



Snag - Trans-Canada Highway, Redcliff, AB, Canada (2016)



Final Steps - Route 28A, Olive, NY, USA (2013)

WES BELL: PUTTING IT ALL 'ON THE LINE'

BY BETH E. WILSON

The ubiquitous, those common things we pass by without thinking as we move through our lives every day, are most invisible to us. Like the purloined letter in Edgar Allan Poe's story, the quotidian furniture of the world that we overlook on our habitual daily routes seems to fall beneath notice, disappearing beneath our very noses as we tend to take it all for granted.

What is striking about Wes Bell's art photography is the power with which he redeems the most humble objects – long-forgotten signage, disused steps, even plastic carrier bags – to see them anew, transformed by the action of light and chemistry on paper into formidable, substantial phenomena. They become allegories of suppressed feeling, released by the framing edge of his medium format Hasselblad camera to gain an unexpected gravitas, to become an experience of resonant beauty rendered through the gradations of black and white within the firm compositional boundaries of his resolute, square format compositions.

The fact that Bell is using the traditional analogue medium of photography on film, producing meticulously executed gelatin silver prints is significant. This mode of photography, which is dependent on the physical interactions of light and chemistry, renders presence and place in a way that is subtly different from digital photography – it provides an uncanny, direct record of both the light available when the image was made and the elusive, ephemeral link between the camera and its subject at the moment the shutter is released.

For most of these photographs, Bell identified the weathered sign, the steps, or other locations in advance, either while on a dedicated scouting trip or coincidentally, encountered while walking his dog, or driving somewhere on other business. He would make note of the location, and then waited until the conditions were perfect – most often on gray, overcast days when the light was flat and in a season when the trees had lost their leaves and the tonal range of the world had narrowed so that the backgrounds would not distract. (*Snag* was an exception, relying on the gusting prairie winds to make the twisted and torn remnants flutter in the strong contrast of bright, sunny days.) As a result, his working method combines

"The scenes I am often most attracted to are simple and ordinary. Based on isolating and elevating the unseen, the photographs

long periods of thought and planning, combined with relatively short bursts of actual shooting, leaving the developing and printing to the longer seasons of winter or summer that follow. Cautious but committed, the discipline involved in developing these series of works is profound, and the rigorous technical precision with which he undertakes all steps of the process is evident in the finished fibre-based prints.

Lost for Words was the earliest series, made when Bell lived in Ulster County, in the Hudson River Valley of New York. Walking along rural roads near his home, he first noticed the signage at the perimeter of nearly every property, staking the owner's rights to forbid trespassing or hunting. Most of these signs were put up and then neglected, each showing the ravages of time. One may be faded, on another the plastic has cracked and splintered, yet another has been infested with poison ivy; in all cases, the legal notice originally intended has been overcome, its language broken, worn away.

While he was working on the signage series, Bell began to notice another ubiquitous, but forgotten phenomenon of the Hudson Valley: *Final Steps* focusses on disused stairways leading down to the road, left behind when a

house was demolished or abandoned. These steps lead, quite literally, nowhere, but they carry memories of the home they once serviced, and with them, the allegorical weight of older cultural practices: in the 19th century (when many of these steps would have been built), it was common for families to lay out their deceased in the parlor for viewing, and thus the exit via the steps of the home were truly 'final' on the way to the grave. I had never noticed the existence of these abandoned steps, until I saw this series of images – and now I see them by the rural roadside, nearly everywhere I go in Ulster County.

The emotional allegory that began in *Final Steps* grew exponentially deeper with the next two series, *Rapt* and *Snag*. *Rapt* was initially an extension of the works in *Lost for Words*, many of which include signs that have been nailed or screwed to tree trunks. In this later series, Bell focusses on the relationship between nature and man's interventions, isolating places where a tree has grown into the constriction of a chain, was wrapped with barbed wire, or was otherwise impinged upon. Over time the trunk has strained against these manmade indignities, metal cutting into the flesh of the tree, or else it found a way to loop itself around the



Rapt – Martin Sweedish Road, New Paltz, NY, USA (2013)

obstruction; it is impossible to look at these images without feeling compassion for the pain they exude. They are at once exquisitely beautiful and anguished, presenting a complex structure of feeling and of being that one rarely encounters in contemporary art.

The intense emotional core of *Rapt* grows deeper, and more profoundly personal, in *Snag*. The idea for these images came when the photographer travelled back home to Alberta, to attend to his mother, who was battling the cancer that eventually took her life. He noticed that the long lines of barbed wire fence separating properties on the windblown prairie were punctuated here and there with escaped plastic carrier bags and tarps, which in the steady wind became pinned to the sharp barbs, left to flap and to shred themselves over time. Something in the painful purgatory of these otherwise forgettable plastic remnants captured Bell's attention, and felt eerily similar to the emotional trials he was experiencing as he tended to his dying mother. In his photographs, the pain of remaining tied to the earthly bonds of the intransigent barbed wire is countered by the strangely spiritual uplift of the shredded, ballooning forms of the plastic as it rises up in the incessant wind. Caught somewhere between

life and death, this emotional purgatory is at once unbearable and wondrous, as Bell brings us to the brink of a new level of spiritual consciousness – amazingly, by framing in his viewfinder what would otherwise be the most banal, utterly ubiquitous objects in the world.

The most recent photographs, *In Plain Site*, have been made since he relocated from New York back to his native Medicine Hat. A continuation of the initial ideas developed in *Lost For Words*, this new series picks up on the fortunes of posted property signs, as they appear on the plains of Alberta. Attentive viewers will notice not only a change in the topography; this change of place generates a subtle but powerful shift of energy and emotional response as well. Perhaps this is the ultimate lesson to be taken from all of Bell's photographs of what, on the face of it, are some of the most common, yet most invisible objects on the planet – when we truly invest ourselves, putting ourselves on the line through deep looking, attuning our perception with our emotions, we can find a miraculous and unexpected vital spark, a depth of experience, which is simply waiting to be found everywhere around us. ■



Snag - 11th Avenue N.E., Medicine Hat, AB, Canada (2015)

Wes Bell was born and raised in Medicine Hat, Alberta. From an early age he was fascinated by art, which led him to the studio-intensive program at the Alberta College of Art and Design, where he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography.

After school he pursued a career in fashion photography. Bell lived and worked in Milan and London, eventually relocating to New York, while travelling extensively on assignment to the far corners of the world. His acute sense of design, style and aesthetics are highly respected by fashion editors, leading to editorial spreads in publications such as *British GQ* and *Esquire*, *Conde Nast Traveler*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *People*. Celebrity portraits include Channing Tatum and Olivia Wilde, as well as fashion designer/film director Tom Ford.

After residing in New York for more than twenty years, Wes returned to live in Medicine Hat three years ago. Since departing the fast-paced world of freelance fashion photography, he has reignited a passion for fine art photography, and today he photographs in both the studio and on location, responding to the detail and natural beauty in the environments that surround him.

Bell's photographs have been exhibited internationally in numerous group and solo exhibitions. He is a recipient of the LensCulture Exposure Awards 2017 – Jurist Award as selected by MaryAnne Golon, Director of Photography at *The Washington Post*. More recently, he received the 2017 Bronze Award for the *Royal Photographic Society International Photography Exhibition 160* in the United Kingdom.

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In Plain Site – Black and White Trail, Cypress County, AB, Canada (2016)

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Final Steps – Water Street, New Paltz, NY, USA (2012)



Final Steps – Springtown Road, Tillson, NY, USA (2013)