

The Final Frontier

by Heather Jenó

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It's unlikely that the photographers of the late-19th-century American West, who braved uncharted territories to capture the natural beauty of its expansive wilderness, could have imagined the extent of its inevitable urbanization. Although photographers such as William Henry Jackson and Carlton Watkins certainly understood that the taming of the West was unavoidable, they probably never would have guessed that by the turn of the next century, the last large reserves of uninhabited nature would lie in the wilderness of Alaska.

Jeff Jones continues their tradition of pioneering wilderness landscape photography in the series of photographs of the Arctic Natural Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) that makes up his current exhibition, *A Wilderness Worth Saving*. The format of the photographs has evolved from gelatin silver prints to digitally produced giclée prints, and at the same time the purpose of the pictures has also evolved. With large oil-mining industries taking over much of the Arctic Coast, Jones now feels an obligation to address the impact of such development on the land. Through his investment in the subject matter, the contemporary naturalist photographer takes on the role of environmentalist.

But first and foremost, it is clear that Jones's main objective is to make an aesthetic journey with his photographs. Hiking into remote areas of ANWR, Jones is privy to worlds that resist sharing their secrets. Sharp, focused images of winter ground foliage in "Tundra Close Up" reveal the tenacity and pattern of the natural world. On the other end of the spectrum, his large-scale photos of wilderness stretching miles across the pristine landscape hold their own mysterious surprises. In "Fall's Red Brushstrokes," imposing mountainsides hide in cloaks of misty haze, while fields of vibrant color shroud an abundance of wildlife below. By taking quick, consecutive images of the same view, Jones reveals its panoramic vastness in a way that it would seem only the naked eye could behold. The effect is a painterly vision of the refuge that captures the scale and overwhelming monumentality of the scene, and echoes the naïve idealism found in earlier portraits.

That the exhibition opens on the exact day of the 37th anniversary of the Union Oil Company oil spill off of the Santa Barbara coast is no coincidence; Jones's photographs are a palpable reminder of how precious our resources are — and how quickly they can disappear.