

JERRY BURCHFIELD

Artist's Statement

“The image is formed by placing objects on the light-sensitive paper, exposing it to light for several hours, and then chemically halting or fixing the result.”

My work is about change and the relationship between humankind and nature. It is also about natural process. Exploitation has been the primary characteristic of the interaction between mankind and nature for centuries. Today, technology has made direct experience of nature inaccessible for many people. We experience nature more through photographs, electronic images, and simulations. Our firsthand interaction is often nothing more than using it for decorative purposes. Fortunately, the tide seems to be turning, and more people have begun to recognize the importance of “real” experiences with nature and natural processes. I hope that, in some small way, my work will contribute to this reawakening.

The **Understory** project has provided me with the opportunity to expand upon my work from the Amazon rain forest, the islands of Hawaii, and the coastal wilderness of Southern California. In each of these environments, I have focused on creating art that celebrates natural beauty and attempts to increase awareness of humanity's impact upon nature. I use cameraless photographic methods that go back to the origins of photography to make images directly from nature. I have been making cameraless images since the early 1970s, when I became disenchanted with the small-camera black-and-white work that I had been doing and began a series of color photograms. In the mid-1980s I began using unexposed black-and-white photographic paper in installations and performances. The addition of this kinetic characteristic brought to the work both physical and metaphorical change over time.

THE AMAZON - PRIMAL IMAGES. In 1998 I made my first trip to the Amazon rain forest of Brazil. I wanted to make pictures that celebrated the wonders of nature while drawing attention to the impact of deforestation. With that in mind, I decided to concentrate on the flora itself, since the Amazon is home to the most diverse plant population on our planet and the accelerating loss of it is a global concern. I also decided that cameraless images would retain the character of the plants while conveying a fossil-like feeling that alluded to the loss occurring in wilderness environments everywhere. Images like this would present the beauty of nature in a somewhat decorative manner—the role to which nature is so often relegated; while preserving the essential rawness that makes nature so compelling to me.

Using methods similar to that of photographic pioneers like Thomas Wedgwood, Anna Atkins, and William Henry Fox Talbot, who made cameraless images of botanical specimens in the early 1800s, I worked outdoors, not in a darkroom, using extended sunlight exposures to create color images of Amazon flora directly on gelatin silver photo paper. An image of this kind is formed by placing the object on the light-sensitive paper, exposing it to light for several hours, and then chemically halting or fixing the image. The resulting print radiates an array of colors that is surprising in its range. I call these one-of-a-kind photograms **lumen prints**, and I find that they capture the physical essence of the plant specimens and evoke a sense of beauty, loss, and memory.

THE FLORIDA UNDERSTORY PROJECT.

Florida, like the Amazon, has an amazing diversity of plant life, and I was excited at the prospect of working there. Initially, I planned to produce work that covered the whole state from the Everglades in the south to the hardwood forests in the north. However, after a tour of wilderness environments surrounding Daytona Beach and a canoe trip with my good friend George Blakely, I realized that the area's **pine flatwoods** and surrounding niche environments were representative of much of the state.

Working in the Amazon, I spent nearly every day exploring the rain forest by canoa (similar to a skinny rowboat) or on foot, collecting specimens and bringing them back to the boat that served as our home base. I used the deck on the bow of the boat as my outdoor studio to expose the prints and my tiny cabin to dry exposed prints that were wet from the frequent rainstorms. My work space was very limited, and this, along with the problems of storing and shipping large print paper under those conditions, severely limited the scale and scope of the work I was able to produce. In contrast, in Florida I was able to use the Bicentennial Youth Park, near Deland in Volusia County, as a base of operations. Don Spence, a Central Florida botanist and native-plant expert worked with me in identifying the plant specimens—an issue that had posed a major problem when I worked in the Amazon.

Part of the thrill of this type of image making is working with nature rather than against it. I establish certain limits and then let nature take its course. If it works, great; if not, then perhaps it was not meant to work. There is always another day. Making one-of-a-kind images also provides a certain freedom. Rather than relying on tedious postproduction processes to refine my work and make it possible to produce multiple copies, I like working with what I call “orchestrated chance.” It is the process of doing that really excites me, and the results are merely the evidence of the effort.

ABOUT JERRY BURCHFIELD.

Jerry Burchfield is an artist, curator, writer, and educator. From 1973 to 1987 he was the co-owner with Mark Chamberlain of BC Space Gallery, a pioneering alternative gallery space dedicated to showing nonconformist contemporary photography. Since 1987 he has been a professor of photography and director of the Photography Gallery at Cypress College, Cypress, California. The author of several books and catalogues on photography, Burchfield co-founded Laguna Wilderness Press in 2002.

Known as an environmentally conscious artist-activist, he has received numerous awards, including an NEA Fellowship, and has exhibited his work throughout the United States, Europe, and Japan. He was the featured artist for Arts Orange County's (CA) Annual Arts Awards ceremony in 2004 and has twice received their Outstanding Individual Artist Award. Burchfield is a founding member of The Legacy Project, a long-term project documenting the transformation of Southern California's Marine Corps Air Station, *El Toro*, into one of the nation's largest metropolitan parks, the *Orange County Great Park*. In 2006 he and his Legacy Project colleagues turned an airplane hangar at the former air station into the world's largest pinhole camera and used the building to produce *The Great Picture*, the world's largest photograph. A book about that project will be released in 2009. Other recent books by Burchfield include Habitat, published by the Laguna Art Museum; In Transition—El Toro: A Photographic Essay from Past to Present, published by the Great Park Conservancy; The Edge of Air: The Final Days of MCAS El Toro, published by Laguna Wilderness Press; and Primal Images: 100 Lumen Prints of Amazonia Flora, published by Laguna Wilderness Press and the Center for American Places.

