of social dramas. The dream of perfect nature, the dream of a landscape with no human beings, that is very silent. There are different subjects, but I think there is one line in all these pictures at different levels and through different stories.

You explore how humanity and nature are existing at odds. How do you feel about the current state of environmental degradation and human impact on climate change?

We are frightened by it. I'd like to translate this feeling of fright for it, because it's everywhere, but we don't know it. Sometimes we feel it slightly. Sometimes images like these, it could be, and it could not be, and you don't know.

If you compare the image with the cars (the first image on my website of cars in a coal mine), it is very brown, titled *Tertiary Valley*. It's a long, long time ago, and you don't know why there are cars. It's like the dinosaurs. The cars are fossils from five million years ago. You can see it on the ground and it's about 100 meters deep because it's an old coal mine, and you see the cars on the ground like old animals that were fossilized but you don't know what they're doing. There is always a question about nature and catastrophe, and the relationship between the human being and nature.

Last but not least, what is your fantasy?

My fantasy is a mixture of reality and construction, reality and fiction. You don't know what fantasy is and you don't know what reality is. There is always a mixture. Sometimes the reality is built like a fantasy, and you don't know where you're standing. Even in my photos of the billboards in New York you don't know where the fantasy and the reality ends – you are between all of these things.



