

Pasatiempo

MIXED MEDIA

Devil is in the details

Michael Abatemarco | For The New Mexican | Oct 7, 2022



Joan Myers, *Monument Valley, UT* (2021), archival pigment ink print; courtesy Dolph Briscoe Center for American History
Joan Myers



She could be photographing along the route the pilgrims took to reach Santiago de Compostela in Spain in the Middle Ages; contrasting the elements of fire and ice in trips to active volcanoes and Antarctica; documenting World War II-era Japanese relocation camps on U.S. soil; or illuminating the beauty of threatened habitats in the jungles of India.

Arizona-based Joan Myers remains an intrepid, adventurous photographer, whose projects often take her to some of the world's most remote and difficult-to-reach locations but with an eye towards creating a dialogue around the pressing issues of our times, such as the climate crisis and the impact of humankind on the landscape.

In her book, *Where the Buffalo Roamed* (Damiani Editore, 148 pages, 2019, \$50), she turned to a subject closer to home: the myth of the American West. And it's one she's expanded on in a new monograph, *The Devil's Highway: On the Road in the American West* (Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas Press, 168 pages, \$45).

"*Where the Buffalo Roamed* was primarily color with just a few black and whites," Myers says. "It was a little bit more about iconography. This book is all black and white. It has a little bit more of an emotional tone to it than *Buffalo* did."

The Devil's Highway includes a short story with the same title by writer, conservationist, and Pulitzer-Prize finalist William deBuys. DeBuys' short story was first published in *Story* magazine in 1992. He collaborated with Myers previously on the book *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-Down California* (University of New Mexico Press, 400 pages, 1999, \$35). *Salt Dreams*, which includes text by deBuys and photography by Myers, inspired Murat Eyuboglu's 2016 documentary *The Colorado*, which was co-written by Eyuboglu and deBuys.



Myers and deBuys present a 6 p.m. talk on *The Devils Highway* on Friday, Oct. 7, at Collected Works Bookstore (202 Galisteo St., 505-988-4226, collectedworksbookstore.com). They'll be discussing their love of the West and its changing cultural landscape. Signed copies of the book are available for purchase.

The talk is free and will livestream via Zoom (register in advance at sfnm.co/3y1Xtf-register).

Myers' book came about during the coronavirus pandemic, when restrictions on international travel prevented her from taking on projects overseas.



Joan Myers, *Conway, Texas* (2020), archival pigment ink print; courtesy Dolph Briscoe Center for American History
Joan Myers

"I didn't feel like I could travel by airplane and go anywhere else with all the COVID restrictions," she says. "But it was possible to do car travel safely, so I did. Really, I went all over the West."

The images in *The Devil's Highway* were showcased this summer in an exhibit at Obscura Gallery (1405 Paseo de Peralta, 505-577-6708, obscuragallery.net), where Myers is represented. Work from the series is available at the gallery.

The photographs feature Myers' compelling use of contrasting imagery to underscore the dichotomies between the West as it exists in the imagination, or through the lens of nostalgia, and the realities of the contemporary West. And it poses the question, without asking it directly: What happened to the American Dream?

"What I was thinking about through all of this work was the difference between the myth and the reality, and the fact that the myth has been expressed with cowboy and Western images for the last hundred years. But the myth and the imagery are disappearing. We're left with a reality that's very different and without a new myth to go along with it."



Michael Abatemarco

Staff Writer



★ Follow Michael Abatemarco

POPULAR IN THE COMMUNITY