

BARRY UNDERWOOD

ARTIST STATEMENT

Barry Underwood's creative practice stands at the intersection of staged photography, land art, and minimalist sculpture. His work illuminates environments that hold rich ecological and cultural histories and are sites of destructive human behavior. By building and photographing sculptures of light, Underwood elucidates the ways humans intervene in the natural environment while highlighting how society normalizes these exploitations. His work makes visible the cultural constructs of wilderness and, by extension, the environmental issues related to human use and abuse of natural resources.

Each of Underwood's photographs begins with many hours of location search, talking with community members, learning the place's ecological and social histories, and studying satellite imagery. He also visits tourist sites and science centers to gather documented narratives while spending considerable time in the environment, watching, listening, and exploring. His goal is to learn how humans, past, and present, engage with a particular site and, more broadly, the land itself. Through these investigations, Underwood has come to understand that landscape contains rich layers of information, providing for different types of storytelling.

Underwood applies this understanding through the creation of his temporary site-specific sculptures that are then photographed. Using the landscape as a stage and the intrusions as the players, Underwood's light installations trace what has happened on a site. Shapes, lines, discordant colors, and diagrammatic perspectives are made vivid with electroluminescent wire or LEDs. Within the photograph, these sculptures visually intersect with the landscape into balanced compositions that lure the viewer in, while altered perspectives destabilize the figure-ground relationship and disrupt expectations. These artist-made light intrusions refer to the scarring, seepage, division, removal, and infestation inflicted on nature. Each gesture points to ways humans force their will on the natural environment, whether by erecting a literal fence, dumping toxic waste, or designating property lots on a survey map. These works demonstrate the paradox of the human relationship with nature, calling attention to the dichotomy of resilience and fragility embedded in both.

Underwood's photographs tell the story of the sublime, the terrifying and wondrous power of nature contrasted by the naive and dangerous impact of human activity on our environment. There is a moral to the tale. The inviting aesthetics function as a kind of "Trojan horse" smuggling this necessary message past the bastion of doubters who question the need for environmental action. The glow of the temporary light installations reflects on its environs and also on the viewer as if to say that all of humankind's actions or inactions eventually cast a light back on us all.