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# The Big Picture

*The transcendental work of New Hampshire fine art photographer Carl Austin Hyatt*



As a boy, Carl Austin Hyatt was certain that nature had a consciousness, that even rocks had a soul. "Nature is conscious and alive; it'll interact with you," says Hyatt. "It's not just the background of our lives. All children know this."

WRITTEN BY ALLISON PAIGE  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY CARL AUSTIN HYATT



While the fine art photographer's childhood may be far behind him, he has managed to preserve this sense of wonder and connection. It is evident in the sentience of his landscapes and the sensitivity of his portraits.

Raised on Long Island, Hyatt was in his thirties when he was drawn to New Hampshire. His studio, in Portsmouth's Button Factory, is just a short walk from the craggy coastline he calls an infinite source of inspiration. "I was astounded to see the coast of New Hampshire," says Hyatt. "You can just pull off the side of the road, park your car, take your camera out, and have the whole rocky world to yourself."

A large-format photographer, Hyatt shoots exclusively in black and white. If his 4-by-5-, 8-by-10-, and 11-by-14-inch cameras look old-fashioned, the images he produces appear out of time, eternal. The sheer size of the platinum prints makes them feel like liminal spaces to inhabit, not as observer but as participant.

Through Hyatt's lens, the alpine piles of road salt that loom along Portsmouth's waterfront are transmogrified, from humble to august, monumental to mythic, like magic mountains and pyramids. Taken over a period of 30 years, the images are as stirring and majestic as those taken in the Peruvian Andes, another location that has beguiled Hyatt and a place he returns to again and again.

An interest in shamanism first attracted him to Cusco, Peru, on what he assumed would be a one-off trip. That was 22 years and 35 trips ago. "My overall interest was particularly for the elders, the ones who had come of age before any significant interaction with Western culture," says Hyatt. "How do they see the world? How do they thoroughly indigenous people explain the world to themselves without the cinder blocks of Western culture?"

Two recent solo exhibitions—*Salt/Sea/Stone* at the Ogunquit Museum of American Art in 2017 and *From Portsmouth to Peru: In Search of Animus Mundi* at the

New Hampshire Historical Society in 2019—explored what Hyatt calls "the intersection of the human and natural worlds." *Animus Mundi*, Latin for "world soul," evinces the notion of both an artistic and spiritual quest, says the artist.

Hyatt is a seeker, and this touch of the mystic is particularly imprinted on his portraits of Peruvian healers, which have a burnished, reverent simplicity. If Hyatt is able to recognize the soul of a stone, so too can he see landscapes in the faces he captures. At close range, the weathered visage of a shaman is riven like an arid terrain, a very topography of human existence.

"The work that I am most drawn to has a certain numinous quality," says Hyatt. "I think the most powerful art transmits. The shamans in Peru would say nature doesn't teach; nature transmits. The ocean is not explaining itself to you, but it's sharing its energy with you. Once you start having an actual relationship with the planet instead of just using it as your hardware store, everything changes. You start seeing things that you didn't see before."

It is no doubt his well-attuned eye that permits Hyatt to see a familiar vista as mutable and alive, as demonstrated by his fealty for and fascination with the New Hampshire coast. In addition to the sense of wonder Hyatt retains, there is an abiding curiosity and deep joy in the process.

"In the early years when I was photographing the coast," says Hyatt, "I had this wonderful feeling of having run away and joined the circus, because here I'm catching the first rays that are hitting the continental United States. Everybody behind me is either asleep or going to work. But not me! I'm taking photographs. I just used to pinch myself, doing what I wanted to do."

A 1996 MacDowell Colony Fellow, Carl Austin Hyatt is represented in public and private collections across the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia, including the Smithsonian Museum, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and Currier Museum of Art. To see more of his work, acquire prints, or inquire about exhibitions, go to [carlaustinyhyatt.com](http://carlaustinyhyatt.com). 📷

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