

ADVENTURES IN SEARCH OF THE FINEST



PHOTOGRAPHER JAY MARK JOHNSON BREAKS HIS CAMERA AND BLOWS YOUR MIND

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## THE THING ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY IS ITS TRUTHINESS.

Digital-age machinations aside, the camera enjoys a reputation for providing trustworthy, unmediated depictions of the real world, more or less as it actually appears. Whatever filters or post-production technologies abound, the basic idea remains that you can look at a picture and know what something looked like in a recognizable world. But when it comes to the photographs of Jay Mark Johnson, that presumption is turned on its head. His pictures look nothing like the world as we know it, and they are not really meant to. Yet still, their brain-melting relationship to the truth remains unassailable. The best thing to do is just relax, and let art and science blow your mind.

Instead of recording the optical contours of what a place looks like, JMJ has figured out a way to record the temporal events that happen there. Instead of what a person looks like, he records the evidence of what they've done—in a unique process he calls Spacetime that produces fixed-point images depicting objects and figures as time passes. The overall effect is ironically surreal and abstract, considering the hyper-accuracy of the information the images contain. There is a certain conceptual kinship with the work of video artist Bill Viola—who also manipulates time and sees the drama of motion as central to an event's meaning. In Viola's case, he dramatically slows down time to set a seemingly still image in motion; in JMJ's case, he converts motion into a still image. Basically by "tricking" a moving camera lens into taking still images in a process not unlike what happens when your scanner breaks, objects in motion appear still, while stationary surroundings appear as stripes of pure color.

Yet even though you don't "see" the backgrounds, they play a huge role in the images' energy, giving liminal subconscious cues to the eye as to the urban, natural, bustling, or remote location. He's the only guy I know that has the surf report and the CalTech particle physics lab on speed dial. His subjects range from ferris wheels that appear to corkscrew; waves that carve out infinitely receding spaces; architecture that collapses; roads and rivers that straighten out their bends; mining towns enveloped in dust storms. His travels take him to Rome, Cambodia, Ojai, West Virginia, South America, the Venice boardwalk, and Belgrade—no small feat considering the miniature space station he carries around with him. Besides the ten-pound camera and hefty tripod in its own case, we're talking 100-150 pounds of equipment in titanium briefcases wherever he goes, and the TSA guys stop him every time. On the ground, he relies on local drivers and guides up for driving around for hours "in Terminator scan mode" looking for the perfect shot. From train depots to dance studios, rain forests to recycling plants, what JMJ is really documenting are the innate, inescapable underlying patterns of the universe, the stripped-down coordinates of where beauty comes from—but try explaining that to your average random cabbie. He was once abandoned in a Cozumel alligator reserve, but still he isn't daunted. "I'm hoping this year to shoot the Wildebeest migration in Masai." Drivers wanted.

