

Cuyahoga 50 photo shows uncover fresh takes on the recovery of a once combustible river

By Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer • Updated Jun 30, 2019; Posted Jun 30, 2019

CLEVELAND, Ohio – Art reviews don't often come with a spoiler alert, but this one requires it.

To convey the experience of flying in a helicopter over the [Cuyahoga Valley](#), Ethiopian photographer [Michael Tsegaye](#) made the unusual decision – here's the alert - to have big enlargements of his photos fastened to the floor of the [Cleveland Print Room](#).

This wonderful idea requires viewers to walk on the images and look down into them, evoking the sensation of hovering 500 feet above the Cuyahoga River in a helicopter.

This unusual show is half of a two-part photographic exploration of the river that includes "Bridged," an exhibition at the Riverview Community Center on West 25th Street by New York photographer [Sophie Schwartz](#), a native Clevelander.

She returned to her hometown to produce an outstanding black-and-white portfolio that provides a fresh viewpoint on familiar landscapes in the Flats between downtown and Ohio City.

Remembering 1969

Both shows are part of the community's observance of the [50th anniversary of the fire on the Cuyahoga River in 1969](#), which launched the environmental movement and a cleanup of the nation's once heavily polluted waterways.

The Cleveland Foundation funded the photographic projects through its global [Creative Fusion](#) program, which supports residencies here every year by international and local artists.

The foundation asked this year's cohort to focus on the river and issues related to fresh water.

Other artistic manifestations of the Cuyahoga 50 anniversary include the Cleveland Museum of Art's exhibition of the exploded gunpowder drawings of Chinese artist [Cai Guo-Qiang](#) and photographs on the theme of "Water," by [Edward Burtynsky](#) of Canada.

It's worth mentioning that the museum exhibits share art historical DNA with Tsegaye's inspiration to cover a floor with his photographs.

All three exhibits are rooted in the idea of making art about the act of looking down from above, a transgression of the traditional notion of depicting landscapes as if a picture were a window. Burtynsky used airplanes and drones to make his photos, and Cai's gunpowder drawing of the Cuyahoga resembles a map, not a conventional landscape.

A Fine Disregard

As mentioned in my previous review of the museum shows, art historian [Kirk Varnedoe](#) memorably described the history of the vertical viewpoint in an essay called "Overview: The Flight of the Mind," the final chapter of his superb 1990 book "[A Fine Disregard](#)," which catalogues the innovations underlying modern art.

Artists and photographers began exploring vertiginous viewpoints soon after the advent of tall buildings and airplanes. Examples cited by Varnedoe include photographs of European streets and squares in the 1920s and '30s by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Alexandr Rodchenko and Andre Kertesz.

The new viewpoints enabled by skyscrapers and airplanes implied that artworks themselves should have new relationships to their spatial surroundings when exhibited.

As Varnedoe pointed out, a French art critic joked after seeing an 1880 painting by the Impressionist Gustave Caillebotte, entitled "Boulevard Seen from Above," that the painting should have been shown on the floor, not on a wall.

Lo and behold, when you walk into the Cleveland Print Room, you see a perfect manifestation of that idea in Tsegaye's exhibition.

The 43-year-old photographer and photojournalist, based in Addis Ababa, said he'd never heard of Varnedoe's book or of anyone else showing photos on a floor.

Elevating sensation

He said the idea just came to him while discussing his exhibit with Cleveland artist John Carlson, who acted as a liaison under the Creative Fusion program, and who flew over the river with Tsegaye last fall.

Tsegaye said he discovered that he enjoyed shooting straight down, eliminating the horizon, so he asked the helicopter pilot to swing or spin over selected landscapes so he could aim his Nikon down through the open door without obstruction from its skids or rotors.

"You see things you don't normally," he said, unwittingly channeling Varnedoe. "It gives you a completely different perspective."

After having the resulting photographs printed on large sheets of styrene, he had them fastened to the gallery floor in clashing orientations, with "up" facing in different directions.

The viewer is required not only to look down, but also to change orientation, as if wheeling or turning in a helicopter.

The photos reveal the Cuyahoga's many moods as it flows from marshy uplands and forests through suburbs scattered with McMansions to the hard-used industrial zone downriver in the Cleveland Flats.

Tsegaye said he was particularly struck by the lushness of the Ohio landscape, and by autumn colors in the Cuyahoga Valley – something that doesn't exist in Ethiopia.

Tsegaye's eye was also caught by oddities such as the remnant of the historic dam at Franklin Mills Riveredge Park in Kent, where the city cut a channel to allow the river to flow through freely as a way to improve its health.

Eye level views

Along with the images on the floor, Tsegaye photographed wooded landscapes along the Cuyahoga from the ground. The resulting black-and-white images are suspended from the gallery ceiling, at eye level.

Together, the two groups of photographs document dramatically different aspects of Northeast Ohio's landscape, and ways of exhibiting landscape photographs in general.

The black-and-white photos show that when viewed up close, amid thick foliage along riverbanks, the scenery can be shadowy, lush and even claustrophobic.

When viewed from high up, the same landscapes appear in Tsegaye's photographs like a rich tapestry scarred with intrusive manmade structures that divert the river, alter its flow or blacken its banks. The two approaches together provide a beautiful overview of our most vital and historic waterway.

Making the familiar new again

Schwartz, for her part, bravely enters the industrial Flats, a familiar place documented by generations of artists and photographers before her.

She doesn't romanticize things. Her photographs are frank and blunt in their acceptance of chain link, barbed wire, mud and smothering mounds of knotweed. In her photographs, the Flats are carved into a series of no-man's lands edged by dunes of sand and gravel and massive bridge piers.

Amid these giant structures and inhospitable foregrounds, Schwartz celebrates a collection of ragtag users including a sweaty jogger, a parking lot attendant, skateboarders and tailgaters picnicking under a grimy bridge.

Her work updates the 18th-century landscapes of Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Hubert Robert, who portrayed fishmongers and peasants milling about amid the gargantuan ruined splendors of ancient Rome.

Schwartz's tough, unsentimental viewpoint is altogether fitting for a river whose banks remain contested ground lapped by waves of transformation that continue to change the view.

REVIEW

What's up: "Crooked River," photographs by Michael Tsegaye, and "Bridged," photographs by Sophie Schwartz

Venues: Tsegaye at Cleveland Print Room, Schwartz at Riverview Community Center

Where: Cleveland Print Room: 2550 Superior Ave., Cleveland; Riverview Community Center: 1701 West 25th St., Cleveland.

When: Tsegaye through Saturday, Aug. 3; Schwartz through July 20

Admission: Free. For information on both shows, call Cleveland Print Room at [216-802-9441](tel:216-802-9441) or go to info@clevelandprintroom.org