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INTERVIEW

WORKING TO SCALE

"I am fascinated, maybe even a little obsessed, with the idea of apocalypse," admits Lori Nix, whose photographs feature scenes of destruction and abandonment. She tells Eliza Williams why, despite taking up to seven months to painstakingly build them, she abandons the models she creates once she's photographed them

Lori Nix's photographs depict scenes of devastation. Empty of people, they reveal a world post-man, where nature has taken over, reclaiming the places where once we dwelt. A tree grows wildly within the double-height space of a library, while a once-great hall has only pillars and a crumbling staircase remaining. Elsewhere, an art gallery, launderette, pool hall and subway car are all left, Mary Celeste-style, to slowly rot and decay.

These images form part of Nix's series, *The City*, on which she began working in 2005, and which is about to be published by Decode Books. Writing about the series, Nix says, "I have imagined a city of our future, where something either natural, or as a result of mankind, has emptied the city of its human inhabitants. Art museums, Broadway theatres, laundromats and bars no longer function. The walls are deteriorating, the ceilings are falling in, the structures barely stand, yet Mother Nature is taking them over slowly. These spaces are filled with flora, fauna and insects, reclaiming what was theirs before man's encroachment."

Nix's images are highly detailed, yet contain a certain sense of unreality – a result perhaps of the complex way they are created. Instead of photographing real buildings, or working with Photoshop, Nix creates intricate models of the scenes she wishes to portray, before carefully lighting them and then photographing the results using an 8x10 large format camera and film. Nix began this way of working while at college. "In college I studied ceramics and photography," she says. "With ceramics, you're always building the object from scratch. This translated well in my photo studies, where my desire was to construct the image rather than find an existing one. Since my earliest days, I have always worked with fabrication, either through darkroom manipulations or even room-sized installations. My strength lies in my ability to build and construct my own world rather than seek out an existing one."

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While Nix speaks of the influence that landscape painting, in particular Romanticism, has had on her work, she traces her attraction to disaster scenes back to her upbringing in a small town in Kansas. "My childhood was spent in a rural part of the United States that is known more for its natural disasters than anything else," she says. "I was born in a small town in western Kansas, and each passing season brought its own drama – from winter snowstorms, spring floods and tornadoes, to summer insect infestations and drought. Whereas most adults viewed these seasonal disruptions with angst, for a child it was nearly euphoric. Downed trees, mud, even grass fires brought excitement to a mundane life."

These personal experiences were then enhanced by the scenes Nix saw depicted in blockbuster movies. "I am fascinated, maybe even a little obsessed, with the idea of apocalypse," she continues. "In addition to my childhood experiences with natural disasters, I grew up watching 1970s films known as 'disaster flicks'. I remember watching *The Towering Inferno*, *Earthquake*, *Planet of the Apes*, and sitting in awe in the dark. Here were the same types of danger I had experienced day to day being magnified and played out on the big screen in a typical Hollywood way."

Nix first brought this imagery into her work in the series *Accidentally Kansas*, begun in the late 1990s. These photographs depict snowstorms and lightning strikes, tornadoes and insect infestations. Again, the scenes are all absent of people, though their influence on the land is everywhere, found in the abandoned cars and trucks or the broken-down homes. This impact of humanity on nature is important to the photographer and adds a serious strand of thinking to her work, alongside the dramatics of the disaster movies.

"I'm very interested in climate change," she explains. "I believe we are at the forefront of this change, and we're nearing the point where, if we do not act, we can never reverse course. I'm baffled by people who still deny climate change is occurring, even after consecutive news reports about extreme weather patterns, droughts, our oceans rising in temperature, the melting polar ice caps. I'm not sure these people live in the same universe I live in."

Accidentally Kansas is an obvious precursor for Nix's later series, *The City*, though in the latter images the scenes she creates are far more elaborate and realistic. While mostly imagined, they are inspired by real places she has visited in New York, where she now lives. "I'm always conducting research for the environments I depict in these photographs," she says. "I try to visit similar places and take in the physical space, lighting and colour palette. For example, take *Aquarium* [6]. I visited the aquarium





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- 1 *Anatomy Classroom*, 2012
All images © Lori Nix
- 2 *Library*, 2007
- 3 *Laundromat at Night*, 2008
- 4 *Mall*, 2010
- 5 *Space Center*, 2010
- 6 *Aquarium*, 2007
- 7 *Subway*, 2012



at Coney Island, as well as Shedd Aquarium in Chicago. I'll take a small point-and-shoot camera and document what I see, but when I get back to the studio I usually forget to consult what I have shot and just build the scene from memory. The image of *Subway* [7] is different in that I take this subway line to and from work daily, plus it terminates not too far from where I live. My assistant Kathleen and I rode it late one night to the end of the line, waited for everyone to exit, pulled out tape measures and made very careful notes. I also photographed Kathleen in relation to the car to get a good reference of body to space. Since the subway is so ubiquitous to New York City, I knew I had to get everything as close to perfect as possible; otherwise, I would get called out for being out of scale."

Despite such attention to detail and care in building the models – which are built mostly by hand and take an average of seven months to complete – for Nix it is the end photographs that are the work, not the models themselves, which are usually scrapped once the final image is captured. "After I have finished photographing the scenes, I dismantle them, recycle some of the materials, such as the floors and walls, into new scenes, keep some of the elements for posterity and discard the rest," she says. "I get a lot of flack for throwing out the dioramas, but anyone who has to live in a New York City apartment should understand that space is a premium. I just don't have the space to store them. And, honestly, I build these to be photographed; the photograph is the final product for me, not the diorama."

"That being said, there have been rare occasions where I have displayed the model with the photograph," she continues. "But it was only in a museum setting, when the show was specifically about dioramas. Without the benefit of special lighting and the added dimension the photographic process brings, there really is no comparison."

To coincide with the publication of *The City* in book form, Nix will be holding several exhibitions of works from the series, beginning with a show at G Gibson Gallery in Seattle. There will also be an exhibition at Clamp Art in New York in November and, after that, Nix intends to call a halt to the eight-year project and "retire the ideas for a while". She doesn't divulge what she plans to work on next, though one wonders if the enduring influence of her early years may play a part, with Nix admitting that, despite being very much a city dweller these days, Kansas remains strongly part of her character. "I don't go back to Kansas very much, mostly because my family has spread to other parts of the Midwest," she says. "I still visit the region twice a year, but not specifically Kansas. I feel very much a part of city life now, but rural life is in my blood. I like to eat an early dinner, go to bed at a reasonable hour, and I try to live by a pragmatic personal code." BJP

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