

Barbara Bosworth's Triptychs

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I was introduced to Barbara Bosworth in 2011 by Bill Finn, whom I had met the year before. Bill is a gifted naturalist who is a mainstay of the volunteers working along the Mount Tom range.¹ He was asked by the National Park Service to offer assistance to Barbara in her role as Artist-in-Residence for the New England National Scenic Trail (New England Trail, or NET). After spending a good deal of time with Barbara on her project, Bill knew that I would enjoy meeting her. We've become close friends, a threesome that fortifies the particular attraction I feel to Barbara's landscape triptychs. (Because of our closeness, I feel more comfortable referring to her as Barbara rather than Bosworth.) She's a renowned photographer, widely exhibited and published, from whose extensive and varied work I've singled out her landscape triptychs for special attention. This is therefore not an essay on her photography *tout court*, just my responses to her triptychs.

Why triptychs, and why landscapes? I admire all her work but I've been especially drawn to these three-part photographs she's taken with her view camera. In this essay I first wrote my interpretations of sample triptychs without consulting her, except for a few facts and dates. Then when I showed her a draft, she was astonished that I reacted to the photographs in ways that duplicated hers as she composed them. This was comforting to us both, especially to me because this bore out my art historical training in making deductions from visual evidence. To explain my attraction to Barbara's triptychs I'll start with one of them. Please stare at this photograph because I need you to look at it intently to make sense of my words.

Blue Pool at the Sycamore, Novelty, Ohio, 2008, is a particularly lovely piece of autobiography.

¹¹Bill is a retired corporate executive with a wide range of interests that includes volunteering his time on a variety of environmental and conservation projects in the Pioneer Valley and beyond.



Blue Pool at the Sycamore, Novelty, Ohio, 2008

Barbara makes no mystery about the autobiographical content of her photography. In a four-minute video in 2014 produced by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, she speaks about how the 8 x 10 view from her big camera perpetuates the wonders she felt when looking out the living room window of her childhood home.² She reproduced her photograph of this window in *Natural Histories*; it shows the woods that led to the stream of the *Blue Pool*.³ In the colophon to this book, she wrote “My woodland-romantic father and my landscape -painter grandfather took my siblings and me on long walks along the streambed. Our explorations were slow and quiet meanders, as my father proclaimed the joys of looking at the natural world we passed through. On these walks I learned to love being in nature . . . All the images I make now, no matter where I am, have their roots in the woods and streams of Novelty, Ohio.”

Barbara’s childhood window views were therefore a way of slowly observing nature that she has subsequently done when she looks through the rectangle of her view camera. Her “slow looks” give her time to observe the image on her camera screen because slowness is built into the use of a view camera. First she has to reconnoitre a desirable view that may require an hour or two, or repeated visits. After settling on a site, she has to lug her tripod, the heavy 8 x 10 camera, the spare plates and their holders, and the black hood that she pulls over her head when she’s ready. When she looks through her lens, she sees her chosen scene upside-down and this makes her conscious of the organization of her rectangle and the arrangement of her subject. Both the lens plane and the film plane can be moved relative to one another, giving control over focus, perspective and depth of field. It’s a slow and deliberate procedure as she rotates her camera to the right and

² “Barbara Bosworth on using a ‘slow look’ to photograph birds,” SFMOMA video, Nov. 2014.

³ *Natural Histories*, photographs by Barbara Bosworth. Santa Fe, Radius Books, 2013.

left to choose three associated but slightly different points of view that will constitute her visual story.

The sharp focus of Barbara's view camera gives life to the bark of the two tree trunks, to each serpentine root of the sycamore (who could doubt that the tree is a living creature?), to each small rock, each fallen leaf, and in the left panel, to the brookside green growths and the reclining twiggy branches. Growing up, Barbara lived near this brook and often explored its woods. In an email (5.12.15) she wrote, "That sycamore was there when I was growing up along that stream. In fact, it's in a watercolor my grandfather painted of the stream back in the early 1950's." She must have often stood, as here, on the bank of this pool where the stream finds a small expanse. In reflecting the unseen blue sky overhead, its cool blues are made the more saturated by contrast with the broad yellowish bursts of the sun on the side panels and with the light greens and yellow-greens above. On the left, the pool's still water is mirror-like and captures a clear unmoving blue. In the center, close to our feet, the pool has a tremulous surface which lightens the blue and makes the water shimmer. Our feet are so close to the water that we might be standing in it, but this would create ripples so we know we're poised on the bank. The sense we have of hovering over the water is what makes us feel intimately present alongside Barbara.

John Constable wrote of "the chiaroscuro of nature" to evoke the play of cloud shadows and sun on the landscape. Barbara makes sensuous use of the sun breaking through overhead foliage. The papery thinness of the dry leaves in the left panel contrasts with the touchable three-dimensionality of the bric-a-brac of sharp-edged stones in the right panel. The same kind of rocks mark the flow of the brook as it leaves the pool in the right panel. These are not the rounded stones of a glacial moraine, and the brook itself is not old enough to have worn them into smooth curves. Barbara does not supply answers to her natural histories, but gives us the pleasure of wondering at their unspoken connections.

Typically of her triptychs, we can treat each of the three portions of *Blue Pool* as a composition in its own right. Left and right panels have splashes of sunlight that separate them from the center. On a close look we see that there are slight breaks or shifts where the side panels meet the central one. To the left Barbara caused a break by turning her camera an inch or two leftward. This is not noticeable until we see that leaves and one skinny branch are cut off and not altogether continuous. With a similar slight movement of her camera to the right, she separated the pool's blue reflections from a dark expanse of shaded water.

In looking over the three panels—usually moving from left to right—we engage in a kind of narrative. There's a story we tell ourselves as we puzzle out the differences among the three panels, a visual parallel to three chapters of a written narrative. I distinguish *Blue Pool* and many other triptychs I'll discuss from the few that Barbara has made that show no such distinctions. One of these is *The Forest, Novelty, 2008*.



The Forest, Novelty, 2008

Yes, the left and right panels are different, but they don't share a common ground plane with the center. They bear a harmonious relation with it, but they're separate and don't lend themselves to the sequential readings of *Blue Pool* and other "narrative" triptychs.

In the following paragraphs I'll study how Barbara composed her story-telling compositions. My discussion of their structures or scaffolding will be the kind of formal analysis that at times sets aside reactions to the beauty and poetry of her photographs in order to write about the subtleties of her working methods. Single photos of the woodland stream of *Blue Pool* could tell us much about its setting and why Barbara evoked it, but behind the naturalness of her triptychs is an artful organization that results in more complicated and richer effects than possible in a single shot. This arrangement is of a kind that I've studied over a lifetime devoted to the history of painting, particularly to the tradition of naturalism in nineteenth-century painting. There the historian needs to explain how the illusion of a natural subject was created without the artist revealing the tricks of the trade.

Triptychs in Black and White

In 2005 Barbara published twelve years' worth of black and white photographs from her view camera in *Trees National Champions*.⁴ From 1990 to 2003 she travelled to twenty-four states and sought out trees designated by American Forests as champions, measured by the combination of diameter, height, and spread of crown. Each tree is almost invariably centered in her photos, giving them a monumental and iconic presence. I'll begin this canvass of Barbara's compositional art by looking at her photographs in black and white before I turn to her work in color. *Trees* introduced me to landscapes of the midwest, west and south that are unfamiliar and so have the appeal of novelty. Of the seventy photographs in this book, forty-nine are triptychs, so she also favors them.⁵

In the history of art, triptychs are among the notable paintings of the late medieval and early Renaissance eras, including the *Mérode Altarpiece* by Robert Campin (1420s) and the *Portinari Triptych* by Hugo van der Goes (c. 1475). Their side panels were hinged and could be folded shut, then opened on special days to reveal the centerpiece and its flanking paintings. Barbara's triptychs aren't literally hinged and her side panels are too broad to imagine them folded over to cover the center. Yet often, despite the shared ground plan, they are so distinct from one another that they seem nearly detachable. (In fold-out reproductions in *Natural Histories*, they literally bend forward.) In *Slippery elm, Ohio, 2000*, the left side holds a flat receding meadow so different from the right side's crowded surface that we imagine them capable of swinging on their hinges.

⁴ *Trees National Champions*, photographs by Barbara Bosworth, with essays by Douglas R. Nickel and John R. Stilgoe. Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 2005.

⁵ Ten are singles, eight are diptychs, and three are four-part polyptychs. And half the photographs are also triptychs in *To Be at the Farther Edge, Photographs along the New England Trail*, published by the National Park Service, 2012.



National Champion Slippery elm, Ohio, 2000

Similarly, in *Swamp white oak, Ohio, 2002*, each side dips toward the center. I sometimes think of a three-piece cosmetic or shaving mirror that gives a different view of the central image.



National Champion Swamp white oak, Ohio, 2002

There's no doubt that Barbara regularly made deliberate choices of her side panels. They are fully "natural" but artfully chosen.

This hinging effect waxes and wanes as we sort through Barbara's triptychs in *Trees*. Only one of them, *Longbeak eucalyptus, Arizona, 2001*, seems like a single panoramic photo with no appreciable distinction between the outside panels; they would not make autonomous compositions.



National Champion Longbeak eucalyptus, Arizona, 2001

In this triptych Barbara exposed the endless Arizona plain and centered the tree on receding wheel ruts as though we were looking through a car's windshield. However, most of the triptychs in this book have side panels with enough differences to allow us to regard them as compositions in their own right. Often one side has an open receding space while the other has buildings, fencing or foliage that come forward toward the surface. *Saguaro, Arizona, 2001* and *Sugarberry, South Carolina, 1994* have flat receding levels on the left but houses in the foreground on the right.



National Champion Saguaro, Arizona, 2001



National Champion Sugarberry, South Carolina, 1994

If isolated, the side panels might be thought to show separate landscapes. Because the tree in each triptych is exactly centered, it's easy to picture Barbara walking around it before she chose where to place her camera. Many vantage points could have done justice to the tree, so her choice was well considered.

Often Barbara augments the contrast between left and right sides by very careful cropping. The center of *Waterlocust, Pennsylvania, 2000* is cut on the left precisely by the gatepost, and signaled on its right by a parallel tree trunk.



National Champion Waterlocust, Pennsylvania, 2000

Here the left panel has a road angling deeply into glaring light, while the right has foliage and tree branches packed together near the surface. Like a dozen other triptychs, the waterlocust panels load the right side. Usually our eye sweeps from left to right and as it does so, we move from open and light space to closed and heavy forms. We have an entrance on the left, but no exit on the right because that

side is filled up and effectively closed. This sweep from the left that forbids exiting the composition on the right is common in the history of art. It's especially prominent in the work of Degas. For example, in his *At the Races, Gentlemen Jockeys* (Musée d'Orsay), the left portion is open whereas horses, carriages and people fill up the right side. We accept this as normal, but if we reverse the reproduction by holding it up to a mirror, we instantly feel disturbed. When we look to the right, we fall out of the composition. Similarly, if we turn a number of Barbara's triptychs to a mirror, our "normal" vision is upset. When reversed, *Slippery elm, Ohio, 2000* loses its drama because dense images are now on the left and we head towards light and open spaces that take us beyond the frame.

Strangler fig, Florida, 1995 would also lose its climax if reversed in a mirror.



National Champion Strangler fig, Florida, 1995

Viewed normally, it tells a story. A one-two-three rhythm moves across this triptych; we create a kind of silent narrative of what we're seeing. Entering on the left, our eye finds a deeply receding pocket of space with a foreshortened lake in the distance that reflects the sky's glare. In the center, distance is blocked off by dense foliage in middle ground although the foreground consists of a shallow opening of grassy vegetation. Its right edge has a narrow portion of the strangler fig whose multiple trunks and adjacent branches entirely fill the surface of the third rectangle. Affected by the resonance of the word "strangler," we finally look upon the scary snaky growth that bunches together. A tangle of fine branches emerges to the right from this elemental struggle.

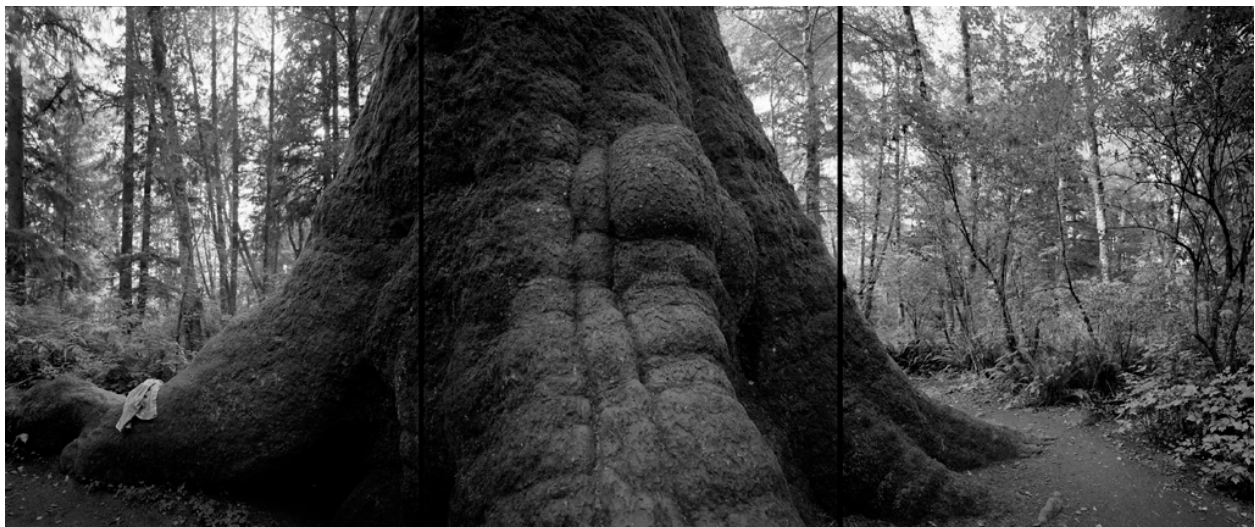
Another left-to-right narrative leads to drama in *Sycamore, Kentucky, 2002*.



National Champion Sycamore, Kentucky, 2002

We start on the left where an unpaved bushy road passes by a parked car to a distant field, surmounted by a glowingly lit sky. The ancient sycamore entirely fills the central panel; its well-scarred verticals refuse to gather into a single trunk. Then, through a nearly opaque dark patch, we come on the right to a downward slanting two-pronged dead branch. Its lack of leaves lets the light pick out a sad drama. It's like the open jaw of some primeval beast.

Barbara creates different sorts of dramatic effects in a few triptychs that share the central tree with the side panels. In *Sitka spruce, Oregon, 1993* she doesn't stand back to take in the immense height of the tree.



National Champion Sitka spruce, Oregon, 1993

Instead she conveys the spruce's immensity by positioning us close to its brute animism. As we stare at it we grope among childhood memories of visits in the zoo to elephants, hippos, and rhinos. The shirt tossed on the sprawling root to the left lets us know that we're visitors—this isn't a tree off in some remote forest—

— and gives scale to this gigantic apparition. *Paper birch, Maine, 1991* has another kind of monstrosity.



National Champion Paper birch, Maine, 1991

Birches are not outsized trees but here Barbara makes the large branch thrusting forward to the right threaten us with its nearness, although the woman below, staring into the distance—it's Barbara herself—is indifferent to it.

A number of triptychs in this book have symmetrical side panels that share a continuous ground plane without sweeps to the right. Differences between the two sides are less pronounced, but still allow us to think of them as autonomous compositions hinged to the center. The left side of *Valley oak, California, 1994* has an uninterrupted flat field in the foreground, but a large foreshortened fence looms in the right panel.



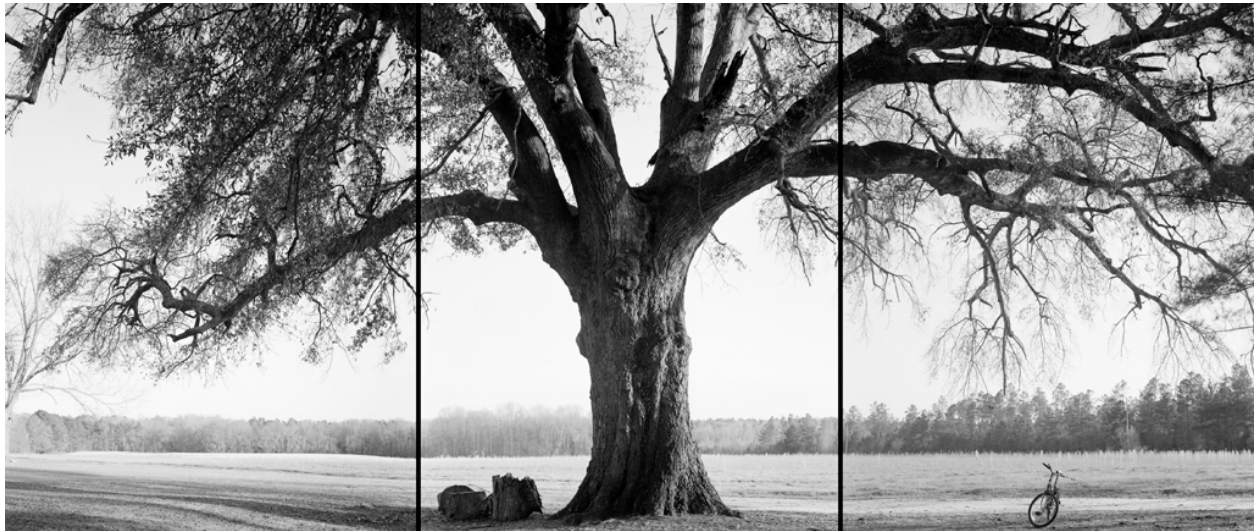
National Champion Valley oak, California, 1994

A reclining boy and a children's slide are pictured in the right portion of *Slippery elm with Jeffrey, Ohio, 2002*, but the left side has a rural setting with a pony.



National Champion Slippery elm with Jeffrey, Ohio, 2002

Left and right sides of *Darlington oak, Georgia, 1999* would appear nearly identical were it not for the parked bicycle on the right which gives this panel its distinction.



National Champion Darlington oak, Georgia, 1999

Because the bike is centrally placed (by Barbara, we know) it helps make this side into a separable composition.

Triptychs in Color

In recent years Barbara has made a number of triptychs in color in woodlands, valleys, streams and fields. It's these that first attracted me because they evoke the landscapes that I grew up with and still find lung- and head-clearing. They're my homeland landscapes, the places where I and my brothers and boyhood friends played and hiked, and where my wife and I took walks with our children. I continue almost daily walks in nearby woods. It's especially Barbara's recent triptychs of the New England Trail that take me into her landscapes along routes of nostalgia. She continues to surprise me by the ways her view camera picks out details of leaf, bark, rock and water while simultaneously opening out vistas of valleys, rivers and skies. It's this mixture of near and far that transforms the familiar into the unfamiliar structures and poetry of art.

Unlike Barbara's triptychs of the west and midwest, in these eastern landscapes there are usually not the sweeps from the left that build up the panels on the right. That's a compositional form which suits open terrain. For enclosed or partially enclosed wooded sites, Barbara often favors a structure in which she draws our eye to the center. It's flanked by foliage, trees or rocks that rise to the upward corners of left and right panels. This forms an overall pattern of an upside-down archer's bow or the cross section of a bowl, swooping down from the upper corners of the side panels to belly-out in the center. I call it a "bowl pattern." It's found in more than twenty-five eastern triptychs whereas in *Trees*, only two have a similar format: *Singleleaf ash, Colorado, 2001*, and *Durand oak, Georgia, 1999*.



National Champion Singleleaf ash, Colorado, 2001



National Champion Durand oak, Georgia, 1999

In *Bill above Millers River*, 2012, Barbara situates us in the protective shade of trees, looking beneath and through them to a sloping river valley.



Bill above Millers River, 2012

In this bowl pattern foliage, trees and ground in left and right panels curve upward from the center until they block the outlying edges. The center positions us on a projecting block of ground that acts as a *repoussoir*. It gives way to a receding slope marked at its left by a flash of blue from the river. It's framed on its right edge by an opaque tree trunk. The right panel has its own aperture between trees. Bill Finn's silhouette assists three trees here to form a screen. The ground rises steeply to our right, revealed by mottled patches of sunlight. In the left panel, the ground looms closer to us as it swells upward. It has a huge portion of rock bathed in the sun, its splash of warm light setting off the dark greens of foliage. Its spray of foliage against the sky, leaning toward the center, is lit by the overhead sun, but

in the right panel the foliage is in shadow and is marked by the strong verticals of the slender trees. Were it not for finding Bill already here, we might imagine ourselves as solitary wanderers of the Romantic era peering out from the forest to a welcome glimpse of open land.

This tripartite structure recalls the picturesque paintings of the Hudson River School and indeed, Barbara is an heir of this tradition. The picturesque featured irregularity and roughness as “natural,” as opposed to the obviously designed nature of the neoclassical, with its conscious and evident compositional control. Barbara’s triptychs are subject to her own compositional patterns, yes, but once we put formal analysis behind us, we look at them as saturated in naturalness. By comparison nineteenth-century picturesque paintings like Asher B. Durand’s *The Beeches* (1845) or Worthington Whittredge’s *A Catskill Brook* (1875) no longer seem fully natural. We’re too aware of their conscious organization which the passing of time has made obvious.

Barbara’s more immediate, more graspable naturalness nonetheless owes a debt to the picturesque. Artists like Durand and Whittredge made paintings of eastern woodlands with central openings into light-struck distance that are sheltered by side screens. These are tripartite structures within single canvases that Barbara emulates in her triptychs. Rebecca Bedell wrote a beautiful essay on this relationship for the catalogue of Barbara’s photographs along the New England Trail.⁶ She traced the historical origins of the picturesque and Barbara’s creative adaptation of it, appropriately enough because the New England Trail itself grew out of the same tradition. In perceptive analyses of two of Barbara’s triptychs she shows how she recalls the nineteenth century picturesque while “inverting, subverting, and transforming” it. She begins her essay with a wonderful interpretation of *Harry above Brigg’s Brook Falls*, 2012.

Filling the side images, steep, rocky banks with thickly forested slopes slant inwards toward the streambed depicted in the foreground of the central picture. There, a pool of water becomes a smudge of white, reflecting the sky. Slender trunks of deciduous trees rise on either side of the pool—a corridor of them—sloping inwards to canopy the stream’s path as it tumbles downward and out of sight in the distance. Above the pool, at the very center of the triptych, the tender, green leaves of early summer dissolve in an aureole of resplendent luminous light.

⁶ “On the Trail of the Picturesque,” in *To be at the Farther Edge*, pp. 8-10. For the origins of the Romantic triad of the Picturesque, Beautiful, and Sublime in the eighteenth century, see the still fundamental study by Samuel M. Monk, *The Sublime* (New York, Modern Language Association, 1935). For the Picturesque, see *The Politics of the Picturesque. Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770*, ed. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge University Press, 1994).



Harry above Brigg's Brook Falls, 2012

In a following page, Bedell remarks that the figure of Harry Sharbaugh seated in the left panel, “does not, in conventional picturesque fashion, gaze out at the vista to carry our gaze with his, but rather looks at us, making us conscious of ourselves as figures as well as viewers. As he is a figure in our scene, so are we in his.” Bedell also notes that Barbara put her camera on top of the falls looking outward rather than show us its picturesque cascade.

The other triptych that Bedell links to the picturesque era is *Young rock climbers at Farley Ledges*, 2012.

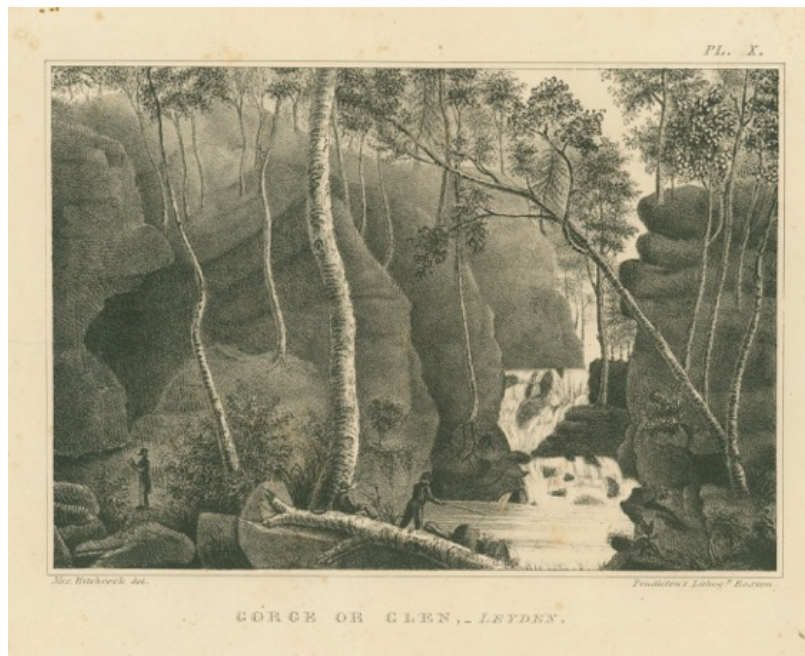


Young rock climbers at Farley Ledges, 2012

She points out that this is a witty evocation of the Romantic sublime which was intended to inspire feelings of awe at nature’s fearful powers. The threat that the massive tilted rock poses to the two hikers is diminished by the everyday normality of the scene offered by two lateral paths and the central one. I might add that the

unperturbed innocence of the two young people disarms our apprehension; they act like visual props holding up the rock. The overall composition of this triptych is more geometric than most of Barbara's work. The stark geometry of the middle section is echoed by the rock slab on the right and the huge trunk on the left. It's softened, however, and further removed from the sublime by the feathery light lemon greens and luminescent glow of the sky.

It's fitting that this triptych takes us back to *Gorge or Glen, - Leyden*, the handsome picturesque lithograph of 1833 by Orra White Hitchcock (1796-1863).



Orra White Hitchcock. Gorge or Glen, - Leyden. Lithograph, 1833.

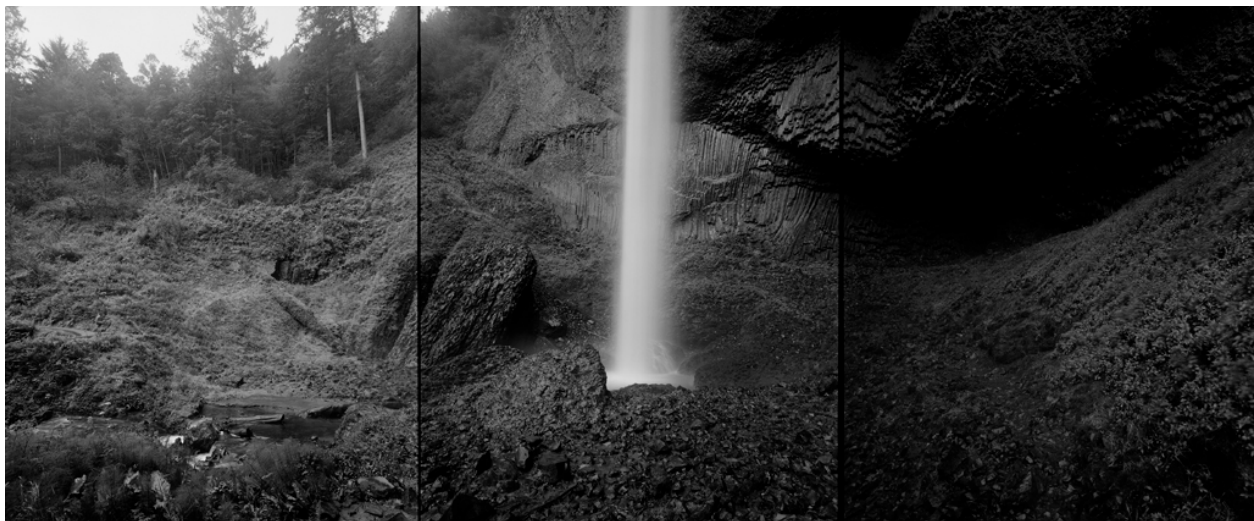
Barbara knows the lithographs and watercolors of White Hitchcock, a native of Deerfield and Amherst, who roamed the fields, streams and woods of western Massachusetts and was familiar with its traprock heights that characterize the New England Trail. In her view of Leyden, she also has two small figures among steeply rising rock ledges and prominent tree trunks. She too stops short of the sublime, so her conception of the picturesque foretells Barbara's. She worked alongside her husband Edward (1796-1864), the notable American geologist and paleontologist of Amherst who wrote about the traprock (basalt) ridges of the future New England Trail and who named several of its eminences from the vantage point of romantic naturalism, including Mount Norwottuck and Mount Nonotuck.

One of Barbara's rare triptychs of three separate views is *Traprock*, 2012, from the New England Trail on the Mount Tom State Reservation, Skinner Park, and Rattlesnake Mountain.



Traprock, 2012

It can be taken as a homage to Hitchcock's pioneer studies of basalt. Another of Barbara's triptychs calls Hitchcock to mind: *Latourelle Falls, Columbia River Gorge, 1993*.



Latourelle Falls, Columbia River Gorge, 1993

Although from across the country, it celebrates the kind of columnar basalt formation that the Amherst geologist studied in Scotland and found on a steep slope of Mount Holyoke and on the shore of the nearby Connecticut River. He named them *Titan's Piazza* and *Titan's Pier*; road and trail signs point them out. Barbara's *Latourelle Falls* offers a striking lesson in Hitchcockean geology. The powerful shaft of the waterfall is cutting a hole in the hard basalt, the same process that formed Lily Pond, the quarry by the Connecticut River in Gill, Massachusetts, from which Hitchcock obtained some famous Jurassic dinosaur footprints. The Latourelle shaft of water has the force of a fire hose: Barbara has centered it like an

icon to be wondered at. Its setting is explained by the left panel that shows a rocky slump, coated in tactile vegetation, and by the right side that reveals a dark recess whose moist speckled rock seems like a magnification of the adjacent central stone.

Among Barbara's photographs of the New England Trail are several taken from the traprock cliffs that are links along the trail in Connecticut and Massachusetts. These are the views sought after since the early nineteenth century, views touted in guidebooks. To reach them, paths were made by clearing brush and trees, occasionally building small bridges, and tracing routes over the rocks (this is what Bill Finn does today for the Mt. Tom State Reservation). "Views" were not passive but were active agents in the transformation of the landscape. Barbara particularly loves the view of the Connecticut River's oxbow from Dry Knob on Mount Tom. The oxbow was made famous by Thomas Cole in his 1836 painting from the other side of the river, and was the subject thereafter of many paintings, prints, and photographs. Barbara is aware of her ties to romantic naturalism when she turns her contemporary eye upon the oxbow. With Bill Finn's help, she once climbed up to Dry Knob in darkness in order to find the light as it just began to show before daybreak. In *View of the Oxbow from Dry Knob, (just before daybreak)*, 2012, the electric lights of the oxbow marina punch a two-eyed tunnel that looms toward us, coming forward from a sky which holds a whole range of blues and grey-blues.



View of the Oxbow from Dry Knob, (just before daybreak), 2012

As our eyes adjust to the localized glare, we also see some tiny pin-pricks of other lights that allow us to sense a deep landscape. Right and left panels have silhouettes of massed foliage, nearly opaque, but the one on the left has its own glimpse of light sky coming through thin branches.

From the same vantage point later in the day she took other triptychs which share the familiar bowl pattern. She moved her tripod back and forth slight distances before she settled on the exact locations that produced her three-hinged views. One of them caught the perspective on an overcast day, *View of the Oxbow from Dry Knob, (dawn)*, 2012.



View of the Oxbow from Dry Knob, (dawn), 2012

Its middle panel opens to the oxbow and the valley beyond; there are no vertical features to frame it. Left and right panels, by contrast, have thick foliage of bushes and trees that fill their surfaces. Their dense greenery rises up the lateral edges and forms striking silhouettes against the sky. It's easy to imagine the side screens bending forward toward us at the vertical creases that separate them from the center.

When Barbara made *View of the Oxbow from Dry Knob, (fall)*, 2013, she moved her camera slightly back and to the right.



View of the Oxbow from Dry Knob, (fall), 2013

Now the autumn light, veiled but strong, virtually eliminates the three-dimensional substance of the central panel's foreground in *Dawn*. The latter's prominent pine tree here sinks into the landscape while the mottled ruddy colors of the mid-distance foliage come forward. In the distance, sunlight breaks through the thin cloud-cover to illuminate a long streak of ground whose warm tones echo those of the mid-distance and contribute to the panel's relative flatness compared to *Dawn*. The two left-hand panels are not very different from those in *Dawn* but the right side of *Fall* exhibits a variety of color-lights lacking in the other. Now the mid-distance trees move to this panel's left edge and receive a blaze of yellow-orange light. The same autumnal light appears behind the nearby trees which form a stronger surface pattern thanks to the foliage that crowds the upper portion. This results from Barbara having shifted her camera backward a few inches, a move that also reveals a lighter and more detailed foreground.

Barbara made other triptychs from salient heights on the New England Trail. In the central panel of *Sunset from Provin Mountain*, 2012, she exploited the moments of a setting sun when pulsing white light precedes the fan of strong colors that typify so many conventional sunsets.



Sunset from Provin Mountain, 2012

We look out over a swag of dense foliage to a gently rolling lowland of fields and woods, punctuated at the far edge of a broad meadow by tiny white buildings. The incandescent sun is about to slide below the horizon but it's still powerful. It dazzles our eye as its hot glow dissolves the distant land and melts the thin clouds above. On the right several kinds of leaves and thin branches curve upward to the edge of the triptych. Glimpses of ruddy stone through this patchwork lets us realize that a cliff is rising sharply upward here. Beyond is a dark mass of treetops surmounted by a pine tree silhouetted against the washed sky.

The opposite panel has a symmetrical upward surge of foliage that blocks

the triptych's left edge. Through the V of treetops is its own meadow that takes part in a pastoral view with none of the glowing dynamism of the panel in the center. This openness contrasts with the far panel whose foliage keeps us in the very near distance. Looking back to the left panel, we see near the bottom a slash of sun-struck cliff face that solves the mystery of where Barbara placed her tripod. She was working on an edge of the cliff that is unseen beneath her feet in the central panel because its thickset foliage turns nearly black toward the bottom edge; we couldn't know where we stand. However, when we look left and right to those flashes of rock, we have a postponed thrill as we sense our precipitous perch. Overhead the sky's blue is overtaken by windswept filmy clouds and the bleaching action of the setting sun. The sky helps unify the three panels, and so does the swinging lateral rhythm of the up-and-down profiles of the foliage, a variation on the bowl format.

Ordinariness and Intimacy

We won't find the most ordinary aspects of modern life in Barbara's triptychs, no common city streets, suburban shopping, automotive traffic, buses or trains, churches or any of the other daily sights of ordinary urban and small town life. Nevertheless I find myself applying the word "ordinariness" to her triptychs. She usually takes us out into landscapes that feature natural settings but they're ordinary, familiar, and not isolated or far-off places. Douglas R. Nickel in his sensitive essay in *Trees* points out that she frequently includes elements of urbanized culture, common signs of human activity. A dog or a bicycle will appear in a side panel, or we'll find a roadside stand, a looming farmyard fence, or a cluster of houses. These are signs of ordinary life that give scale and a narrative environment to the chosen tree. Barbara's pictorial realm is found in natural settings not far from human activity that embrace peaceful, contemplative moods.

Barbara's triptychs are faithful to the landscapes she pictures but they're not merely factual or objective, not the matter-of-fact results of a point-and-shoot camera. By deliberately centering and framing a champion tree or a view from a cliff, she calls our attention to a composed picture, to her art. She credits a tree or a view with the special place it occupies in society's hierarchical reckoning: a well-sanctioned tree or a sought-after view. She doesn't pretend that she came across them while just walking through a landscape: they're too well planned. And yet she doesn't so isolate her composed views or glamorize them that they seem wholly apart from ordinary life.

Those qualities can be partly encompassed in the word "ordinary," but to treat Barbara's triptychs more fully, I also need the word "intimacy." This word has many shades of meaning from the erotic to the merely close-up, so I'll have to say what I mean by giving examples. In *Trees* we're often brought up right next to a trunk instead of remaining off several yards to see the whole tree. Barbara presents an intimate view of an individual plant, and because we stand in her shoes as she works, we share this intimacy with her. When I wrote of *Blue Pool at the Sycamore*, *Novelty Ohio* and of *Sunset from Provin Mountain*, I pointed out that we stand alongside her; our toes share her precarious perches; it's a shared intimacy. Barbara recently told me that she turned to triptychs because she wanted to tell stories about the landscape, not just about looking at the landscape, but about being in it.

Barbara also personifies some of her landscapes by posing her friends, although sometimes we're unaware that this is the case. In *Strangler fig, Florida*,

there is a tiny figure of a reclining man under a dark copse in the central panel. After writing my interpretation of this triptych I learned that he was a friend who accompanied her when she was looking for this tree. She wished to include him because he was a part of the story she told in this triptych but she didn't want him to be prominent since her story was about the tree. Intimacy was present to Barbara, but not to the viewer. In some triptychs of eastern meadows or parklands she poses single figures so that we're more obvious of the attachments of friendship. In *Margot at the lookout, Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Park*, 2008, she stations her friend exactly in the middle.



Margot at the lookout, Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Park, 2008

Her vertical stillness overlaps in our mind with Barbara's trees: the intimacy of friendship is honored by the recall of upright trunks and by Margot's substituting for Barbara when she looks out from the edge of view-giving heights. Friends enter into other of Barbara's hilly New England landscapes: the hikers Bill Finn in *Bill above Millers River*, and Harry Sharbaugh in *Harry above Briggs Brook Falls*, both acquaintances who personify the nature spirits of woodlands despite their ordinariness.

Autobiography is implicit in these last two triptychs because Barbara has hiked the New England Trail with Bill and Harry; they've helped form and maintain it. From the same trail a niece and nephew are taking the view from a clifftop in *Katie and Jeff at Rattlesnake Mountain*, 2012.



Katie and Jeff at Rattlesnake Mountain, 2012

They are “cool” figures in the current vernacular. Barbara doesn’t choose poses that would express affection or even contact with the photographer. She puts the figures at the same distance from the panel’s edge and their heads on the same horizontal line (isocephalism). I can almost hear Barbara telling one or both of them to move into these positions. They look out from beneath their own arch of foliage and they’ll be there forever, members of Barbara’s family set into pictorial form that honors the relationship.

Her family enters even more prominently in some of her earlier triptychs, like *Picking wild roses and blackberries in the backyard, Novelty*, 1992.



Picking wild roses and blackberries in the backyard, Novelty, 1992

In the yard of her natal home in Novelty, her nephew Jeff faces his aunt, holding a bouquet with shy stiffness because he knows his photo is being taken. To the left his sister is bending over the berry patch. Barbara herself is in the left panel, also

holding a bouquet. She faces into the composition from the base of a cherry tree whose severed branch once held a rope swing that Barbara enjoyed in childhood. Not far through the woods is the stream of *Blue Pool*. To the far right the children's mother Joan dozes; her body faces into the composition. Although we could imagine a single photo that grouped the same members of her family, Barbara uses the slight independence of each panel of her triptych to make obvious that she has constructed this scene. She forms a central stage with side screens whose figures face inward. She is the director of a theatrical presentation ("scene" derives from the Latin for theatre stage). Of course she is the director of all of her triptychs which are never the results of pointing her camera at random.

Less theatrical in appearance, but nonetheless artfully orchestrated, is another family triptych, *Mom and Dad, Rocky Mountain National Park*, 1998.



Mom and Dad, Rocky Mountain National Park, 1998

In the center we look over the flowing water of a stream to a distant cleft in the mountains that is lost in the misty air of a cloudy but bright day. In the left panel, in a meadow below a hill thickly clad in evergreen trees, Barbara's mother is crouched down by the curving stream, looking at the wildflower whose stem she holds. She bends toward the central panel and the water flows there. On the opposite side, Barbara's father stands erect facing three-quarters to the center, looking toward the mountains; the water flows out to the right. One senses archetypes: a woman examining a flower, a man surveying the landscape. Barbara needn't have consciously planned these antiphonal images to suggest archetypes but she has given her mother a domestic gesture in the near distance and her father a masculine command of the far distance.

Because Barbara puts family and friends in her triptychs, we naturally think of characterizing them by intimacy. They invite us into natural environments that

we're encouraged to share with her and sometimes with her family. "Intimate" and "intimacy" are subjective terms that need a context to be understood. The estimable photographs of Arthur Lazar (1940-) are called "intimate" but his intimacy is not Barbara's. Not often does he make us feel that we're surrounded or backed-up by trees, clearings, or pathways. He also seldom shows leaves, grass, foliage, or rocks at the very base of his compositions as she does. She brings us close in a tactile way to the ground in front of our feet, hence intimacy: we're drawn into her absorption of nature, not kept aloof from it by a controlling, exterior dominance.

None of the other modern landscape triptychs that I've seen have Barbara's intimacy. Often one sees the juxtaposition of three different scenes with echoing subjects but no hints of a shared viewpoint, such as a famous landscape broken into sympathetic scenes of mountain peak, valley, and another mountain view. Frequently found are a panoramic view divided into three with separating bands of white or black; they lack Barbara's distinctive device of central and flanking panels that can be taken as separate compositions. She employs her craft to embody an experience of a particular slice of nature. We can't literally share her experience but we see it as an entry-point to a set of thoughts of many dimensions: the particular season; the time of day; the quality of the sunlight; the kinds of clouds and the colors of the sky; the middle distance and the far; fields and domestic lawns and houses; bunches of thick leaves or feathery ones; foliage stirred by breezes or wind; reflections from rocks, brooks or pools. We do not merely look at the landscape because the triptych gives the sense of our "being in nature." Our memories and knowledge are evoked. Barbara can't be aware of them as she works except that she can assume that we share some of the same responses. On occasions she will know some of us well enough to predict our reactions.

I began this essay by looking slowly at one of Barbara's triptychs—I'm emulating her "slow look"—and I'll end by responding to another which embraces my sense of the ordinary and the intimate in her art. In the central and right panels of *First snow, Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Park*, 2008, we're standing on the edge of a sharp curve coming toward us, a switchback on a well-maintained woodland trail.



First snow, Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Park, 2008

The low wall of the trail is sharply marked out by mottled light snow that has settled on its compacted surface but elsewhere is scattered on the dark reds of loose fallen leaves. Barbara's camera hovered over the head of the curve; we're so close that the camera has severed the curve's continuity; our toes have a tentative perch. As we think of this, we realize we're standing in Barbara's shoes and have an intimate closeness to her. In the right panel the severance makes the disconnected trail spring from the lower corner to form an acute angle into distance. The two panels' swooping curve embraces a shallow dip in the ground, colored by the snow in white and blueish-white when it reflects the sky. Behind, in the center, glowing orange-reds of distant foliage are notes of contrast with their color opposite, the blue of the sky.

The left panel conforms to Barbara's familiar distinction between the lateral sides. It has none of the drama of the other two. It's a calm level rectangle of snow-spotted brownish reds of the broad trail, leading to a copse of young trees. How unlike is the opposite panel with its swiftly departing wedge as it shoots past the shallow vale! Stepping back, as it were, we realize how the calm left panel exalts the lyrical shifts in the other two. This triptych is an intimate landscape because it avoids the declamatory. It doesn't reach out to the viewer by picturing a familiar monument or a famous piece of nature. Although it's a scene that Barbara has arranged, it has no outgoing drama of the theater. Its intimacy resides in its ordinariness. It's not a wild forest, but a human-made pathway, perhaps not far from a city. This is the same realm of the ordinary that we saw in *Young rock climbers at Farley Ledges* where the pathways around the huge rocks and the presence of children domesticate the sublime. Barbara's triptychs in *Trees* share this matter-of-factness, this refusal to push her scenes out into remote isolation. Signs of everyday life—ordinariness—live alongside the intimacy that is so deeply

embedded in her triptychs.

I now reflect that if I had looked closely at Barbara's triptychs without knowing her, I would have admired them and gained insights into her art because I would have seen that they are not merely objective or factual. However, my reactions have been greatly enriched by knowing her and learning some of the autobiographical content of her work. I can't any longer act as the uninformed outsider who would be "objective." I've had the joy of knowing her and Bill and I've walked alongside them in nearby landscapes. It's a special privilege to feel that I'm standing next to Barbara in her triptychs and having the joy of "being in nature" with her.⁷

⁷ For Barbara Bosworth's work and a full list of exhibitions and publications, see her website barbarabosworth.com. To provide more detail in the triptychs, a supplement of images has been added to this pdf. When viewed in full screen mode these larger images will appear as separate pages. In formatting this document, Alex Knudsen and Emily Sheffer have given invaluable technical support.



Blue Pool at the Sycamore, Novelty, Ohio, 2008



The Forest, Novelty, 2008



National Champion Slippery elm, Ohio, 2000



National Champion Swamp white oak, Ohio, 2002



National Champion Longbeak eucalyptus, Arizona, 2001



National Champion Saguaro. Arizona, 2001



National Champion Sugarberry, South Carolina, 1994



National Champion Waterlocust, Pennsylvania, 2000



National Champion Strangler fig, Florida, 1995



National Champion Sycamore, Kentucky, 2002



National Champion Sitka spruce, Oregon, 1993



National Champion Paper birch, Maine, 1991



National Champion Valley oak, California, 1994



National Champion Slippery elm with Jeffrey, Ohio, 2002



National Champion Darlington oak, Georgia, 1999



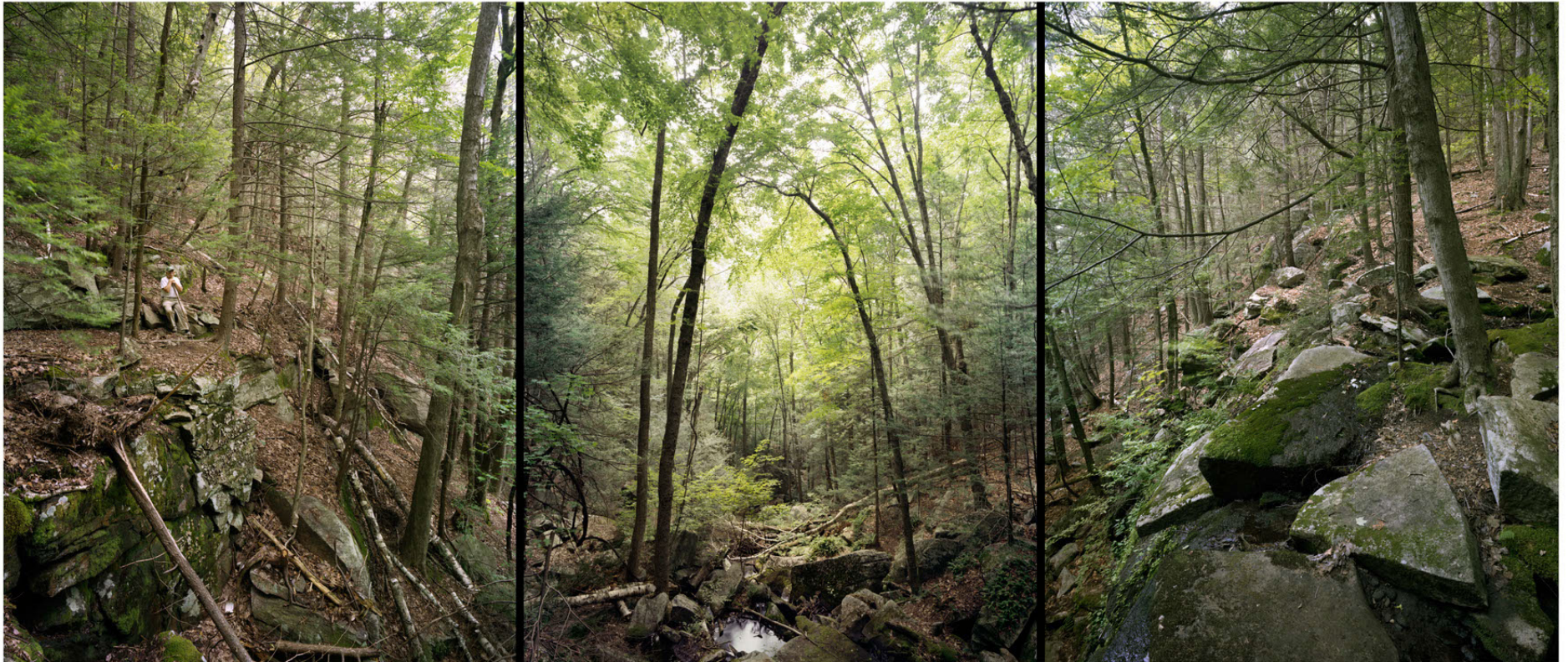
National Champion Singleleaf ash, Colorado, 2001



National Champion Durand oak, Georgia, 1999



Bill above Millers River, 2012



Harry above Brigg's Brook Falls, 2012



Young rock climbers at Farley Ledges, 2012



Traprock, 2012



Latourelle Falls, Columbia River Gorge, 1993



View of the Oxbow from Dry Knob, (just before daybreak), 2012



View of the Oxbow from Dry Knob, (dawn), 2012



View of the Oxbow from Dry Knob, (fall), 2013



Sunset from Provin Mountain, 2012



Margot at the lookout, Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Park, 2008



Katie and Jeff at Rattlesnake Mountain, 2012



Picking wild roses and blackberries in the backyard, Novelty, 1992



Mom and Dad, Rocky Mountain National Park, 1998



First snow, Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Park, 2008