

March 2011

Art Murphy

By Louisa J. Curtis



© Art Murphy, Image from Devonian Fossil Gallery

This month I'm excited to bring you my conversation with fine art photographer and friend [Art Murphy](#), who contacted me recently to tell me all about his latest body of work, photographing the Devonian Fossils that can be found in abundance around his home in the Catskills. The work is both surprising and stunning all at the same time. I was amazed at how a very old piece of rock can be so exquisitely beautiful and thought provoking, but as Art says, there is a wonderful majesty to these 380 million year old former residents and a great thrill attached to uncovering them. So I asked him about that attraction and the relationship between science and beauty,

“I have always loved scientific related imagery. Despite the primarily informational nature of such images (maps, planetary diagrams, etc.), there also oftentimes seems to be a wonderful visual aesthetic inherent. Look closer at the fossils and you can see beautiful, graceful patterns and wonderful organic shapes. This fossil project continues open ended. The further I explore these hills and these rocks the more I find the project taking on a life of it's own, telling me where to explore next. (Wow! maybe I've been in the woods way too long!!) Seriously, though, perhaps because of my “Libra” nature I love that confluence point where art and science intersect. It's that left brain - right brain thing. I hope that this work can help the non-scientist appreciate science while also helping the scientist to see the aesthetic beauty of science. I always say that I am an artist and not a scientist. So these images were never meant to convey scientific certitude. They are not specimen photos. Rather, they are opportunities to perhaps reflect on nature, or deep time, or even our own nature.”

I asked Art what plans he has for these spectacular images and he told me he is hoping to find venues where art and science tend to come together – natural history museums, university geology and earth science departments and the like. He said that the more he digs into it, the more it reveals new avenues of pursuit. Prompted by a curator's suggestion, an interesting side project unfolded where Art created a Catskills-related book. Already familiar with the relationship that existed between the painters of the “Hudson River School” and the “Gentlemen Geologists” of the region, Art set out to create a volume in the style of an old Catskills scrapbook. One particular gentleman who had associated with the “Gentlemen Geologists” was a man by the name of Thomas Cole, father of the Hudson River School, who, while climbing and sketching in these hills, found many of the same type fossils that Art continues to find. Some of those fossils reside at the Thomas Cole Historic Site and the New York State Museum in Albany, and Art was graciously given access to photograph them at both institutions. Those fossils are the only ones he has photographed that he did not excavate himself. Art then combined the fossil pictures with local landscapes (in the style of the Hudson River painters), along with quotations, and pertinent historical facts. More information about this project as well as the full image galleries of the Devonian Fossils can be, and should be seen at Art's website. <http://www.artmurphy.com/>.



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Art and I met several years ago through the local New York photography network when he was still splitting his time between the city and the countryside. Art has always been involved with making images in some form or another, from when he was shooting for clients such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and then later working as an accomplished printer for photo luminaries such as Robert Frank and Ron Haviv, and re-touching for diverse clients ranging from Nike to Macy's. So I asked him how he had come to start photographing these fossils and what was it about them that drew him in, and he said, "I quite literally tripped on a rock, picked it up, and saw this beautiful small fossil. It looked like a piece of sculpture growing out of the rock. I showed it to a neighbor who chuckled and told me that every other rock around us has fossils in them. It turns out that I live in an area very rich in fossils. Most all of the local fossils are marine invertebrates that lived 350-400 million years ago. It all seemed to me like messages from long, long ago, sent by some of the earliest life forms on the planet. How could that be anything but cool?"

I was curious to know if he considers himself a photographer first, as a printer, or a re-toucher, or as a fine artist? "I consider myself an artist who uses various tools to create images. A camera is a tool. A paintbrush is a tool. Photoshop is a tool. It's really so much more about what you are trying to say or do than what you call yourself." And how much have all those skills played a part in the process for this new body of work? "They certainly have played a large role. My art school training was primarily painting. Ninety percent of Photoshop to me is about painting masks. As a re-toucher I learned the tricks of the trade - tools used to create effects of your choosing. Reapplying these tools into my personal work allows me seemingly infinite controls. That notion of the "decisive moment" for me has been replaced with a process that begins with the snap of the shutter and continues through to Photoshop and the many varieties of output options."

With Art, it is the totality of experience, not just the taking of a photograph. It is also the hiking and the discovery, followed by splitting open the chosen rocks to see what treasures are held inside. Larger specimens and slabs are photographed on site, but the rest are brought home. Once the hidden treasure has been revealed comes the photograph itself, which is then the starting point for the work to come in Photoshop. I wondered if his permanent move from the city to the Catskills affected his personal creative process and he agreed, "It has enhanced my creativity immensely. I am on a country road deep in the woods, and it's like heaven. Shortly after finally leaving my city apartment behind, while researching the book project, I came across a letter that Thomas Cole wrote after moving to Catskill. He was writing to his dear friend Asher Durand exhorting him to leave the city for the sake of his own sanity and come up to the country where there is a far better life to be had! That was approximately 180 years ago. Yeah - some things never change I guess!"

And here are my **ChatterDozen** quick fire questions with Art's equally quick responses:

- 1) Who (dead or alive) do you admire? "Mickey Mantle, Thelonius Monk, and Mark Rothko.
- 2) Who is your favorite photographer? "Duane Michaels."
- 3) What was the last movie you saw? Luis Buñuel's "That Obscure Object of Desire" on Netflix."
- 4) What is your favorite TV show? "The Rachel Maddow Show."
- 5) What is your favorite food? "Anything Italian."
- 6) What is your favorite animal? "They're all pretty fascinating, aren't they? I'm a sucker for nature shows of all kinds.
- 7) What is your favorite color? "Not Green!" (Odd for a guy who loves nature shows so much?)
- 8) What would you do if you weren't a photographer? "I'd be a "Robin Hood" of sorts - helping to put the fat cats in jail." (Pretty funny, for someone who doesn't like green!)
- 9) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be and why? "I'm fine where I am."
- 10) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, perhaps to somewhere you have never been to before, where would you fly to and why? "Patagonia - Why? Because I can't even imagine it..."
- 11) Do you have an essential piece of photographic gear that you always carry with you - your "must-have" item? "My gear has been simplified to the barest essentials, and I now carry hornet spray with me as well!"
- 12) And what is the most important piece of non-photographic gear you always have with you? "It's a card, of sorts, now laminated, given to me by my son at age five - a lifetime pass to any performance of his once he grows up. He's now a brilliant and amazing fiddler residing in Nashville - "livin' the dream" I believe they call it!"

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