Door County, WI, (barn foundation), 1970

Door County, WI, (with line), 1971

Chambers Lake, CO, campground, 1975
Ginny in our Winter, WI house, 1981/82

Nedli on a Lake Superior Beach, 1981/82

Heidi on a Lake Superior Beach, 1981/82

Judy, Reservation River, MN, 1975/82

Left: Tim in our tent in Iceland, 1976/82
Beyond the Edges

Joseph Jachna, a South Side kid with a knack for electronics and photography, found Chicago’s ills and factory assembly lines a backdrop of the small, tidy houses with an inner mystery and magic of nature. Film, paper, and shadow, time and motion ushered us into a study in contrasts, their passion for photography became the reserved, soft-spoken Callahan and the witty Siskind. While their personalities posed coincided completely.

Photographer Minor White, the revered editor of Aperture, noted in his introduction that studying “camera practice of turning ‘professional’ at the first snapshot people in everyday scenes in Chicago and the subconscious edges beyond reality beckon from these images to places of utter beauty and eerie menace.

He began experimenting and exploring, and, in one playful series, photographed the entire Porcupine Mountains bordering Lake Superior from 1958 to 1963.

By the time Jachna started there, ID was part of the Illinois Institute of Technology and occupied the old State Armory. School of Design had already died by then and Jachna’s role models became the reserved, soft-spoken Callahan and the witty Siskind. While their personalities posed coincided completely.

Callahan used dramatic light and shadow to spotlight people in everyday scenes in Chicago, newing the city as a stage set for life. Siskind’s forays into close-ups of paint drips and splatters turned cultural decay into arresting water photographs he made ushered him into a life of photography. With every roll of film Jachna shot, he moved one step closer to capturing “the inner world of our minds encountering the outer world.” He found slackness and a new freedom in nature. Water became both a subject and a medium. At the urging of Jachna, his series of photographs he pursued from 1958 to 1963. But Siskind — Jachna’s graduate adviser — pulled up the tent, made the beds, clean the pots every day when you camp. But over the summer I got a lot of work done,” Jachna said.

His family also entered the picture as he started. “The students were all fired up and went to take photographs and, there I was, standing in the road, not knowing what I wanted to do,” he said. Luckily, he had brought a 17 mm Pentax film adapter with him and took it out. The ultra-wide-angle lens brought animals and mythological beasts suggested by water, wind and sand to life in the thousands of furlongs of the Upper Peninsula. Chicago and time and motion ushered into clipart entered the picture as he started. “The next summer, he introduced mirrors and lenses into the black and white images. The mirror-image of sky and clouds cuts an alternative road through a hauntingly isolated highway to nowhere. The mirror strips resurfaced in Iceland, where the snow line met the dirt, a grand synthesis of seeing — and living in wonder of a world seen for how it is.”

In 1969, Jachna’s life touched a turning point. “It was the most important gesture of my photographic career,” he noted later.

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Collages, cut-outs within prints, lightscapes of buildings as urban sculptures — Jachna took his images and his visual poetry from flocks to urban canyons to remote Wisconsin winters in the next few years. Even a simple snowdrift piled on a Wisconsin garage reveals the uncanny profile of a woman’s face and neck in a transient shadow, truly a breathtaking gift of chance.

He, Ginny and the children designed and built with their own hands a cabin in Winter, WI, working piecemeal across 1980 and 1981. Carpenters tackled the roof and the family moved into the finished home for a year so that Jachna could embed his photography in a place he had only visited, a retreat supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship. His work included dozens of Kodachrome slides of the ice and snow of Lake Winter as spring loosened winter’s hold. Color had given him a new way of seeing that he mastered in 1972 so that he could introduce a color photography class at UIC. He worked sporadically in color but carried a Canon or Rolleiflex loaded with black and white film even after he switched to a digital camera in 2002 and never looked back.

“IT’s harder to use color in a way,” Jachna said. “You want to get to the point and get poetic. Black and white gives you a leg up on that. Everyone sees everything in color all the time.”

His solutions once again offer viewers a fresh gaze, made possible by exploring the unconventional possibilities of materials and tools, such as attaching colored gels to his flash. The red gel torches foreground in a blaze of tools, such as attaching colored gels to his flash.

The red gel torches foreground in a blaze of tools, such as attaching colored gels to his flash. A bigail Foerstner

Abigail Foerstner teaches health, science and environmental journalism at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications. She’s written hundreds of articles on photography and the arts for the Chicago Tribune and other national publications covering science and the environment for suburban sections of the Tri. Her most recent work is an essay: The First Eight Billion Miles; Picturing Utopia: Bertha Shambaugh and the Amraa Photographers; and essays for Barbara Crane: Challenging Vision and Stephen Deutsch: Photographer From Paris to Chicago.

Red tree trunks or a dead bird on the sands of Lake Superior resonate that familiar duo of magic and menace, majesty and a Sci-Fi Channel quality of a monster stalking into the scene with a ray gun.

In an ongoing series, Jachna combines color and a fisheye lens to isolate brown and curling sycamore leaves that hover like bats or unleash a chorus of dancing spirits. Photoshop gives him inventive approaches for digital collaging with other work. Now he can “embrace” a pleasant-like pattern of weeds over a landscape or wrap a forest in vibrant jets and ribbons of light.

But the cosmos of images to be found is a short walk from a single place continues to inspire him. A trip to the Hudson Bay port of Churchill, Manitoba, Canada, in 1993 unveiled a frontier where Jachna will return for a fourth time in August 2012. Polar bears migrating by the hundreds to their winter hunting grounds attract most of the visitors to the town. Jachna, though, is on the trail of new images in a place where nature sculpts the bedrock and paints them in a spotted skin of orange, pale green and black (schem). With a 15mm Canon fisheye lens curving the horizon, some of the Churchill landscapes resemble satellite views of the earth transmitted from 400 miles above, but the rocks themselves unleash otherworldly creatures through the metamorphosis of eye and lens.

Images reveal a coccymora filled with a stone menagerie of dragons and dinosaurs, butterflies and fish — not to mention a fertility goddess or two. In these stage sets of seeing and being, Jachna takes rest — for a few shots. And then he walks on, ever fascinated by the “infinite ways” light and patterns take form in his work.