

WITHIN THE WAVES — A Work in Four Movements

Lake Superior photographer Craig Blacklock's work has undergone a metamorphosis. Like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, these new abstract images shimmer with bold shapes and colors belying their previous manifestation.

The entire exhibition is created from photographs made for his book, *Light Waves, Abstract Photographs of Reflections from Lake Superior*, which make up the exhibition's first movement. For subsequent movements, Blacklock uses techniques that took him months to master, doing a multigenerational dance between newly-developed AI sharpening and enlarging, and traditional editing software.

The metaphors Blacklock explores begin with his musings on the dismaying and disorienting state of the world during the start of the pandemic, which leads to our desire to escape into nature, bringing us up to our present inflection point: whether we will continue down a path of growth and environmental destruction, or be able to reverse course in time to mitigate the worst ramifications of out-of-control population growth and consumption. The final movement looks at a theoretical future, warning us of what inaction may look like.

Movement One: Light Waves

Light Waves is a response to the shattering of the earth's ecosystems at the dawn of the Anthropocene Epoch—simultaneously acknowledging changes and loss, while revealing the beauty remaining to be discovered within the shards, providing a place of refuge.

The photographs isolate the complex mirror of Lake Superior's surface, producing purely abstract representations of the palette and textures lying outside of the frame.

Movement Two: Dream Waves

Dream Waves takes a departure from reality akin to the fluidity of dreams themselves. Blacklock edited these in a stream-of-consciousness manner influenced by his connection to Lake Superior's elements—the water, ice, atmosphere, and light, its varied rock formations, and the gemstones and precious metals embedded within them—as well as his awareness that the ramifications of encroaching human overpopulation are ever-present. We fled the cities during the pandemic, only to find our get-a-ways packed with people.

Employing editing techniques akin to Glitch Art, he exploited the idiosyncrasies of the digital capture and software programs, much as an electric guitarist manipulates the sounds emitted by strings, amplifying imperceptible details, shaping and distorting the outcome. In some images, the AI sharpening program introduces geometric, pseudo-human glyphs into the images, which he utilizes to symbolize our impacts on even the most remote and pristine parts of our planet (and also as a comment on the ubiquity of AI in our lives). The final artworks transcend mere representations of the original subjects, evolving into profound explorations of our impacts on our planet, and the inner workings of the medium—a medium that fundamentally alters the nature of photography and thus plays a pivotal role in shaping and redefining the content.

Movement Three: Encroachment

The global human population is now over 8 billion. Scientists estimate that if everyone on Earth could achieve a European standard of living, the planet could only sustain around 2 billion. The 6 billion difference is called overshoot. When populations overshoot the carrying capacity of their environment, they degrade its ability to sustain life, eventually depleting resources or creating so much toxic waste that the population crashes.

The ramifications of *human* overshoot affect not only humans, but all life: climate change, habitat loss, ocean acidification, and species extinctions are all happening at an alarming pace.

The immediate human consequences are also horrific, with climate refugees, wars, famine, water shortages, extreme poverty, and degradation of everyone's quality of life all exacerbated by overpopulation.

These artworks depict human encroachment into formerly natural lands and waters represented by the green and blue areas. Agriculture, housing, extraction industries, businesses, and our waste products all have an ever-expanding footprint, fragmenting and degrading ecosystems. To drive his point home, Blacklock has titled each piece with the global human population at the time the image was created.

The Encroachment images are reminiscent of NW Coast Indigenous artwork, Central American molas, and 1950s abstract expressionist paintings. The painterly, graphic patterns may hint of familiarity from afar, but upon close inspection, we discover details more intricate than any previous artwork done at this scale.

Movement Four: Lamentations

(AS BLACKLOCK NOTES: This movement is still a draft, your actions can help rewrite it)

Sometime in the not-so-distant future. The ramifications of unchecked population growth and consumption have triggered environmental tipping points humans could no longer correct. Whole ecosystems are in collapse. Pockets of livable land and waters exist (depicted by Blacklock in small green and blue areas), and enough species have survived to begin repopulating the planet, evolving to fit within the new environment.

Visually, these are the most intricate images in the exhibition. At a large scale, they appear as post-apocalyptic satellite images of an Earth dominated by roadways and transmission lines. On a small scale, you may imagine dragonfly wings in the detritus covering the ground. But even in this most devastating of metaphors, Blacklock has found a way to create works filled with wonder, and even beauty.

As the son of a nature photographer and naturalist, Blacklock has always viewed our place within the world as bound by the same laws as all other species, and that to survive and thrive, we must be humble enough to realize this. This does not diminish his feeling of awe for and expression of love for other humans—just the opposite, each of us is an integral part of this incredibly complex and wonderful planet.