CARRY THAT WEIGHT

By James Izzo

I left long Island three years ago. I'd grown up there the majority of my life and even though my feelings toward it now are complex, I've always enjoyed the food, the beaches, and more than anything else, the quiet, close-by outdoors that was always just a short drive or walk away. As I got older, I developed a deeper appreciation for it, and when my hometown friends all left for school and I stayed for community college, a walk through the woods became a daily occurrence for me.

This was right about the time I really connected with photography. I'd already been looking through a camera for years – I spent a long time making short films, as I'd wanted to be a cinematographer – but the camera seemed to complement my isolated situation better than anything else could at the time. I was lonely, but the camera provided a rationale – *I'm not a lonely boy wandering quiet towns and nature preserves, I'm practicing my composition.* I fell in love with the medium and I exclusively used film. Along with the ritual of manually loading rolls into my camera, the satisfying clicks of the advance lever, the *whoosh* of cloth responding to the release mechanism – there was something in the equation of having no more than 36 frames to work with and not being able to immediately see the shot, and the practice became an exercise in mindfulness and meditation.

For a few years, that's how it went: wandering Long Island and making photos. I wanted to both describe the beauty of the environment but also, somehow, describe the emotional headspace I was in when making those pictures. I was far more interested in vague, interpretive descriptions of landscape and feelings than I was crystal-clear and upfront renderings.

Being alone and spending so much time in nature gave me a chance to both respect and

become intimately familiar with it. I began to see large changes I wasn't previously attuned to. First it was a small pond you had to spend five minutes walking through a beat-up trail to get to – I came by one day to see it had been drained in preparation to alter the land. I discovered that the horse farm at the end of my neighborhood had been put up for sale and now, years later, has in fact been sold. It made me sad; it felt like this vague thing keeping me anchored and company was being transformed into something I would no longer recognize.

Of course, the land, much like those open and wild spaces that once defined the majority of the world, had already undergone disfigurement. But I left Long Island to attend SUNY Purchase and attain a degree in photography, and I stopped thinking about the trails and beaches I'd left behind. I never lost my love for exploration, however, and my camera always joined me. I spent a long time figuring out this work, its motivation and what it meant to me.

As a baseline, I was inspired by the work of early photographers that set out to document the landscape and America – artists like Carleton Watkins, photographers of the Farm Security Administration from the 1930's, and the hazy, emotional images made by the Pictorialists of the 1800's. Eventually, I came to understand the feelings I was putting into my photos, and what was represented in that content.

Carry That Weight is about the changes we're making to the Earth in pursuit of wealth, our complicity in its continuous destruction, and the burden on us as a society to not only reverse the changes that are not yet irreversible, but demand and nurture a greater respect and understanding for our world and our place within it. It deals with the idea of a perverted idyllic landscape, the industrial whirring of metropolis, and the lightly touched nature between – areas that were it not for a lone tree marker, scattered litter, or a drainage pipe, would appear

untouched.

I went back to Long Island to photograph areas and landscapes I'd known and walked many times before. I shot with black and white film, as I felt the subjects I was photographing represented a once longed for time that had passed, or simply not come at all. I found several photos in my collection taken years earlier that I remember thinking important when I had made them, but not understanding why until now.

An image of a deer and its child mid-run, headed into a forest away from concrete, development, and people. It seemed to be a clear depiction of man encroaching on nature and strangely, for some reason, it felt like my fault. I knew it belonged in my sequence, and it made the work's narrative become clearer to me.

Although I used to wander most at night, and therefore take most of my photographs at that time, there are only two nighttime photos in my project. It felt important to me that the ideas I wanted to communicate be revealed by the light of day, but certain emotions in this work feel better placed in darkness. It's the understanding that the way ahead isn't clear, in fact- it's quite bleak. Our prognosis, put simply, isn't good as far as the Earth's climate and inhabitants, and socially, we appear to be more divided now than at any point in my lifetime. I wanted to communicate these grim realities I've been considering – and share this growing fear and desperate sense of feeling lost against an insurmountable force.

The first night picture is of a cat, far away from its colony on a beach. It was just a silhouette and felt like an outcast, and though I knew I didn't have nearly enough light to properly describe the animal, I thought a low shutter speed, slight blur and underexposure would amplify the notion of this poor cat, alone with nowhere to be.

The second is another photo taken years ago. A rolling hill with power lines in the background, faintly visible stars traveling on their trajectory, and a hazy figure just barely illuminated at the bottom, lost in a sea of darkness. It's foreboding, speaking of the unrelenting march of loss and hinting at the vague, barely audible echo of earth's past wildness.

Although this content deals with uncomfortable truths, I strongly believe that progress prevails, and while it might take more time than is ideal, social progress, and by extension environmental justice, will come to pass. This is represented through the sequencing of my images, beginning with black and white photos of “classic America.” A lone, multi-story, copy-paste house, jutting out in the middle of an otherwise empty field; rolling hills, and farms. These are followed by images of industry, swirling and hazy landscapes, symbolizing what our desire for excess has wrought. In order to fuel our ideal living environments, suburbs, houses -- things must be sacrificed, and harmful things created. I wanted to bring them out of shadow.

Putting the work together, I found an interesting link between the image above and an image of a farm at the beginning of my sequence. One sign in each photo: “No trespassing” and “keep

out.” It struck me that two polar opposite locations could bear the same sentiment, and that perhaps it’s this feeling of ownership and exclusion that so motivates our claim to nature, and the divide in our society today.

The last group of images are all in color, lush, and depict scenes of nature and uneasy calm. We are being removed from a psychological, eco-hellscape, and toward a brighter future. These scenes are empty, free of people and animals, but somehow, still have a lingering footprint of

humanity in them. They are not a direct condemnation – but instead, an example of how we can work in tandem with our surroundings.

For example, when I first took this image, my immediate thought was to see unnatural construction being made to the land. After seeing and considering this image more critically, I understand that this particular alteration is not inherently negative – in fact, construction such as pipes and dams frequently benefit the environment, and speak to the possibility of a

symbiotic relationship between man and nature. This is an example of nature's simple beauty, and while our thumbprint is clearly visible, this bit of land does not suffer for it.

The final image in this work is one of the most important to me.

Colorful and lit, depicting a beach and a clearly visible person, this photo is unlike the rest of the images in my work. It was placed further away than any of the image groupings were in my exhibition space. It represents what I believe to be one of the purest, most distilled examples of man co-existing with nature: human and canine, living together to their mutual benefit. There's a great distance between them, as though they're longing to make that connection, but still must labor to attain it.

The figures exist within uncertain optimism. Standing on a beach, surrounded by the

most basic elements, water and minerals, and away from the deafening pandemonium of cities, commerce, and ego. When we are gone, if society were to collapse, this is much of what would remain: sand, shadows, and traces of the past. The sooner we can return to this level of symbiotic simplicity, the better. Our existence depends on it.