

# STONE BY STONE

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## TAJ FORER

Taj Forer believes that the still image can, literally, still the heart. His practice (both photographic and curatorial) is moved by a curiosity about how the act of recording the world photographically provides us with a moment for pause and reflection. He describes it as a “nuanced process that unfolds as we encounter a still image—something transformative and magical”.

Turning the pages of Forer’s recent publication—*Stone by Stone*—is a contemplative experience. This spare and graceful book embodies Forer’s belief in the power of still images to “provide a bit of context for the business that is life itself”. And life itself—surviving and dying in the natural world—is the thematic that underlies *Stone by Stone*.

Forer travelled to remote wildernesses in Northern Maine, New Hampshire, Georgia and North Carolina, to participate in the lives of communities that come together to learn and share bush-craft ways of life. Ancient practices—flint-knapping, shelter building, fire-making, water-gathering, foraging, trapping, hunting—are depicted in Forer’s images, which, in a memorializing sense, “document” traditions and skills that are in danger of being forever lost.

Forer will describe his methodology as “documentary”, yet acknowledges it’s a categorization that only partially reveals his practice. “I really find images in the world rather than construct tableaux. But I also draw much influence from more conceptual methodologies—more constructed realities,” he explains. “We can turn our lens on anything. What I choose to depict is what I respond to on a deep personal level. Photography is a beautiful vessel for communicating that respect—a way of serving as a monument to whatever it is that’s being depicted.”

The cover of *Stone by Stone*, reprised in the final image, is of a cluster of pale yellow Jerusalem artichokes lying on a bed of dark green pine boughs. A bushman had just foraged the chokes for the evening meal, using the boughs as a sieve to drain the washed roots before cooking them over the fire. “I was just watching and learning as he dumped them out and it was so beautiful and

simple and the light was just right and I made the picture.”

“I am not comfortable using my hand to manipulate the subject matter. I just don’t do that,” says Forer. Yet he is at once participatory in the recorded moment and an observer, framing with a degree of aesthetic formalism the “found” moment.

Forer describes his metier as distillation: selecting; sequencing; finding the proper pace and place; building a true narrative. The image sequencing in *Stone by Stone* subtly echoes the ancient wisdom that has been passed on from generation to generation, which dictates that when out in the wild the first thing that is done is that shelter is created and fire kindled if it is cold. Then water is gathered and then food is found or caught. But shelter is always paramount, because without it, death can come quickly. So the early images of the book are of shelters, flint and fire, and only much later the arresting appearance of animal life in the form of a huge, eviscerated moose carcass, a monumental encounter with the moment just after the kill of a living animal for the survival of another. The image chronology, whilst not overtly contrived, becomes “a nuanced narrative within the greater narrative”.

Of the nearly fifty images in *Stone by Stone*, only five show human beings—and then only their hands or feet—picking fruit, lighting kindle, presenting fish. Initially Forer intended to exclude representing people because it spoke too specifically of the present, when he wanted “to embody the timelessness”. He explicitly didn’t want to make a work recording a “community of people” living an alternative lifestyle. But Forer came to realize that the point of interest was that the work is being done precisely “at this moment in history”. The human presence, shown wearing modern work boots, or a machine-made sweater, acknowledges that the very small number of people passing on this bush-knowledge are indeed “people who are simultaneously living in an ancient past and a very real present”.

The process of selection and distillation in Forer’s work seems to operate at both a cerebral and intuitive level, extending to his



Untitled 46

All images from the series *Stone by Stone* © Taj Forer

confident, purposeful use of colour which is key to his work.

Forer was a student of Joel Sternfeld's and recalls an early class on colour photography he took with him. "You're a black and white photographer using colour film," said Sternfeld to his disciple. "Think about all the things that make up a great colour image. Understand that. Embody that and then let it all go."

"He was this Zen master," says Forer. "I didn't initially understand, but over the years I was able to intuitively understand what he was saying in that first meeting. I came to see photographically in colour—when the colour just clicks in the frame."

Forer describes himself as a colour theory geek, citing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and his observations on the relationship between colours as they present themselves in Nature—the way a flower emerges from the brown stem, becoming a green bud and the other colours emerging from that elemental green. Forer says "it's a process, a curve, it's temporal, in some sense". His image sequencing aims for a similarly temporally progressive effect—an immersive experience that parallels his own when walking in nature and creating the work.

*Stone by Stone* works its effect in images much as a poem does in words—through visual alliterations and assonances, distilled imagery, rhythm and compression. Illuminating, therefore, to hear Forer describe how he came upon his title. "It's a great challenge titling a body of work. I turned to poetry and was reading

some of the great American poets that marvelled at the natural world. It was Emerson's poem 'Snowstorm', and the line—"To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone"—that really resonated, and embodied what this project is about. The passing of time. The magnitude of time. Yet how we function within that disorienting magnitude."

We cope with that disorientation, Taj Forer says: "One step at a time, stone by stone, we move across a stream."

— Sophie Balhetchet

[www.tajforer.com](http://www.tajforer.com)

Exhibitions: Galeria Senda, Barcelona, solo show, on view through end of Feb. 2012

LEADAPRON, Los Angeles, special portfolio event / solo show late March 2012

Flanders Gallery, Raleigh, North Carolina, solo show, April 2012

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Diptych, *Untitled 19/20*









Diptych, *Untitled 44/45*





*Untitled 31*



*Untitled 25*







*Untitled 17*