

When the Sun Burns a Hole in Your Photo

BY BECKY HARLAN | JUNE 18, 2015



Eclipses and equinoxes, solstices and midnight suns—these are the celestial subjects of photographer Chris McCaw. But his photos reveal more than just beautiful representations of what any knowledgeable sky-watcher could see.

The photographs McCaw makes bear the actual burn marks of the sun as it passes through the sky.

How does he do it? “The principal is the same as using a magnifying glass to burn a hole in a leaf,” he says. “Only I use a really big lens and the focused light from the sun to burn its path into old gelatin silver black-and-white photo paper where traditional film would go.”

Since the image is being burned into the actual paper as the sun moves, the exposure lasts as long as whatever event McCaw is capturing. His longest exposure to date? “About 32 hours in the Arctic Circle? Maybe 33!”

Paying such close attention to the sky, he says, “gives you an incredible perspective in the natural rhythms that work in the background of our lives every day. I think nothing now of spending a day, even a week, in the same place, just watching shadows move, watching how the land is experienced.”

He’s come a long way since he accidentally discovered this technique by sleeping through his alarm and overexposing an overnight exposure, burning a hole in the film. A monograph of his work, *Sunburn*, was published in 2012, but McCaw is nowhere near through experimenting. “It’s an exciting place to be, on the outer boundaries of what light-sensitive photographic materials can do. This project has opened the floodgates of what and how something can be photographed.”

I talked with McCaw just as he was headed back to the Arctic (his fourth trip) for several weeks to capture more of the midnight sun, a journey that involves a five-day boat trip from Washington State and being pretty much offline upon arrival. “Flashlights are about the only thing I don’t need to pack. I have a small Sprinter van that holds all my gear and camping supplies. It also doubles as a mobile darkroom that I can make light-tight to change paper, since it never gets dark outside. It can be cold, even in summer,” he says. He’s developed a coping mechanism: “I drink lots of tea.”

The 24-hour light of the Arctic summer attracts McCaw like a moth to a flame. “In the summer the sun never sets. It allowed me to make pieces showing the rise and fall and rise of the sun in a way you don’t see anywhere else,” he says. “Currently I’m working to describe this natural rhythm of the relationship of day to night in multiple days-long exposures, weather permitting.”

This kind of analogue, experimental photography leaves a lot of room for trial and error. “If it was all figured out, it wouldn’t be as interesting to me,” says McCaw. “There are still many times when I’m pleasantly surprised and equally times where I am staring into a developer tray full of failure, and I just have to remember how nice it was to sit outside and enjoy the day.”