

Palo Alto
Weekly
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Arts & Entertainment



"Dancing Shadows," by Allan Hayes. The 1999 photograph was taken at Yosemite, two miles East of Tuolumne Meadows.

Distilling the great outdoors

Palo Altan Allan Hayes launches a debut show of limited-edition photographic prints

by Laura Reiley

In 1941, the National Park Service paid Ansel Adams about \$22 a day to take photographs for an ill-fated mural that was never to be displayed in the Department of the Interior building in Washington, D.C. He roamed around Arizona, California, Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming taking austere black-and-white photos with the aim of encouraging nature preservation in national parks. These were breathtaking photos of Yosemite and other national treasures that prompted words like "sacrosanct," "awe-inspiring" and so forth. Our national parks were precious, sacred spaces, his work seemed to say, not to be trifled with.

Palo Alto resident Allan Hayes comes at some of the same subjects from a different angle. The Sierra Club would hardly tsk at his gorgeous, oversized color photographs of the High Sierras and the Big Island of Hawaii, but the scale is more human. These are outdoor spaces you could tramp around in, touch with open palms.

"I'm trying to say, 'This is who we are. This is what we've been for 3 to 5 million years, only now we've got a little social overlay over the top. For me, this is rooting stuff, basic stuff that gives us an understanding of form and balance.'"

Having spent the last quarter century at the helm of Emerson-Hayes Advertising and Design in Palo Alto (his clients included Chevron, Apple and the Learning Company), this is new territory for Hayes, at least



professionally. Several years ago his longtime photography avocation blossomed into a more serious undertaking.

"All the work was sitting in my hallway. I was knee-deep in it and I needed to take the next step," Hayes recalled. "But galleries have a two- to three-year waiting list and I don't have that kind of patience." For his "coming-out party," as he calls it, he ain't doing too bad, thanks to local developer Roxy Rapp.

"(Rapp) didn't know me from anyone. I showed him a folder of my work. He looked at it for a few minutes and said, 'Come with me.' He drove me down to the space and said, 'What do you think? OK, you can use it.'"

The space in question was a huge, empty, light-filled New York-style

warehouse on Alma Street that presented a few problems for a would-be art show. Case in point: No walls.

Hayes designed where the walls would go and got some help from friend Matt Weston, grandson of one of the other great photographers of the 1930s and '40s, Edward Weston. The result is a lattice of suspended walls crisscrossing the vast room, on which Hayes' first limited-edition series is hung, framed gorgeously by renowned Bay Area framer Peter Kirkeby.

Hayes' 30 works seem to roughly divide into two groups: Crystal-sharp photos capture jagged volcanic fissures and craggy granite spires; while a more painterly approach is brought to bear on ponds whose dappled sunlight may reveal a tortoise at their emerald center.

And while many of the photos explore stark, majestic terrain, Hayes' attention to color softens and broadens what our eye sees, allowing us to focus on form, texture and incipient movement. In the lushness of his color prints, Hayes seems to have taken to heart what Cole Weston, Edward Weston's son, once said: "To see color as form means looking at the image in a new way, trying to free oneself from absorption in subject matter."

Like his esteemed precursors, Hayes aims to innovate in his work. To solve the problem of matte board not accommodating oversized prints, he invented an ingenious type of framing that incorporates a wide black gutter around the photo. And while Adams developed zone exposure to get maximum tonal range from black-and-white film in the '30s, Hayes has labored to perfect his photographic craft, as well as the archival-quality hybrid print style (a laser-driven technique that guarantees his works lasting 70-100 years) in which his photos are finished.

In one corner of the gallery, Hayes exhibits a series of prints called "Mono Grasses," a series that demonstrates

how he refines his pictures in the Photoshop computer program to distill the vision he initially saw in nature.

"In my work, I'm trying to go there, spend time and pay attention."

The results have yielded an assemblage of striking images that bring us a new and personal vision of special places in nature. But can a businessman-turned-photographer make a go of it? Hey, Ansel Adams planned a career as a concert pianist before losing his heart to Western landscapes. So anything's possible.

What: "Pieces of the Planet," an exhibit of nature photography by Allan Hayes Where: 999 Alma St., Palo Alto When: Through Dec. 31. Viewing hours are 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5-9 p.m. The public is encouraged to visit in the evening for maximum viewing potential. Cost: Admission is free. Info: Call (650) 322-7841 or visit http://www.piecesoftheplanet.com . So thanks to Rapp's munificence, you can pull up a beanbag chair and spend some time with the photos.
