



**This page: Buckmaster,
Rawlins, Wyoming (2011);
Opposite: Gold Mine, Lead,
South Dakota (2011); both
by Bryan Schumaat.**

Full Immersion

When a photographer plunges deep into a subject, the result can be a stunning, career-making body of work. We found three such projects by people whose names we think will soon become familiar. These documentary shooters go above and beyond to show us worlds that, without these pictures, we would never have otherwise known.

BY LORI FREDRICKSON





Bryan Schumaat

During a year in Bozeman, Montana, Bryan Schumaat, now based in Brooklyn, became fascinated by the nearby mining town of Butte; he has documented the area on and off throughout the six years since. His *Grays the Mountain Sends*, begun in late 2010, was influenced by literature set in the region by Richard Ford, William Kittredge, Raymond Carver, and especially poet Richard Hugo. “His poems were often inspired by real-life towns he called ‘triggering towns,’ and so I began visiting them, searching for material just as he did,” Schumaat says. Like the poet, he would look for images based on what Hugo termed the “truth of his feelings”—a sense that continued as he expanded went farther north and south of Hugo’s known territory.

Schumaat searched for places with an industrial history, loosely planning routes from one mining town to the next. But most of the time he just set off on the road, stopping at sites that spoke to him. “I wandered in and out of these towns in a constant state of observation,” he says. He also stopped

in countless bars and diners, and his conversations with strangers increasingly led him to make portraits, both on the spot and in miners’ homes.

His most memorable visit was with a former miner named Chuck. He says, “We ended up sharing a bottle of whiskey as he told me about his years mining and driving a bulldozer in Butte, about drinking and getting into trouble,” as well as of the loss of Chuck’s son, killed in a construction accident. It reminded Schumaat of a loss of his own: “During the whole time I was shooting the project I found myself thinking of my father, and his dreams, and the way he would have gotten along with so many of the guys I was meeting.”

While he remains in touch with a few of his subjects, including Chuck, most were brief moments in a journey covering thousands of miles and spanning more than 50 towns and as many wilderness areas. His photos will be on view at the Catherine Edelman gallery in Chicago this fall and the Newspace Center for Photography in Portland, Oregon, in the spring of 2014. However far his work ranges, Schumaat is still inspired by his initial hero. “Richard Hugo was, in a sense, my copilot,” he says.





Clockwise from top left: Abandoned House, Philipsburg, Montana (2010); Ping Pong Table, Anaconda, Montana (2010); Ralph, Moorcroft, Wyoming (2011); Alpine Lake, Gallatin National Forest, Montana (2011)



This spread and previous: Bryan Schumaat (6)





Brandon Thibodeaux

Brandon Thibodeaux had a more than glancing understanding of the Mississippi Delta's conflicted racial history. He grew up in a nearby part of Texas, and as a journalism student at the University of North Texas he focused on agricultural economies. But he didn't travel there until 2009. And, though by then he was a freelance photographer, he'd come simply to escape Dallas for a while. "In one way I was looking to apply my knowledge from school," he says. "But that aside, the Delta was the quietest

place I could think of to ride my bike, meet people, and do what I did on a daily basis back home."

Then a new acquaintance invited him to Sunday lunch at the home of the Coffey family in the town of Duncan. This became the crux of a four-year photography project and sparked what Thibodeaux now considers some of his most important relationships. The Coffeys, though poor, are well known throughout the neighboring towns, and Thibodeaux found them incredibly warm and welcoming in a

Above: A flock of black birds swarms over a harvested field near Mound Bayou, Mississippi (2010).



way that he hadn't yet experienced much in Dallas. "Their candidness, and their openness for me to be there, like I was part of the family, was almost astonishingly immediate," he says. "At that particular time, it was incredibly meaningful to me."

Over that lunch and the ones that followed, the photographer opened up in conversations about music, religion, and relationships. As he became a fixture in the family's home, he also became a sort of confidant even as he remained an outsider to the community. He photographed the family the day they met, and his camera has since come along on many Sunday lunches, during which the Coffeys

have introduced him to friends. As he turned this growing portfolio into a longer documentary project, mentioning the Coffey name helped him gain entry in other towns such as Alligator and Bo Bo.

The resulting series, *When the Morning Comes*, took root over the next four years; he is now developing it into a book. He hopes that by introducing the faces and names of those who live in the Delta's agricultural towns—human lives, rather than mere demographics—he might highlight their economic ordeals. Most of all, his work is a tribute to the years Thibodeaux has spent talking with strangers who, when he needed it, welcomed him in.

Clockwise from top left: Alex beside his new car (2010); grain silos beneath the night sky in Duncan (2011); a church is illuminated at night outside of Bo Bo (2011); a young girl dressed as an angel following the First Baptist Church of Mound Bayou's Christmas Eve celebration (2010).



Above: Tiffany in the living room of her home in Duncan, Mississippi, on Friday, September 13, 2009.



Erika Larsen

“My original plan was to photograph nomadic communities in South America,” Larsen says. Having had an interest in human migration throughout her 14-year photography career, she decided nine years ago to commit herself long-term to a project that would allow her to experience how these cultures really live.

But Larsen’s early ventures into the Southern Hemisphere weren’t the right fit, in part due to language barriers and the need for guides. Then,

while researching nomadic groups elsewhere, she discovered the Sami people of the arctic region from northern Scandinavia to northern Russia. While historically known for herding reindeer, in the past few decades the group has largely been urbanized into Scandinavian culture. About 10 percent still live within Saamis (villages where herders live in season), bringing caribou back and forth between winter and summer pastures each year.

Larsen’s introduction came via a family from Saltoluokta, Sweden in 2007. Over a few weeks’ stay with that family, she realized this was a subject she wanted to explore more deeply. And having

Above: Two young girls from Kautokeino, Norway dressed for confirmation party (2009).

Immersion

always been a believer in complete immersion, she moved to Kautokeino, Norway, where she lived as a family's housekeeper for more than two years.

She looks back on her earlier images, many of which are collected in her book *Sami: Walking With Reindeer* (published in partnership with *Emphas.is*), as some of the most valuable for their detached view as a spectator. "Everything, at the beginning, was fresh and unfamiliar," she says.

Larsen was in Kautokeino for nearly a year before she had earned enough money to sustain a longer visit by selling photos to various publications in the U.S. At the end of the first year, she received Fulbright fellowship to study the Northern Sami language at a local university.

Learning the language gave her access to older, non-English speaking Sami. And it allowed her to understand conversations when she took part in the reindeer migration herding, which takes up to six weeks at a time in the fall and spring. These journeys gave her some of her most important lessons in how and why to capture certain documentary images. "I would photograph reindeer in close-up, but I began to notice that Sami herders were interested in studying them from far off, to anticipate their migration," Larsen says. Her observations began to shape how she photographed.

Larsen concluded her photographic work on the series in 2011. But she says her relationships with the people she photographed have grown rather than faded over time. Discussing her experiences, Larsen easily falls into the description of customs and traditions in Sami terms. "I don't think I'll ever get the Sami out of me," she jokes. "It's part of my life now." **AP**



Clockwise from above: Snow shoes made of reindeer skin (2009); the Gaup family from Kautokeino, Norway (2010); Elle Marja Gaup (2011); Lena Susanne Gaup with her horse Tarzan (2011); Nils Peder Gaup (2010).

