Lucas Foglia

FRONTCOUNTRY

Foglia opens up about his series that pictures the unwild west.

TEXT KERRY MANDERS

"'Frontcountry' is an uncommon word. I got it from a friend, a guide in Wyoming, who takes people into the backcountry to find mountain lions to photograph. When I went with him to visit some of the areas he loves, he talked about the boundary between the wild land and developed land as being the frontcountry.

Frontcountry is the boundary between two different types of landscapes. That's at the core of my book.

ON ORIGINS

For my previous book, *A Natural Order*, I photographed people who were leaving the cities and suburbs in response to world events—moving off the grid to try to live self-sufficiently. I had photographed a small town that had formerly been a cotton town: Nolan, Texas. Its water had been drained, the rain had become unpredictable, and the price of cotton hadn't held up. So, cotton farms were replaced by massive wind farms. I photographed an abandoned farm house with wind turbines behind it.

I also went up into New Mexico and photographed an earthship village—with houses made from used car tires and beer bottles. There I met a priest who was selling a wedding service in a hot air balloon, and I photographed that. I kept those two images on my studio wall. I knew I wanted to go back to that at some point.

In 2009, when I was almost finished with *A Natural Order*, I wanted to start a new project, something that would open up a new way of thinking about or photographing my current project. One of my best friends had moved to Wyoming and I decided to go visit. I expected to find a wild, open landscape—ghost towns, wilderness, rural communities. What I encountered was a vastly developing series of towns on the edge of wild land, devoted to pulling oil and natural gas from that land. The towns were also populated by ranching families.

I thought: here are two industries in a landscape famous for being wild that use the landscape in really different ways. And then I thought back to what I had seen in Nolan, Texas: the overlapping of industries that change a place, both in terms of the culture of the people who live there and the land that they transform."

ON LAND USE

"I met ranchers at The Big Springs Ranch, one of the few naturally green valleys in Nevada. I photographed **Tommy** standing on top of a pole at the moment before he fell, holding a loaded gun. He had climbed up the pole to show me how he could shoot coyotes from up there. In the background of that photograph is the Big Springs Ranch, now renamed Long Canyon Mine: one of the biggest gold deposits in the last decade was discovered there.

The well is being re-directed now because they're going to dig below the water table, and the town that it formerly supplied has had to dig new wells to find new water. There was animosity, direct conflict. The ranchers lost their leases on the land, and a town lost its water for the sake of a gold mine worth more money than the ranchers would ever see.

At the same time, there are no industries in the west profitable enough to support good schools, new roads and local infrastructure except for mining. There could be though. There *could* be new developments with renewable energy. But at the time I was photographing, mining provided the predominant tax revenue that paid for towns' services and infrastructure.

So there are questions. Do ranchers want to keep their way of life? I'd say, mostly *yes*. Do ranchers want to send their kids to good schools? *Yes*. Are those schools paid for by ranching? More by the mines. So it's mixed.

I chose to shoot in Wyoming, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Idaho and Montana because they were areas famous for being wild. I went to the 'wild west' to show how the 'wild' was being transformed—tamed—by mining."

ON GENDER, RACE AND CONCEPTS

"I saw women ranchers. I also saw a lot of guest workers on H2A visas [for temporary

agricultural workers] working cowboy jobs.

If you look at the representation of cowboys in the media, they are pretty white. But there were a lot of Hispanic cowboys running American ranches. And of the maybe half-dozen ranchers I photographed for the book, there was one woman who was actively ranching. I have a photograph of her that I *almost* put in the book, but, as a picture, it wasn't quite good enough. As a result of what I thought of as a good photograph, there is no female cowboy in the book.

I want my work to have concept: to be conceptual does not make it non-documentary. I want it to have a craft. I want the photographs themselves to be compelling enough that someone can look at them for a long time and not have them completely figured out.

I don't have rules, the way many journalists do. If I'm sitting with a rancher in his house and there's a spot of light coming from his window three feet away, I'll ask him to move. I'm not a fly on the wall. I'm working *with* people and visiting and I'm an active part of the scene. The photographs I make are a result of that time we spent together, the relationship we have."

ON THE VISUAL HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN WEST

" I want to tell a visual story, but I want the *way* that I'm photographing not to be taken for granted. I want to be conscious—almost self-conscious—about the structure of the photographs and the way they create story and narrative, while also allowing for intuition in the moments I choose to photograph and the things I observe.

I want *Frontcountry* to be a story of life in the modern American West. I want it also to be a project about the stories of the American West. The photographs play with the expected imagery. An image of a man on a horse rearing appears in every book about the American West. In my project there is a man on a horse rearing but the man is almost falling off the horse and the horse is tied to rope that is tied to another horse that is pulling it back down and there's a dog in the foreground just trying to get the fuck away.

I'm poking at the convention. Not making fun of it but making light of it."

ON EDITING, PERCEPTION AND RECEPTION

"In terms of the sequence, I edited the book so that it arcs between the opening photographs of cowboys and the later images of mining, and it shows scenes of everyday life in between. The book is the closest I could come to a complete idea. But it was also in dialogue with **Chris Pichler** from Nazraeli Press. We went through the edit together. He's done many more books than I and I trust his opinion. It's always in dialogue, and I appreciate and learn from those dialogues.

I took a photograph of the gold mine to an officer of that gold mine's communications department because he had given me access. It was a picture of a large open pit mine.
'I love this photograph,' he said. 'We could put it up in our office to advertise what we do.'

I showed that same photograph to an activist organization that's fighting the negative effects of mining on the landscape and trying to get the Environmental Protection Agency to enforce more of the regulations on ground water contamination.

'That's awful. We'd love to use this to show how damaging the mines are,' they said.

The same picture elicits two very different responses: one of pride and one of protest. A photograph can be—and mean—a lot of different things."

ON THE FUTURE OF THE AMERICAN WEST

"At the core of the project was a question of how people can live in the modern American West: what jobs can allow them to stay there? That was the question that drew me to photograph in these areas—I'm talking about the rural American West. In the end, I didn't find an answer to that. Mining is by definition unsustainable. And ranching as an industry is changing—it *needs* to change. Right now, there are no other industries that can allow people to live sustainably. I've seen small examples: the development of renewable energy plants and more sustainable agricultural practices, eco-tourism, parks and recreation. But what will support a town to have good roads and schools, surrounded by the wild land? That's a question that I still have after all these years."

"At the core of the project was a question of how people can live in the modern American West: what jobs can allow them to stay there? That was the question that drew me to photograph in these areas."