

MJ Sharp
Artist Statement
Nightscapes
Craven Allen Gallery
2025

I started photographing exclusively at night just over 20 years ago, at a time of enduring emotional tumult after being on deck for serious family illness. Returning to the relentless pace of journalistic shooting I had been doing for ten years prior felt completely impossible. In truth, photographing at all felt completely impossible. I well remember visiting friends in Dallas during that period and musing over lunch that maybe I could go into skyscraper window cleaning because I did love clean glass. Supportive in that way that only your oldest friends are, they nodded sagely and said, “Clean glass is good.”

I picked up a camera again two years later. It was an old Polaroid camera, and I loaded it with laughably out-of-date film. My partner and I headed out to a coffee shop, where she was going to read the paper over a cup of coffee, and I *might* take a picture over a cup of coffee. Turns out I did take a picture, and I liked both the picture and the process. Some time later, over a different cup of coffee at a wedding reception, I was delighted to be seated at the same table as Durham novelist Elizabeth Brownrigg. We discovered a mutual interest in environmental concerns and went on to collaborate on two stories about nocturnal species that were being threatened by light pollution – sea turtle hatchlings and bats.

In terms of my personal artwork, the way back to making more pictures was through a similarly esoteric method as using an ancient Polaroid camera. That is, I brought out of storage my SuperGraflex 4x5 mid-century bellows film camera. After the bat and sea turtle stories, I found that I had no interest in taking a picture in the daytime. Like them, night was my habitat now. I’ve seen it mentioned in all sorts of places and in all sorts of ways since that time — the quiet and dark of night is when the efficiency, ambition, logic, and stress of the daytime world fades. The swirl of all those emotions of all those people throughout the day seems to fall to earth. For certain people, night feels like the clean air after a rainstorm. For decades, that was me. I casually talked about “the tyranny of the daytime people.” Now when I awake sometimes at 5 a.m. I enjoy the novelty of watching dawn come, but back then, when I was out at night shooting, the light blue of the sky signaling the coming of day was a horror. A strong word, I realize, but I distinctly remember that feeling, like being stalked by an apex predator.

Part of the awfulness of day was that, because of the camera I was employing, I was sometimes able to photograph only 3 scenes total over the course of the night and so dawn was the relentless enforcer, announcing “playtime’s over.” Though my exposures initially began in the “minutes” range, especially if I was employing some kind of added light (a bike light was a favorite for a while) soon I went completely off-grid – sometimes having a camera look at a scene lit only by moonlight for 40 minutes (*Outside Amarillo*) or be in almost total darkness in my home kitchen for 3 hours (*Dark Dill*).

What I came to appreciate over the course of this type of photographing was that just as I was slowing down the exposure, I was slowing down myself as well. At this stage of modernity, with our widespread and often thoughtless night lighting, spending time in the quiet and dark, in an anticipatory and receptive state, is increasingly a boutique and privileged experience. For a great majority of the world’s population, their evolutionary birthright of experiencing the awe of a night sky or the solace of enveloping and velvety blackness is gone. Darkness is only ever dim, the intrusion of human enterprise inescapable.

While a moonlit prehistoric quoit in Cornwall and a dimly illuminated botanical study in Durham would seem to have little in common, the focused attention they inspire is, in fact, quite similar. Long looking and the resultant long exposures produce a kind of intermediate photographic reality that is not available in real time. I experience most of my subjects as dark and undifferentiated monochromes, but when I’m lucky, the alchemy of photography turns them into luscious and detailed scenes that invite immersion and contemplation.