

Series Number Sixteen

Rainforest - Oahu Hawaii

Photographs 1991 - Essay 2025

Twenty Photographs

Michael Nye

Rain Forest: Oahu, Hawaii

On the last day of the world,

I would want to plant a tree

W.S. Merwin

In the forest above Manoa Valley and upward through the hills on the island of Oahu it's raining. The salmon crested cockatoos call and cry to each other. The earth is moist and the ground holds its melting leaves. What does intricacy have to say about shades of green, trees that are fully awake, the earnestness of insects or the language of the zebra doves? Every look is a bloom of midnight colors. Every inch of ground has an expression. Rain is as present as the slow reach of shadows. How long did it take to create this dark forest of so many living things? The difference between a desert and a rainforest must be water.

William Merwin former U.S. Poet Laureate and twice awarded the Pulitzer Prize died in March, 2019. William and his wife Paula, turned their 19 acres in Maui, Hawaii into a lush palm garden. Over 40 years, they planted more than 3000 trees, nearly 900 different varieties of indigenous and endangered palms. Today, it is considered one of the most important collections of palms in the world.

It was July of 1991 when William was asked to speak on the impact on earth's changing climate in Honolulu. We were living in Honolulu for six months, Naomi, teaching at the University of Hawaii and I was practicing law long distance. The event director somehow failed to promote William's lecture. The auditorium was mostly empty. Eleven individuals were present. William spoke for one hour and fifteen minutes. Passionately. Without notes. His poems and stories connected us to our planet and to responsibility. At dinner that night, after his lecture, William talked about palm trees and the generosity of dirt. He never mentioned the mostly empty auditorium.

The next morning, William took Naomi and me for a hike and a stare. We drove above Honolulu, above Manoa valley into a cloudy lush rainforest. We hiked up among the thick trees. We stood still for a long time. William knew about the history of trees, birds and the sounds they made. He picked up fallen leaves. William stopped and pointed to a tall palm that rose upward into the canopy. Our heads lifted. William told us, "This palm, *Spectabilis* is extremely rare. Endangered. It has a remarkable life cycle. It lives to 100 years, blooms only once and dies. *Spectabilis* means, 'blessed.'"

Sometimes, what you don't want to do, becomes the thing you want to do the most. I never really wanted to live in Hawaii. I thought it might be confining. However, the first week in our apartment high on the hills overlooking the lights of Honolulu and the Pacific Ocean, the trade winds that traveled so far, rocked us to sleep. An island has a gravity and pull that it owns.

RAIN FOREST SERIES - LYON ARBORETUM

Harold Lyon Arboretum is a 200-acre botanical garden and tropical rainforest with a collection of more than 5000 plant species. For four months, a few days each week I spent time hiking and photographing deep into the wild rainforest hills. (See - *Lyon Arboretum -One*)

At night in Hawaii, loading my 8x10" negatives into my film holders, I wondered what light and moist air might touch this film. This series of photographs was the result and a desire to spend time in a rainforest. I photographed tree trunks – bodies of trees, younger and older tree trunks in the same way I would photograph people. I also looked upward and made photographs of the rainforest canopy.

There were challenges. I brought in my 8x10" view camera, tripod, film plates and backdrop. My equipment was heavy and awkward. It rained. I used large plastic sheets to protect my film and camera. It was muddy and slippery climbing up and down hills and valleys. My camera fell over. I fell over. My backdrop blew and tumbled. Many of the sheet films were ruined by rain. I wondered what I was doing? Large branches and thick foliage prevented mobility. Why was I making this simple series of photographs so difficult? Why was I photographing trunks of trees?

Three birdwatchers in Lyon Arboretum pointed their fingers toward a flying Red-Vented Bulbul. The forest of trees leans in the late afternoons. The muted light and slow rain impacts mood. At night, the moonlight, the starlight, and raindrops first fall on leaves before finding the soft soil below. Many days I would not photograph at all, but just listen. The sounds in this wild place were dramatic. The leaves, the wind, the rain, the birds, the murmuring, the chirping behind me, the moan high in the trees, the insects were all using this space at the same time.

The birds and ants know how lucky they are living on this island. The rain arrives each early afternoon on time. Our attention changed while we were living on Oahu. What became important, what we talked about, what we thought about privately were sensory experiences. The richness of the soft air, Hawaiian words and songs, the ocean and its sand, the rainforest and its community of greenness seeped into our bones.



LAST NOTES:

In August, 2016 I interviewed and photographed poet William Merwin in his home on the island of Maui, Hawaii. William and his wife Paula were living in the middle of their 40 year-old palm forest. I was working on a project on blindness and adaptation, interviews and portraits. I heard that William was losing his eyesight due to macular degeneration. I flew to Maui and spent the afternoon asking William questions about blindness and the nature of perception. It was raining and we drank coffee and hot tea.

I asked William, what does the public not understand about blindness? William responded by talking about rain and dragon flies. How rain turns into streams and how dragon flies can fly sideways and backwards.

I asked William about awareness and visual memory? He responded by talking about sound. How sound has a shadow and a shape and a destination;

I asked William if his vision loss has impacted his sense of time? Did he have any newfound perspectives about attention? William responded by talking about his palm garden. *"Trees are our teachers. They are millions and millions of years old and connect us to the earth and being alive. We know so little about trees. We have to pay attention."*



Lyon Arboretum - Rainforest - One



Lyon Arboretum -Two



Lyon Arboretum -Three



Lyon Arboretum - Four



Lyon Arboretum - Five



Lyon Arboretum - Six



Lyon Arboretum - Seven



Lyon Arboretum -Nine



Lyon Arboretum - Ten



Lyon Arboretum - Eleven



Lyon Arboretum - Twelve



Lyon Arboretum - Thirteen



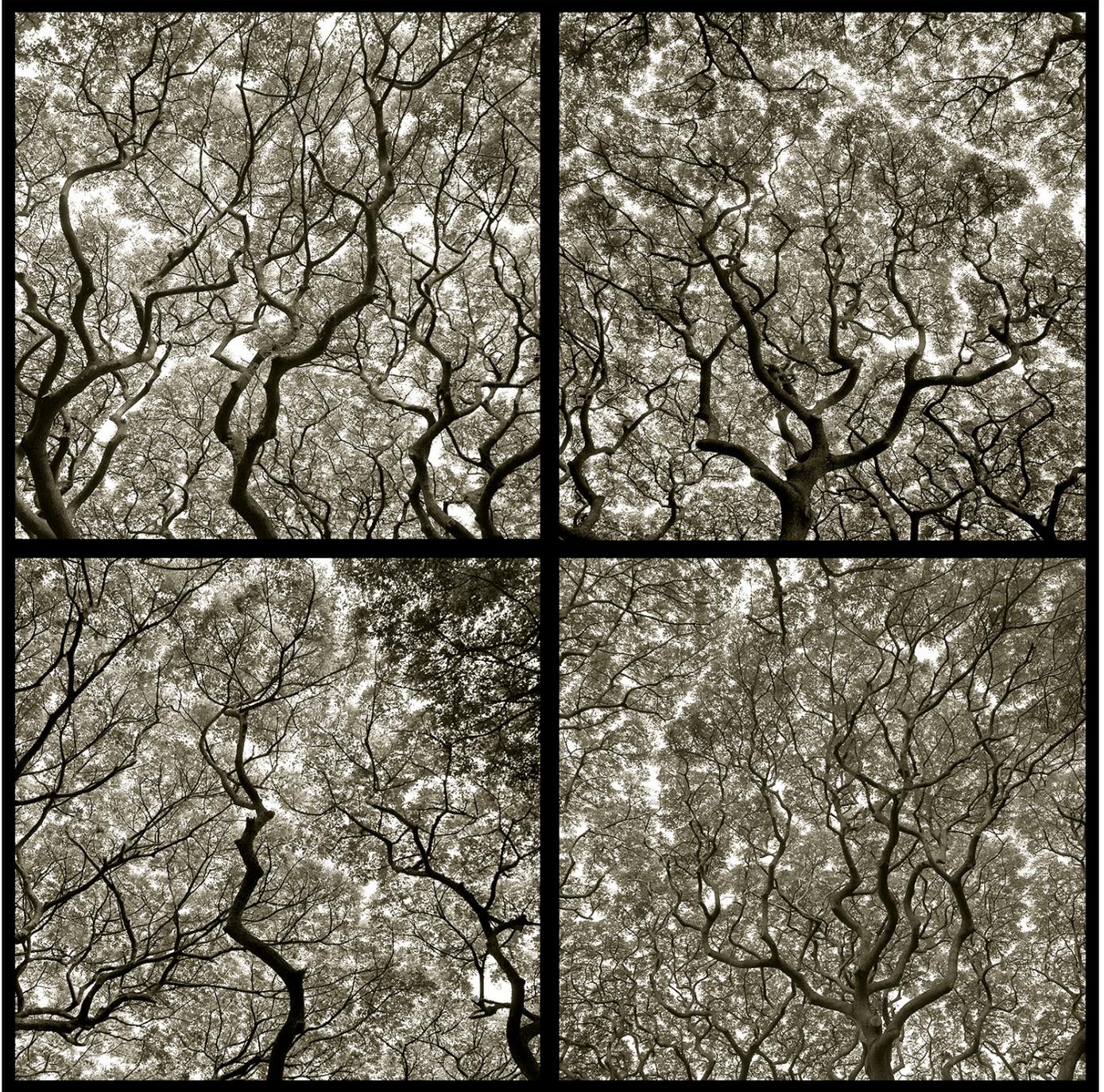
Lyon Arboretum - Fourteen



Lyon Arboretum - Fifteen



Lyon Arboretum - Sixteen



Lyon Arboretum - Seventeen



Lyon Arboretum - Eighteen



Lyon Arboretum - Nineteen



Lyon Arboretum - Twenty