

NINE PORTFOLIOS: 1985-2008

Introduction

Through images and words, this book transports you into the world of photographer Lee Dunkel. The artist began her photographic education in the 1970s using the traditional silver gelatin print process and has continued her work in this vein throughout her career. In the darkroom, she spends days creating prints that reference the original image, while elevating it to a somewhat surreal rendering, shimmering with reflections of nature.

Dunkel characteristically explores a geographical location over a long period of time, often years, allowing her to capture subtle changes in the landscape. She is an explorer on many levels, and her photography has provided a path that has defined much of her life.

The opening essay traces her biographical and artistic development, beginning in 1985 when she began a series of portfolios of works from the Florida environment. Subsequently, a total of nine portfolios were created from 1985 until 2005—eight in Florida and one in North Dakota.

Her admirable ethic of working systematically on an almost-daily basis has given birth to series of work that are joined in their evolution. Here, we are able to view the many facets of her ambitious oeuvre, inviting us into a rich and constantly unfolding world of her own creation.

Endorsements

Every photograph and print by the photographer Lee Dunkel is a performance—as classic as a Renoir, as edgy and smart as Brubeck's 'Take Five'—and faithful to the nature of the artist.

Dunkel's work evolves around thought and feeling, not technology. The sheer volume of pictures produced through digital technology has diminished the artistic value of photography. Too often image-makers use photo-processing programs to mimic styles and schools of photography, and she is the type of photographer they imitate. Her work is trademarked by the fact that she still produces her images with film.

Her handmade prints are a record of a distinctive vision, as shown in the portfolio, 'Florida Études' (2000-2003), that measures the monotone value of each shred of foliage at a particular moment of the day, and its relative value, as she carefully and painstakingly reproduces the image on photographic paper in her darkroom.

—Stephen Crowley, Staff photographer, *The New York Times*

These nature studies are undeniably spectacular; the state's undeveloped sites and natural vistas are magnificent in their own right. Translated into a burnished black and white that defies color's seductive wiles even as they suggest subdued splendor, Dunkel's landscapes seem to occupy a rarified space: arrested glimpses of a vanishing wilderness, they are all the more vibrant because of their restraint. Cypress and palms blend into a lush tapestry, and the elements—light, air, water, even fire—dance and play in series that present formal elements in extreme elegance, technically brilliant and visually satisfying on multiple levels.

—Laura Stewart, “Florida Wetlands: Lee Dunkel,” essay in Southeast Museum of Photography catalogue, 2008

What viewers see when looking at Lee Dunkel’s work is much more than a photographic reproduction. Her views of the landscape are more intimate and personal than the grand views of her West Coast influences, such as Adams, Weston, and Sexton; and the work is more aptly described as an emotional view of a natural scene, containing elements of abstraction. Dunkel does not aim to preserve a remote, unobtainable grandeur in the landscape, but instead invites the viewer into her world, and, in that process, we often get our feet wet.

—Rick Lang, Director of Photography, Crealdé School of Art, Winter Park, Florida

In capturing the beauty, texture, light, and shadows of transitioning environments, Lee Dunkel provides us with an artist’s view of our world in which each compelling photograph becomes a mnemonic of nature’s fragility.

—Marti Saltzman, Editorial Director, Pixiq (an imprint of Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., New York)

Lee Dunkel is very determined, and that’s a good thing, because she wraps all of will around her poetry. The dialogue between delicacy and strength in her work, devoid of contrivances and the baloney of trends, can only happen because she is the real thing and has mastered her medium in the service of a pure and caring vision. It is not easy to be a Lee Dunkel, and though she wears her personality and dedication gracefully, there is an uncompromising backbone that takes her out in the wild world she photographs and then plants itself uncompromisingly in her darkroom...where somehow, all those glorious prints, all those creations of her poetry...come out to make our lives so much richer. Her eye and the understanding of powerful or subtle graphics, all layered over passion for her subject, renders a unique and incomparable body of work.

—Burk Uzzle, Contemporary photographer, Wilson, North Carolina

Artist Essay

I have long thought that, like actors who say they were 'in the zone,' artists are in the zone when creating something. I often look at a print and wonder how or why I got there. I think the subconscious takes over, and you just make the decisions without really thinking...decisions about cropping, lenses, light, or even what to photograph.

—Lee Dunkel

Photography is Lee Dunkel's chosen medium for creating art. Lauded by critics for its uncompromising consistency and startling beauty, her photography references nature through a shimmering black-and-white palette. For over three decades, she has developed a large body of work, never resting on her laurels, but consistently growing and pushing the work to its highest level.

Dunkel is often characterized as an environmental photographer, but she prefers to think of herself as a "photographer of environments." When studying the evolution of her work over the course of many years, it seems that the landscape is as much a vehicle for her artistic expression as it is for environmental concerns.

She became interested in photography while living in Philadelphia with her late husband Dick Dunkel, who worked as a newspaper editor. In 1972, after 14 years of marriage and the birth of her two sons, the Dunkels relocated to Florida to attend to a family-run business. After moving, she decided to pursue photography seriously and applied to the program at Daytona Beach Community College (now Daytona State College), entering in 1974.

While studying at DBCC, she met Stephen Crowley, then a young student, now a Pulitzer-prize-winning photographer for *The New York Times*. "Everything she did was just a notch above everyone else in sophistication—no gimmicks, but rather a pure, classical approach. It made a lasting impression on me," he recalls.

The first of her portfolios in this book was shot in the Tomoka River Basin in Florida between 1985 and 1988, a time during which she immersed in landscape photography. She worked tirelessly over the course of three years, took workshops with well-known photographers John Sexton and George Tice, and dedicated herself to the traditional silver gelatin process. She has never changed her commitment to the labor-intensive method of processing film in the darkroom, even in the wake of digital photography.

After completing the Tomoka River Basin project, she set a self-imposed goal of creating a portfolio of work for an upcoming exhibition scheduled to open in 1992. Between 1988 and 1992, she photographed areas along Spruce Creek, Florida. She honed in on details of her chosen site, making sense of what she describes as "the complicated tangle of foliage in the Florida landscape...a terrain as delicate as it is mysterious." Through her lens she found order in the chaos of the jungle with its interwoven and intricate growth.

The contrasting lights and darks of the Florida terrain provided her with images taken on site that served as references from which to make prints, and her interest in monochrome

abstraction continued to grow. In their final state, the heightened beauty of the pieces appears to have been achieved in an effortless manner, when in actuality, it results from an exhaustive search to reconnect with what originally sparked her imagination. The end results are her personal “re-presentation” of the original material captured on film.

I am attracted to black-and-white photography because of the abstract quality it lends to the image, making it something more than documentation... I took photographs, not with exact replication in mind, but rather ‘seeing’ through the lens what the images might look like once I could manipulate the prints in the darkroom. Each image is made using the whole negative, but the tonal quality is composed with a combination of photography, film development, and darkroom techniques.

This general approach has lasted her through a lifetime of deriving handmade prints from hundreds of negatives, each print unique. She uses Ansel Adams’ well-known zone system when she is photographing, but once inside the darkroom, absolutes are of less concern to her, and she allows herself to experiment. The darkroom work involves a vast number of test prints to accomplish final pieces that she finds artistically satisfying.

Even the slightest change in time in the developer or with the timer during printing can make a difference in the print’s outcome. Sometimes I make a few tests, quit, then wash and dry, go back the next day, look at the tests, fine-tune again and again...and then print the final version. It is a very slow, evolving, painstaking process. Oftentimes, the resulting image is not recognizable in the original negative, because I’ve altered things. I knew when I decided to do this type of photography that it was the quality of the printing that raised it to an art.

After completing the Spruce Creek series in 1992, she turned her sights in 1993 to a large expanse of land in Central Florida covered by the St. John’s River and its surrounding lakes, bird sanctuaries, estuaries and wetland systems. She notes in an exhibition catalogue that her first challenge for this series was simply where and how to begin. Sheer navigation around the complicated ecosystem was in itself difficult, but in her characteristic manner, she quickly devised pragmatic ways to deal with this challenge.

The resulting *St. John’s River Portfolio* underscores her search for strong compositional elements in the reference. Full of tension and life articulated by line and texture, these prints gracefully meld a grand vision with a heightened sensitivity to detailed nuances. Photographer Rick Lang notes that her work is “born of the West Coast photographic traditions of Ansel Adams, Bret Weston, John Sexton and others, but is not derivative—she couples those early influences with her own vision to create a formal landscape that is truly unique.”

During the 1990s, she also worked on a series of prints in the Badlands of North Dakota where she and her husband owned a cabin. In this setting, with its stark, primal rock formations and clay walls, she found incredibly rich material to satisfy her longings to take abstraction further. She concentrated on tight shots, resulting in images that challenge the viewer to abandon obvious references, pushing toward a more formalistic approach. What eventually became the portfolio that she named *North Dakota and The Clay Walls* was photographed during periods of high sun, capturing an intensity that contrasts with the “soft, moist, romantic” landscape of Florida photographed in low light at day’s end.

In the summer of 1998, after fires had been raging for many days during one of the worst fires in Florida's history, she and Dick drove home from North Dakota. Taking detours on back roads, they witnessed the devastation, and she knew she had to "capture the scene." In the smoldering ruins and smoke-filled air, she endured the ungodly heat, routinely cleaned her fogging lenses, and persisted for two weeks to shoot film of a ravaged world. "I tried to portray the delicate beauty there and the sense of strangeness," she recollects. Eventually, she began to see small signs of life in the green shoots, the cycle of growth returning. She left the scene as logging trucks rolled through the land to harvest what remained of the trees. *Firemarkings* was shot quickly in comparison to her other projects.

Later in 1998, she began a new portfolio. Seeking to find abstraction in the Florida landscape that would relate to the minimal work produced in North Dakota, she looked to the infinity of patterning in the shoreline and waves of Flagler Beach. Perched on a pier, she cleverly devised a method of swiveling the camera and taking many rapid shots in succession. "I never quite knew what I was getting... but I learned to instinctively find the moment," she says. The formal simplicity and elegance of the images in *Shore Patterns* complement the intentional sparseness of the images in the North Dakota portfolio, achieving what she set out to do.

The portfolio that follows *Shore Patterns* reflects a major change in her life. Dick Dunkel was diagnosed with cancer in 1999 and died in 2002. Her husband had served as a sustaining support for her work of many years, and she was alone with her process for the first time. With an upcoming exhibition scheduled, she kept her promise to produce a body of work, staying close to home in Ormond Beach and photographing earlier in the day.

Inspired partially by the brevity and complexity of Chopin's *Études*, the abstracted images in *Florida Études* are metaphors for death and dying. "I think my choice of doing pieces of smaller scope probably reflects that my world in some ways seemed smaller, but in other ways, felt larger. My attention gravitated to tiny details adrift in a larger world—the background out of focus and unknown." In the wake of her loss, her internal world was different. Stephen Crowley aptly describes this body of work as "a philosophical reflection on life, loss and redemption."

During 2005, Dunkel spent time in her own backyard to create *Untitled: Light and Abstraction*. Here we see her concentrating on abstraction in an unprecedented way, composing the image primarily in the darkroom. Concentrating on small details in the film prior to enlarging them, she let go of the pictorial reference evident in the original negative. These exercises in black and white are deceptively simple, and yet they are some of her most sophisticated work.

The final suite of images in this book is the epic *Florida Wetlands*, created from 2005 to 2008 for a solo exhibition at the Southeast Museum of Photography at Daytona State College, where she first began her photographic journey. She shot images on land owned primarily by hunting clubs and developers, assuming that much of it would eventually be altered by the sprawl of Florida growth. In the catalogue produced for the exhibition, Dunkel reflects on this ambitious body of work:

This landscape struggles to survive in much the same way a person who is ill struggles to survive. I can see now that I was trying to capture this struggle. This turned out to be

a more difficult artistic journey than I had expected. Not until the very end did the distinctive vision of the project come into focus.

Elements of all of her portfolios are reflected in this group of images: Her obsessive perfection of the print in the darkroom, an ability to portray the poignancy and beauty of nature with passionate objectivity, and a fascination, always, with the opportunities to delve into abstraction through black-and-white photography. In an essay written by Laura Stewart for the exhibition of *Florida Wetlands*, she comments that the images in this portfolio are "...all the more vibrant because of their restraint." It is in this duality between passion and restraint, Dunkel achieves her full vibrato, and she always leaves us longing for more.

—Katherine Duncan Aimone
Fine arts writer, ARTSwrite.com

Folio Openers

The Tomoka River Basin and Ocean Shore
1985-1988

The Tomoka River Basin is in Volusia County, Florida; a part of the Atlantic Intercoastal Waterway that runs from Norfolk, Virginia to Miami, Florida. This area is known locally as "the loop." The waterway is made up of naturally deep estuaries, rivers, and sounds connected by man-made cuts through land areas and shallows.

During this period, and prior to 1985, I photographed close to home in wetland areas in and around the Tomoka River and along the ocean, teaching myself about landscape photography. After a year of photographing, I took a workshop with John Sexton, with whom I studied 'the fine art of printing.' After another year of working at home, I studied with photographer George Tice. Two more years of work prepared me for a more advanced workshop on printing with Sexton. I knew early on that I needed to focus on the real art of landscape black-and-white photography, which, for me, is in the printing. This part of the process raises the image to a work of art. I try to create a sense of drama and emotional response by coaxing dense black areas and balancing them with shimmering highlights. After five years of constant work, photographs were culled from a large body of work to create this portfolio.

Spruce Creek
1988-1992

Spruce Creek is a meandering, tidal, blackwater creek in Central Florida that contains wetlands, savannahs, and palm forests along its route to the Atlantic. It empties into Rose Bay, the Atlantic Intercoastal Waterway, and finally into Ponce DeLeon Inlet before reaching the ocean.

This was the first major body of work I created for an exhibition. I continued to learn how to

make sense of the complicated tangle of foliage in the Florida landscape, a terrain that is as delicate as it is mysterious. The abstract nature of contrasting darks and lights in the landscape became my focus and has remained so to this day. As far as methodology goes, I took all the photography first—concentrating on capturing what I wanted from the landscape until I felt it was complete. I photographed, developed the film, and printed contact sheets to look at as I worked. Eventually, I culled from the many shots I had taken. In the darkroom, I spent hours creating an interesting body of work. With this portfolio, I found an optimal way of working: gathering all the raw material before printing.

North Dakota & The Clay Walls 1989-1997

This portfolio was created primarily in the North Unit of North Dakota's Theodore Roosevelt National Park, situated about 80 miles north of the South Unit, on U.S. Highway 85, just south of Watford City.

These photographs show a continuation of my interest in creating abstract images, and is, so far, my only departure from the Florida landscape. My husband and I vacationed in North Dakota beginning in the late 1980s and eventually built a cabin in the Badlands that we visited for almost ten years. While roaming the park, I noticed the unique, dramatic natural formations in the rocks and canyon wall, and harsh light creating deep, beautiful shadows. From the beginning of my photographic career, I had been interested in focusing on smaller areas in the landscape that force the viewer to pause and study the image as an abstraction, so I took photographs without the idea of exact replication, but rather envisioning what I might be able to coax from the images later. I strive to create something simple, and yet complex, out of the chaos of nature.

St. Johns River 1993-1996

The St. Johns River is unique in that it meanders from south to north, connecting several small lakes from Central Florida to Jacksonville where it flows into the Atlantic Ocean around Mayport Naval Station. It encompasses many estuaries, logging canals, extensive marsh areas, wetland systems, and bird sanctuaries.

This portfolio involved some difficult on-site work. My husband Dick was a huge help in navigating me to various spots. Most of the images were shot from a boat, and it rained during much of this period. He and I would motor to a location, sink poles into the water, and attach the boat with bungee cords, anchoring it so we wouldn't drift away. Then I'd sink my tripod into the water, place the camera on it (sometimes merely an inch above water), lean over the side of the boat, focus, take a meter reading, and shoot lots of film. We would change fishing camp locations to dock the boat so we could get where I needed to be quickly. Doing this kind of location work is fascinating in itself, but an added bonus is meeting people who tell you fishing stories or how to watch for snakes that might drop out of trees!

Firemarkings
July 1998

These photos were taken immediately after one of the most devastating forest fires in Florida's history. Fires raged through Central Florida, destroying undeveloped forested areas as well as highly developed ones. Photographs were taken in Volusia County in Daytona Beach along LPGA Boulevard, State Route 40, and Highway 92. Others were taken in Flagler County. This small portfolio was photographed within a couple of weeks on a daily basis.

Dick and I drove home to Ormond Beach from North Dakota as the fires grew more threatening. Roads were closed, and we detoured through areas that showed the devastation. I knew I had to capture the scene. When I first began, I noticed the extreme silence. There was unbearable heat from the charred ground, as if all the air and life had been sucked out. Small animals and birds slowly returned and behaved normally, and I particularly remember how a small snake stared at me from a charred tree trunk while I worked. In this loss, there was a certain beauty I hadn't seen before. The palmetto branches looked like ballerina arms. The starkness of no underbrush was interesting in its own way. I tried to capture the delicate beauty and sense of strangeness. Within a few more days the palmettos started to come back with their light green fronds. All had changed by then— it was time to quit.

Shore Patterns
1998-1999

These photos were taken along Flagler Beach in Flagler County, Florida.

The abstract work I had done in North Dakota spurred the idea of continuing this approach in Florida, and I eventually combined the two bodies of work in an exhibition. I looked for material in the black-and-white patterns along the shore and in the ocean. I created this series of images in a way that is similar to a painter envisioning the work before he or she paints the scene, allowing creativity within a certain framework and vision. The images were taken from a fairly high level. I wasn't able to get much of anything with the camera in a stationary position, so I worked out a system of putting the tripod head in swivel, moving the camera with the action of the waves, and pressing the shutter when it felt right. I never quite knew what I was getting, but by taking hundreds of shots, I was able to cull good ones, and I was surprised by the success of the compositions. I learned to anticipate where and how the action was going to unfold and act in the moment.

Florida Études
2000-2003

All of the images in this portfolio were photographed in the Ormond Beach area, in and around Tomoka State Park.

Often, a certain piece of music will stimulate a photographic journey for me. The intricate piano pieces and brevity found in Chopin's Études was part of the stimulus for these simple,

yet complex abstract images. They were photographed during earlier times of the day to capture highlights with deep, shadow-filled passages. Much of this portfolio has to do with death or dying found in nature, as this was the first body of work I created after my husband died of cancer. I was committed to an exhibit of new work, but I had to do it alone for the first time in my life, so I had to devise a new way of working. I think my choice of doing pieces of smaller scope probably reflects the fact that my world in some ways seemed smaller, but in other ways, felt larger. And so my focus gravitated to focusing on a tiny detail adrift in a larger world—the background out of focus and unknown. I see 'Florida Études' as a continuation of my involvement with the abstraction of 'Clay Walls' and 'Shore Patterns.'

Untitled: Light & Abstraction
2005

Most of these were taken in the artist's backyard in Ormond Beach, Florida.

I undertook 'Untitled: Light and Abstraction' as a way of pushing abstraction to the max. I wanted to explore the possibility of finding an abstract image within a negative. As I shot the film, I imagined the resulting image, knowing the composing would be done entirely in the darkroom. I focused in on smaller areas on the film, and enlarged them to create the images. The darkroom and printing was always of great importance to my creative process, but here I allowed myself the freedom to let go of representation. The final print in the portfolio is the culmination of this exploration of design and abstraction in black and white.

Florida Wetlands
2005-2008

Almost all of the images in this portfolio were photographed on private land owned by hunting clubs and developers, underscoring the poignancy of a vanishing natural environment. Most of the images are from the Lake Harney area in Oak Hill, with a few from Edgewater, Florida. One was taken in Ormond Beach, Florida.

'Florida Wetlands' is a body of work photographed, ironically, during a period of extreme drought and heat in Florida. It is my least romantic vision of the Florida landscape, showing it under pressure from climate and development. I often had to search for puddles to indicate that it was actually a wetland. I dripped with sweat while working in a cloud of insect repellent, thinking to myself, 'Only foolish humans are out in the heat of the day!' At times it was the zzzzz of the mosquitoes that broke the silence just before the gators started oinking at each other, and the frogs began croaking... just before sunset when all hell breaks loose noise-wise. The area I chose was fairly isolated with a savannah on one side and a lake on the other. Because the property owned by hunting clubs is set aside, I have grown to appreciate hunting as an incentive to preserve what is left of natural areas.

Back Cover: About the Artist

Lee Dunkel explores the landscape in a unique and compelling way. The eloquent black-and-white images of details and forms in nature show the biological cycles of growth, decay and renewal in nature to form some of the most important and compelling photographs ever made of the Florida landscape. No other photographer has so consistently and successfully created photographs that draw out the uniquely expressive and poetic possibilities of Florida's natural world.

—Kevin Miller, Director, Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, Florida

Nine portfolios of Dunkel's work, created between 1985 and 2008, are presented in this book. Throughout her career, Dunkel has consistently used the silver gelatin process, even in the wake of digital photography. She has been honored with solo exhibitions of her work since the late 1980s and has been the recipient of several grants for her work, including two Florida Individual Fellowship grants. Her work can be found in corporate and private collections. She lives in Ormond Beach, Florida.