

# Touching Ground

FINDING THE AMERICAN SOUTH

20×24 Polaroids by Jennifer Trausch

Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame



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### 20×24 Polaroids by Jennifer Trausch

From 2006 to 2011, large-format photographer Jennifer Trausch took the refrigerator-sized 20×24 inch Polaroid camera from the predictable, comfortable confines of its studio home out onto the winding roads of the rural American South. Led from town to town by word of mouth, instinct, and caprice, Trausch worked steadily to understand some of the South's essential truths through the strange moments she happened across in each small place: at fairs, auctions, dances, bars, and rodeos; in homes and shacks, open fields, swamps, forests, dirt roads and highways. The massive, beautiful contact-print images that Trausch made in these myriad places show a conflicted South: hopeful and menacing, at rest and crackling with life, defeated and defiant.

### Beginnings

Prior to and throughout the project, Trausch was director of photography at the 20×24 Studio in Manhattan, where for eight years she worked with photographers and other artists to realize their visions on the 239-pound analog 20×24 camera. By nature a restless, wandering documentary photographer, she rebelled against her everyday life in the studio, where ideas were typically brought to the camera. Trausch turned this relationship upside down by bringing the camera out of the dark studio into the fray of the outside world.

Historically, only a few projects have been made with the 20×24 camera out in the elements: namely, Neil Slavin's documents of modern-day "Britons," William Wegman's playful vignettes of Weimaraners in Maine, and Julian Schnabel's free and loose record of his personal life and surroundings. These projects challenged the camera and the medium, and they gave Trausch faith to break all of the camera's rules, trusting that she could work through the logistical hurdles of shooting outside and naturally find her way.

*Touching Ground*, Trausch's own endeavor with the 20×24 camera, began very loosely when a last-minute cancellation left a camera available for one entire week, a rarity at the time. Trausch jumped at the opportunity, rented a lift-gate truck to transport the camera and a few supplies, grabbed assistant Kim Venable, and hit the road ready to shoot anything. Upon leaving New York City, they headed south, partly because Polaroid films favor warmer temperatures, and partly because the South was an area of the United States that Trausch knew almost nothing about firsthand.

The intent of the venture, at least initially, was documentary—to explore a broad, unfamiliar place at a particular moment in time. Trausch recorded, as directly and quickly as one can with the 20×24, what she saw and reacted to as she traveled. She had no agenda or fixed route, aside from sticking to smaller roads and towns and stopping whenever anything jumped out at her: a hand-painted road sign offering "Guppies for Sale," towns named Hot Coffee and Two Egg, an auto shop doubling as a social club or an amateur observatory perched on a garage. Even when these stops did not lead to a photograph, they often guided Trausch elsewhere—to a flatfoot dance, revival, swamp, or junk auction.

Within each of these wondrous and strange places, images started from a moment that Trausch felt and wanted to communicate. That initial moment, however, often changed over shoots that typically lasted hours for a single final picture. Photographing with the 20×24 is a laborious, manual process. During that process, Trausch often departed from what was, and entered the more active and reactive role of what was to become, which meant that the shoot could change simply by someone altering his or her expression or by the wind blowing. The beauty of these long sessions was that they gave time for the moment and the image to grow and open. What began as a snapshot "document" became something that was neither fully a document nor fully staged, and was more evocative for that balance.

### Better Moving Than Standing Still

Just as the images often became something new over each long shoot, the project itself grew and changed over the five years Trausch worked on it, while the South pulled and pushed on her. The initial photographs in this series were relatively matter-of-fact, sharp and didactic in their storytelling; but Trausch quickly realized that she did not always want to give the whole story away, that for her, mystery and the South were intertwined. Working only with available light was limiting, but eventually Trausch found a way to use long exposures and limited depth of field so that light, faces, fabrics, and animals moved, shook, and danced. It was not always easy to see how these two photographic approaches fit together; through much of the project, it seemed that Trausch was making two parallel but distinct bodies of work—one sharp and real, the other loose and surreal.

What united these two strands, more so than their simmering tension and dreamlike reality, was their intention to expose the essential feeling of a place and how that place is experienced. For Trausch, the small half-noticed details were the most specific, powerful tool to communicate that feeling: the sweet smoke of a day-long barbecue; flashes of suspicion or warmth in a sideways glance; the breeze working its way across the landscape; the pride of a gourd farmer with his fingers in his own soil; the inescapable heat, humidity, and sweat; the flotsam making its way across a turgid swamp at dawn. Through these and a thousand other details, wandering days, nights, and memories, Trausch found the South in these images, so that you might find it too.

#### ARTIST ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Kim Venable, for supporting and grounding this project over five years. We endured heat, bugs, and long days on the road together; laughing, sharing, struggling, and growing with the people we met along the way.

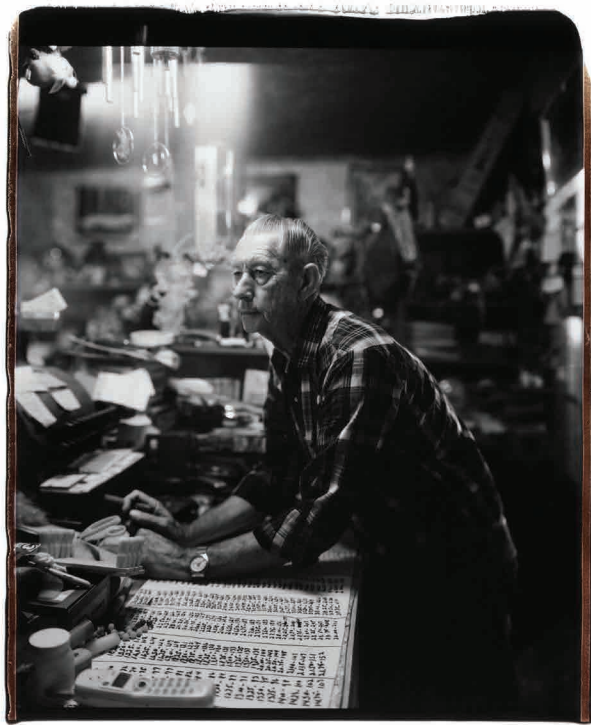
Thanks also to Gabe Greenberg, Eli Fernald, Beth Bates, Jeremy Helton, John Reuter, and the 20×24 Studio who all gave in their own ways to make this project possible.

And finally, thank you to my subjects and collaborators, the people who gave their time and shared their stories.

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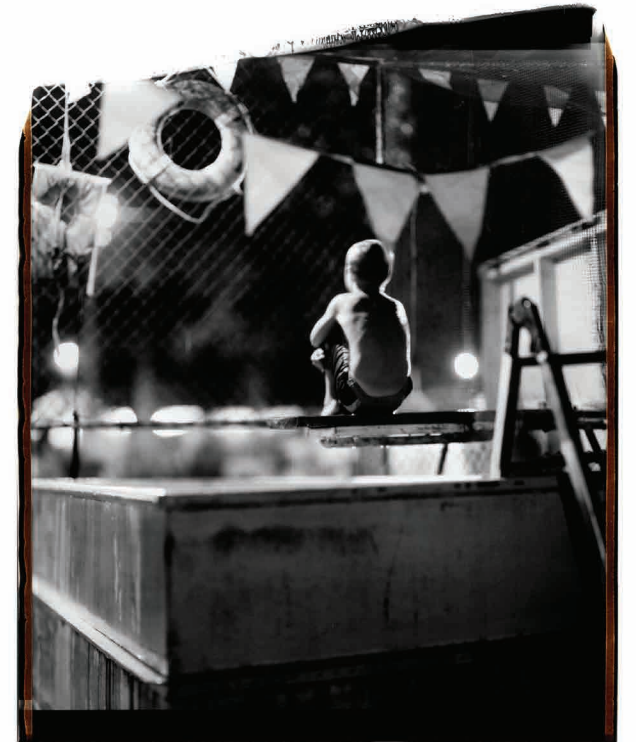
Clarence, 2006



Virginia, 2006



Grand Bay, 2009



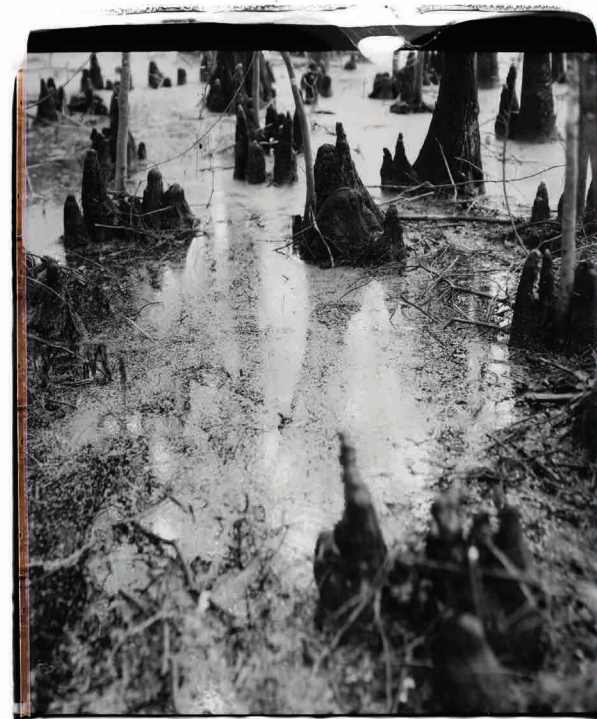
Hunter, 2008



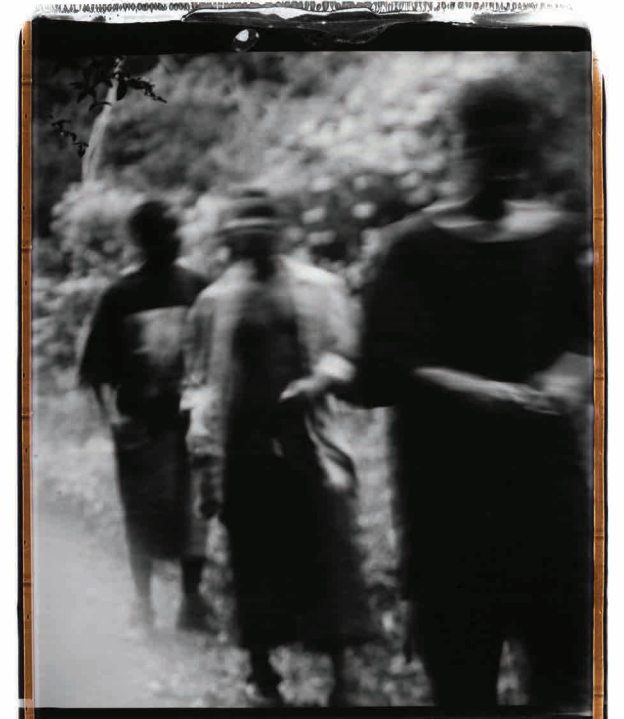
Fowlstown, 2007



Thomastown, 2009

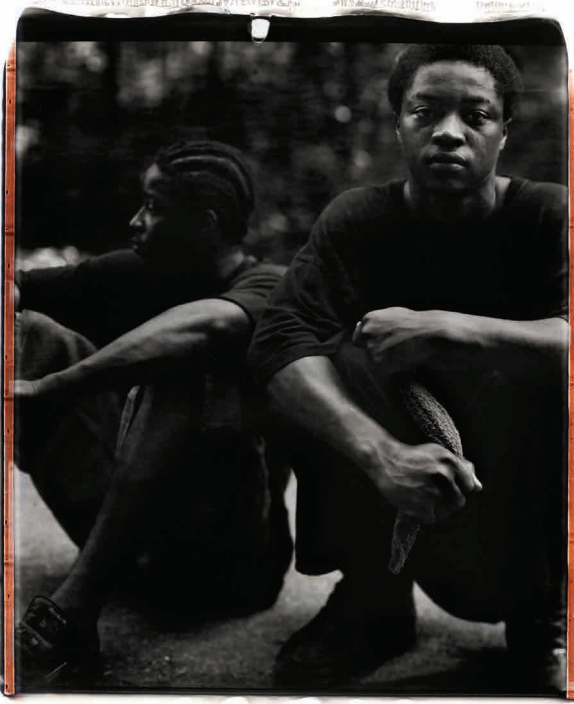


Manchac, 2009

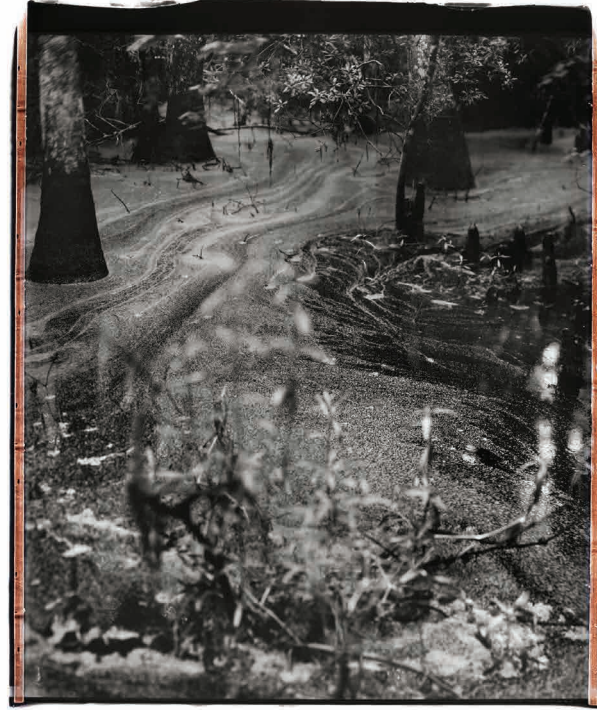


Jose Brothers, 2009

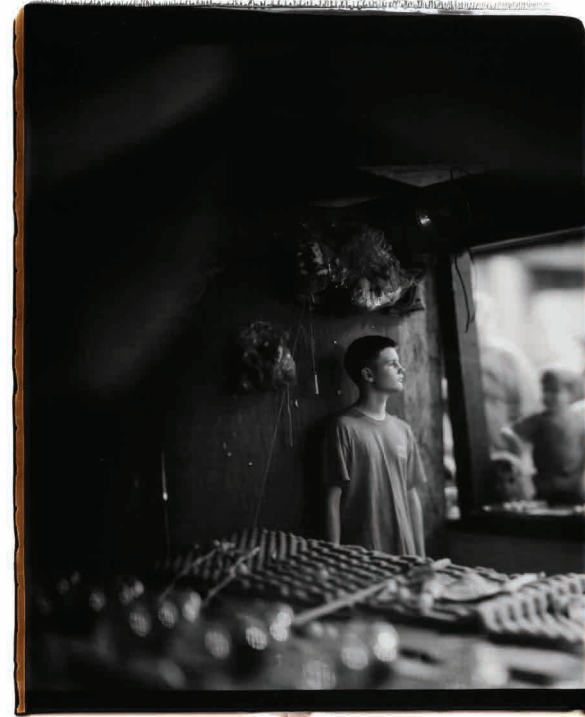




Sunny South, 2009



Manchac Dawn, 2009



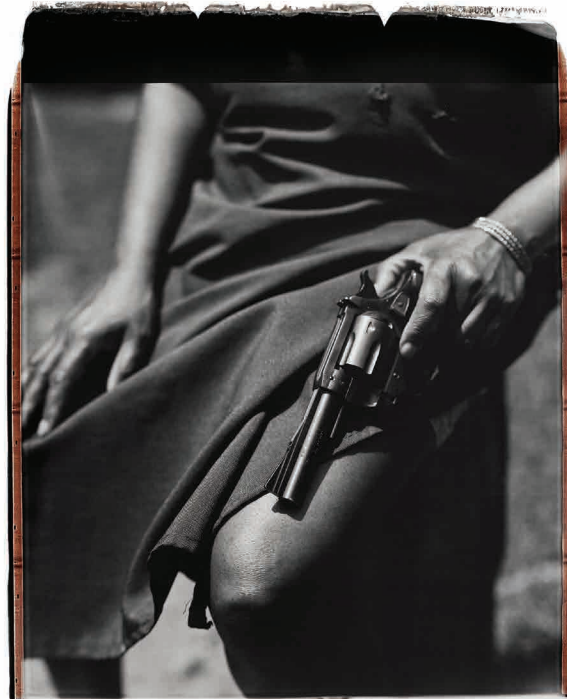
Dalton, 2008



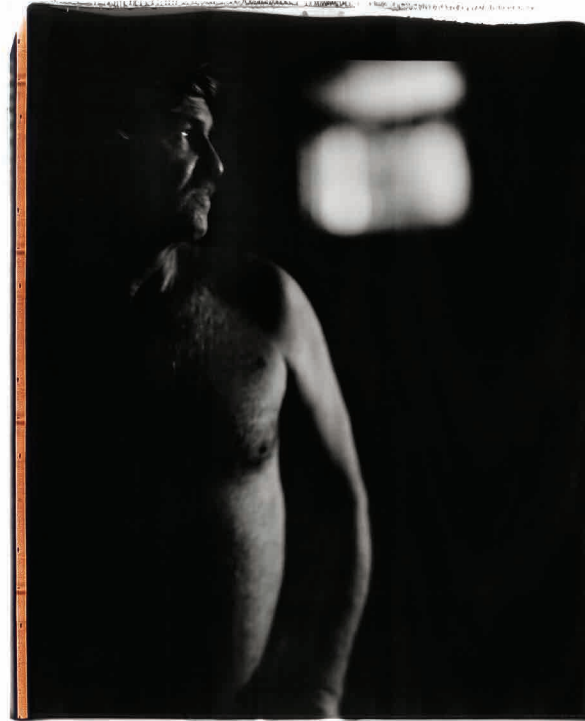
Jimmy's, 2006



Alvin Baptiste, 2009



Maxine, 2009



Tallapoosa, 2009



Ariel, 2008





Jennifer Trausch uses one of the five 20x24 Polaroid Cameras hand-built by Polaroid in the late 1970's. These enormous wooden cameras resemble early large format cameras, but are unique in that the camera back includes a large pair of rollers to process instant films as the photographer works. The film negative and paper sheet are processed together with a chemical reagent, activating the silvers in the negative to migrate to a white receiving paper. The layers of the film are then peeled apart to reveal a one-of-a-kind image. Trausch's favorite aspect of the camera is that it beautifully merges the incredible detail of a 20x24 negative with the soft and painterly quality of a Polaroid diffusion transfer print.