

Meanwhile In Detroit

Edgar Cardenas

About the Artist

Edgar Cardenas spent his childhood in Brodhead, WI, playing in the woods between neighbors' homes and catching snakes along the Sugar River. He completed his Ph.D. in Sustainability at Arizona State University, which included a significant MFA component. To date, he's the only student in his doctoral program to have his work contain both a photography exhibit and a dissertation. A large portion of the latter was on naturalist Aldo Leopold, whom he had never heard of until grad school—despite their homes being just 45 minutes apart. Edgar authored the book *Between Two Pines*, on the need to intersect art and science to address our sustainability challenges. He works very slowly and has a tough time knowing when a project is complete, which makes all his projects long-term projects. Additionally, he suffers from a touch of imposter syndrome. Edgar lives in Detroit with his partner (Sandra), son (Abi), and their 3 dogs (Noodles, Rubble, and Tornado).

I. Introduction

Nestled between highways and city neighborhoods, Eliza Howell Park in Northwest Detroit is a wild and evolving landscape where nature coexists with urban life. Making photographs as the seasons of his own family life unfolded, Edgar Cardenas' work asks: What becomes possible when we intentionally cultivate more intimate relationships with the land and its living histories?

Cardenas challenges representations of wilderness shaped by historical U.S. Geological Survey photography and influential 20th-century figures like Ansel Adams. These portrayals often depict nature as pristine and untouched by human presence. In contrast, Cardenas expresses grounded, everyday relationships with the landscape, recognizing it as continuously shaped by both human life and natural time.

Inspired by childhood curiosity, Indigenous knowledge, and the rhythms of seasonal change, *Meanwhile in Detroit* explores how we can be in relation with the natural world, especially in places often overlooked or considered "ordinary."

II. The Sublime and The Picturesque

Ideas of wilderness have been shaped by the aesthetic ideals of the Romantic movement, which spanned from the late 18th to mid-19th century in Europe and North America. These artistic and intellectual traditions emphasized the **sublime** and the **picturesque**. In art, the sublime refers to a greatness beyond human comprehension, evoking awe, wonder, and even terror. The term picturesque describes idealized natural landscapes that are visually alluring while retaining elements of rough wildness.

Both traditions promoted the idea of land as something to be tamed and controlled by so-called civilizing forces. These styles of painting often served as tributes to natural landscapes that had been, or would soon be, transformed by settlement and industry. Indigenous people were often portrayed as part of a primordial world that would disappear with the changing landscape.

Edgar Cardenas' photographs engage with the categories that have shaped conventional understandings of the landscape, actively challenging and rethinking these perceptions.

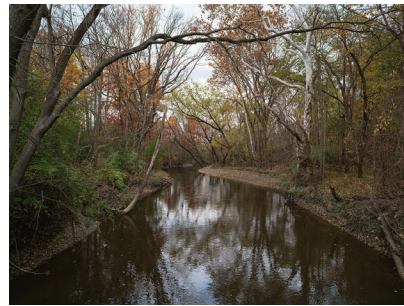


Questions for Looking

→ Consider *Sunrise in the Catskills* by Thomas Cole, a 19th-century American landscape painter. This scene, viewed from above near the Delaware River, shows fallen trees, rough areas of rocks and undergrowth in the foreground. How does this painting reflect the artistic values of its time? What might it be saying about how people saw the relationship between humans and the natural world in the nineteenth-century?

→ Western ideals of the sublime and picturesque later influenced the development of 19th-century photography. For example, Carleton Watkins' photographs were widely circulated and admired, contributing to the growing environmental conservation movement which led to the creation of national parks. Consider his photograph *Tasayac, or the Half Dome, 4967 Feet*. What important stories or perspectives might be missing from this view of nature? Whose histories are left out when we see the American landscape portrayed as 'wild'?

→ In his photographs, Edgar Cardenas explores the relationship between people and nature in a way that challenges older ideas from the history of art. Look at photographs such as *The Great American Eclipse (Sandra and Abi)* and *Untitled (Sandra and Abi #4)* for example. What does the artist suggest about how humans and the natural world are connected? What might these photographs suggest about how we can live with nature today?



III. Imagination and Observation

While *Meanwhile in Detroit* draws on Cardenas' academic training, such as his questioning of aesthetic concepts like the sublime and picturesque, it is ultimately guided by deeper personal connections. In creating this work, Cardenas imagined the stories of **Indigenous** communities living with the forest, seeking to honor their enduring harmonious relationship with the land. Equally significant were his observations of his young son, Abi, exploring the woods with unfiltered curiosity. These intertwined motivations highlight how attentive observation can foster a deep bond with everyday wildness, while also sustaining long-term artistic and storytelling practices. Through his project, Cardenas reveals that the landscape is never a neutral subject: it holds layers of history, **ecology**, and human interaction that demand thoughtful, nuanced understanding.

Questions for Looking

- In photographs such as *Little Body of Stardust Exploring Origins Under Every Rock, Through Every Crevasse*, and others that use low vantage points, Cardenas captures the way his son moves through the forest: curious, close to the ground, noticing what adults might overlook. Think of a familiar green space you know well, such as a backyard or a local park. If you viewed it with childlike curiosity, what details might suddenly stand out? What kind of experience might unfold if you allowed emotion, rather than knowledge, to guide you?
- During the exhibition, how does repeatedly encountering the same view of the Rouge River in different seasons shape your understanding of the place? Why do you think the artist chose to include this motif?
- The historical concept of the sublime often transcended the senses, emphasizing a universal feeling of awe. How does Edgar Cardenas challenge this notion in his exhibition by using studies of texture, form, light, and sound to engage the viewer's senses directly?



IV. Living towards Sustainability

Edgar Cardenas' work explores the relationships between people and an urban preserve, with a particular focus on environmental **sustainability** issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and urbanisation. These challenges are not purely environmental. They are also deeply tied to social, cultural, and economic histories and contemporary public policy.

Meaningful engagement with sustainability requires us to reflect not only on our individual choices, but also on the well-being of our communities now and in the future. *Meanwhile in Detroit* invites us to consider what it means to be responsible stewards of the land for generations to come.

Questions for Looking

→ In photographs like *Untitled (Sandra and Abi #2)* and *Untitled (Sandra and Abi #3)*, Edgar Cardenas makes tender portraits as well as portraying family members as active participants with the land. By making once private experiences public, he invites broader reflection on human-nature relationships. How does the artist's openness and vulnerability foster empathy in the viewer? And how might that empathy inspire a deeper ethical responsibility toward the natural world?

→ As a genre, landscape photography has historically avoided portraying states of death and decay. However, this is a subject that Edgar Cardenas does not shy away from, as seen in photographs such as *Canine Skull* and *And on the Third Day*. How do such photographs make you feel? What do they suggest about the relationship between decay and sustainability?

→ What does personal environmental sustainability look like to you? Whether at home, or when interacting with local urban natural spaces, what conscious choices can you make to minimize your impact on the planet?

V. Community Perspectives

Community Perspectives is an ongoing series where people from diverse disciplines and backgrounds respond freely to images in our exhibitions.



Ginger Brooks Takahashi reflects on Edgar Cardenas' photographs *River Rouge Looking North, Fall*; *River Rouge Looking North, Spring*; *River Rouge Looking North, Summer*; *River Rouge Looking North, Winter*

Looking at these photographs of River Rouge—the river is the muse and the mirror, the reason that Cardenas has arrived here, returned to this spot time and time again, making these photos across the seasons. Or is photography the muse, the reason to look, the impulse to make an image? As a wild mushroom lover, I think about how looking for mushrooms has me getting to know trees. Tree identification gets us to look at details—the texture of bark, the shape of leaves, the silhouette of the tree, both with leaves and without, are there seeds or flowers, and when do they appear? While making my public artwork *Drip, Seep, Run* in Schenley Park, I spent so many different seasons in the park, seeking out a site in winter, and then observing, measuring, planning and installing, and now each time I return, I witness when the goutweed first emerges in the spring, when the creek is dry in sections, and when the migratory birds are hunting insects, and once I saw a hawk splashing in the creek next to the pawpaw grove. Returning to a site is being in relation with that place.

*Ginger Brooks Takahashi is a transdisciplinary artist and educator based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her performance, installation, and site responsive works examine our relationships to the mediums that connect us. These public projects are platforms for intimate interaction, an extension of feminist and queer praxis. Currently an MFA candidate at School of the Art Institute Chicago, she received her BA from Oberlin College, 1999; and attended the Whitney Independent Study Program, 2007. Her work has been supported by Carnegie Mellon University's Frank-Ratchye Further Fund, Cooper Union's Ida Applebroog Grant, and Office of Public Art's, Environment, Health and Public Art Initiative. In 2023, she installed *Drip, Seep, Run*, a permanent public artwork for Schenley Park in Pittsburgh.*

Glossary

Ecology

The study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical, chemical, and biological environments.

Indigenous

Indigenous communities are the descendants of the original inhabitants of the Americas, the Pacific, and parts of Asia and Africa, prior to European colonization. They sustain distinct cultures, histories, traditions, and spiritual relationships with their ancestral lands, passed down through generations.

Picturesque

An aesthetic ideal in art that emphasizes visual beauty and elements of wildness or irregularity, often evoking a romanticized, ahistorical view of nature.

Sublime

An artistic and philosophical concept describing experiences that inspire awe, wonder, or even terror. The sublime evokes emotions that transcend full understanding.

Sustainability

Environmental sustainability refers to the responsible use of natural resources to meet present needs without compromising those of future generations.

Reading List

Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Jennifer Raab, *Picturesque and Sublime: Thomas Cole's Trans-Atlantic Inheritance* (Yale University Press, 2018)

Beyond Wilderness, *Aperture*, 120 (Fall, 1990)

Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire* (MIT Press, 1999)

Edgar Cardenas, *Between Two Pines: Ushering in a Sustainable Future Through an Art-Science Practice* (Maize Books, November 27, 2019)

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Mariner Books Classics, 2022)

William Cronon, 'The trouble with wilderness: or, getting back to the wrong nature' in *Environmental History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan, 1996), pp. 7-28

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, 1949)

Ben A. Minteer, Mark Klett and Stephen J. Pyne, *Wild Visions: Wilderness as Image and Idea*, (Yale University Press, 2022)

Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble, *The Geography of Childhood* (Beacon Press, 1994)

Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (4th ed.) (Yale University Press, 1982)

Scott Manning Stevens, Karoniaktatsie (Akwesasne Mohawk), *Native Prospects: Indigeneity and Landscape* (Thomas Cole National Historic Site with Florence Griswold Museum, 2024)

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