



■ Brook Road farmstead

art for history's sake

PHOTOGRAPHY OF JIM WESTPHALEN

STORY: jasmine bigelow | WORKS: jim westphalen



The photo bug bit Jim Westphalen as a kid, when he was given an Instamatic camera. He quickly became fascinated with the concept of clicking a button and two weeks later picking up the prints, capturing something forever. “It was the most magical thing,” he recalls. Decades later, Jim the professional photographer, has reached a certain sweet spot in his career: work that he enjoys, and a notable talent that can be put to use to benefit others. The best part? He’s aware of how sweet it is to be in this particular place in life.

In fact, “fortunate” and “thankful” are words he uses quite often when talking about his work and his artistic journey. He is—of course—referring to how he feels, and yet, they are the

same words those of us who appreciate art, history, and local stories might use when exploring and explaining the details of his work. We are fortunate to experience a converging of cultural importance, and thankful to him for doing it.

“You get to a certain point in your career, where you find you have a passion, and you want to do more with it,” says Jim, a tall, blue-eyed, gentle, engaging man, who is forward thinking in a nostalgic kind of way. “I feel super fortunate because people are really understanding my vision.”

Well known throughout the region as a commercial photographer, primarily for architecture, resort lifestyle, and food, Jim has enjoyed a long, busy career doing what he loves. Now, he’s making an intentional shift to do more fine art landscape photography, and in the process is gaining notability as a fine art photographer. And, as a documentarian. >>

■ Kendra Dew Westphalen portrait of her husband, photographer Jim Westphalen, as he photographs The Church of the Brethren, circa 1915, Kremlin, Mont.



- The Church of the Brethren, circa 1915, Kremlin, Mont.
- Hay stack, Ryegate, Mont.
- Red Barn 3, circa early 1880s, Charlotte, Vt.

Still in use, this barn sits on the land that was originally settled by Capt. James Hill, who purchased it before the Revolutionary War. After the war, he sold the 240-acre parcel to his son, Thomas Chittenden Hill, who developed it into the largest apple orchard in New England. The Hill family continued to live on the site until 1946. Now used as a woodworking shop, it has been in the Tuttle family for half a century.



Born and raised in suburbia Long Island, Jim is a self-described country boy, which he attributes to his childhood summers spent with his grandmother in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. As an adult, he visited Vermont frequently with friends, and his moving-to-Vermont story is similar to those heard so often—he just couldn’t stop thinking: wouldn’t it be great if we could live here?

In 1996, he discovered Burlington’s creative, urbanized vibe and he found there the potential to continue his already established commercial photography business. But moving his young family here—his kids were 2, 4, and 9 at the time—was a leap of faith. He knew he preferred to live in a place like Vermont, but the big question remained: “Do I believe in my abilities and what I can do?”

He chose to believe. He uprooted himself and his family and began the challenging process of planting roots in northern Vermont. Fortunately, commercial clients in New York stuck with him while he built a reputation and clientele closer to home.

As a result of his ongoing faith and the support of the people around him—notably his wife, Kendra Dew Westphalen, kids and family, production manager Bill Killon, and the galleries who’ve taken a chance on him—his Vermont roots have grown deep in the past 23 years, influencing a positive local reputation, inspiring a shift to fine art, and spawning a more widespread purpose.

“Here in Vermont, the landscape is phenomenal,” Jim says. “In my travels around, I’ll happen upon a structure that will capture me, and I have to make plans to go back and revisit it in the right light or season.”

He has diligently gone back, and the result is “Vanish: Disappearing Icons of a Rural America.” A ten-year-in-the-making artistic project, “Vanish” captures what Jim describes as “the built landscape; those features and patterns reflecting human occupation within the natural surroundings.”

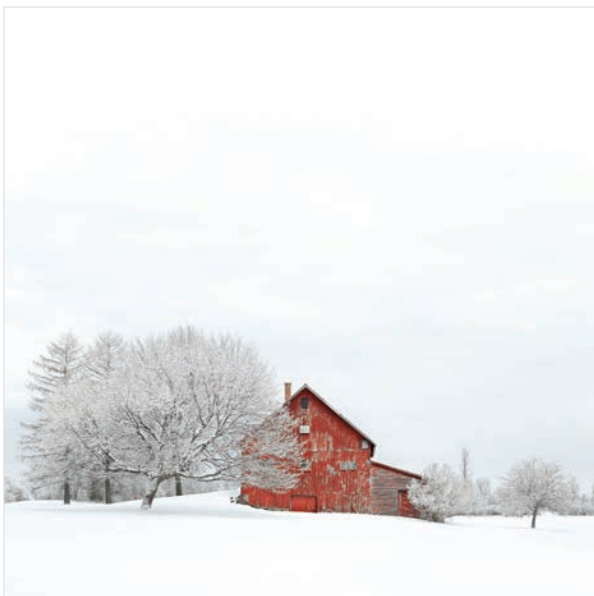
His artistic muse, so to speak.

While “Vanish” is an art project, there is a deep historical and anthropological side of it.

“Now is the time we are witnessing this profound loss of the ordinary and extraordinary structures that our common heritage and the very soul of Vermont were built upon,” he explains. Along with them, the stories of the rural economy that was once our way of life may also disappear.

Some of the historic structures Jim has captured on film have already vanished. On several occasions, he has gone back to a location of note to find that the building that once stood there is gone, the victim of a natural collapse or an intentional teardown.

“The ones that got away,” he says. >>





■ Orwell Barn 1, Orwell, Vt.
 ■ Sugarhouse 1, South Enosburgh, Vt.

For those that don't get away, his photography captures a certain mood with an exquisite, show-stopping quality. It reveals the loneliness and vulnerability of the changed rural economy.

Jim is not only photographing an artistic catalog of historically significant structures of our cultural and economic past that sit in disrepair or abandonment, but he is also serving as documentarian, gathering facts and anecdotes, and weaving it all together on gallery walls, in a book, and in a documentary film—coming in 2020.

Vermont features heavily in “Vanish,” but Jim is also including structures that are indigenous to specific regions of the U.S. Barns, outbuildings, coal sheds, grain elevators, one-room schoolhouses, and churches.

In a tangible example of his forward-thinking but nostalgic personality, Jim uses a 35-year-old vintage view camera to shoot. But he adapted it to digital, in a sort of marrying of old and new. The camera has been a trusted friend for over three decades.

Jim's on-site approach to photography tends to be methodical, but, “if the light is fantastic in this moment, you better figure it out quick because the right light is everything,” he says.

Some of his on-site tricks include merging and overlapping exposures, and moving the camera just slightly to blend it all together. He photographs everything in color, later transitioning some images to black and white; he sometimes gives a patina to details. >>

■ Salisbury Barn 1, Salisbury, Vt.

It is known that this barn was used for horses and milking cows in the early 1950s. Three families have owned the structure in the decades since; it was used mostly for hay and machinery storage until the 1990s. The barn is no longer structurally sound and sits vacant.

■ Mount Tabor Grain Mill 2, Danby, Vt.

Built by Goodwin Crosby as a grain mill in the 1950s, the original structure burned to the ground in 1963. A new mill was rebuilt and completed in 1967. This structure is no longer in use.



His images are not overly manipulated, either on-site or in his Shelburne studio, but his choices are a means to the end. He knows what he wants the final image to look like, and uses technology to achieve his vision.

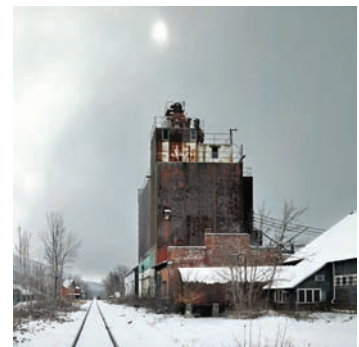
Final images have a painterly quality, and it's unsurprising to learn that his influences include Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper, and A. Hale Johnson—all painters.

The first time he had an emotional experience viewing a piece of art was when he first saw Johnson's work at a gallery in Vermont. He couldn't believe that human hands could create such an incredible thing, and he even wrote a note to Johnson; they've since become good friends.

His images are presented like paintings, and that's because he wants people to get the textural sense from his work. He prints on 100 percent rag paper, which is specifically designed for fine art applications. The paper has tooth to it. There is no glass, and prints are not matted. The works are also extremely large, because it's easier to see, acknowledge, and appreciate the intense detail.

For "Vanish," the research is an additional process of its own. Jim knocks on doors, visits historical societies, and has discovered that six degrees of separation is all part of the adventure. He's found that people are open and willing to share their stories, and the stories behind the buildings he's set his lens upon.

There will always be those that get away. But, fortunately, they won't all get away. ■



ESSENTIALS:

- Westphalen exhibits at West Branch Gallery, Stowe.
- Documentary film: "Vanish: Disappearing Icons of a Rural America." View trailer at jimwestphalen.com. Feature film coming in 2020.
- Book: "Vanish: Disappearing Icons of a Rural America." Available at the gallery.