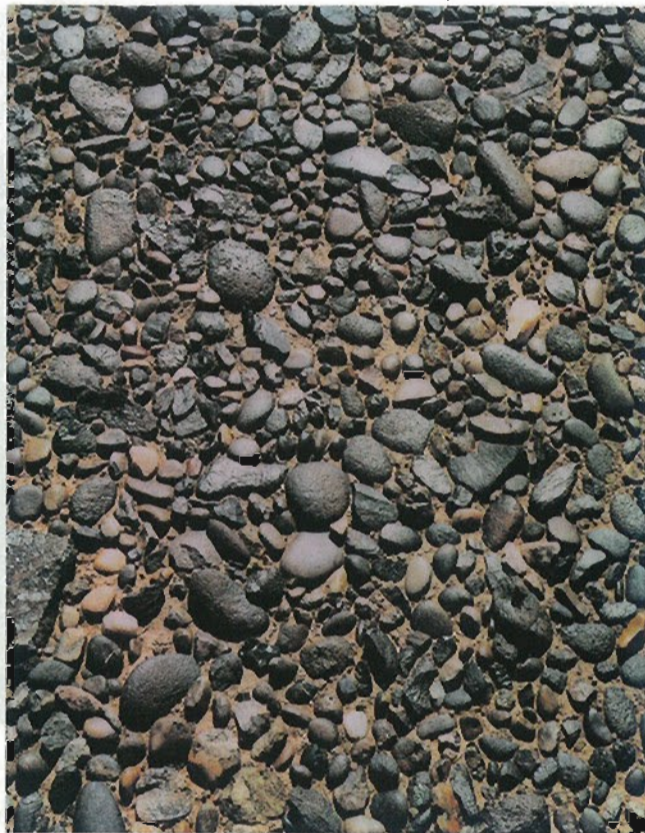


Living Color

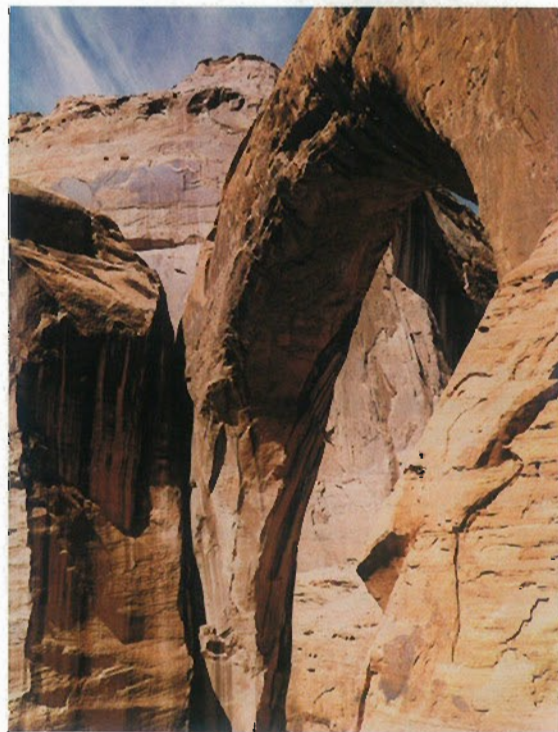
JIMENA CANALES ON THE ART OF ELIOT PORTER



Elliot Porter, *Pebble Pavement, near Aztec Creek, Lake Powell, Utah, May 9, 1965*, dye-transfer print.



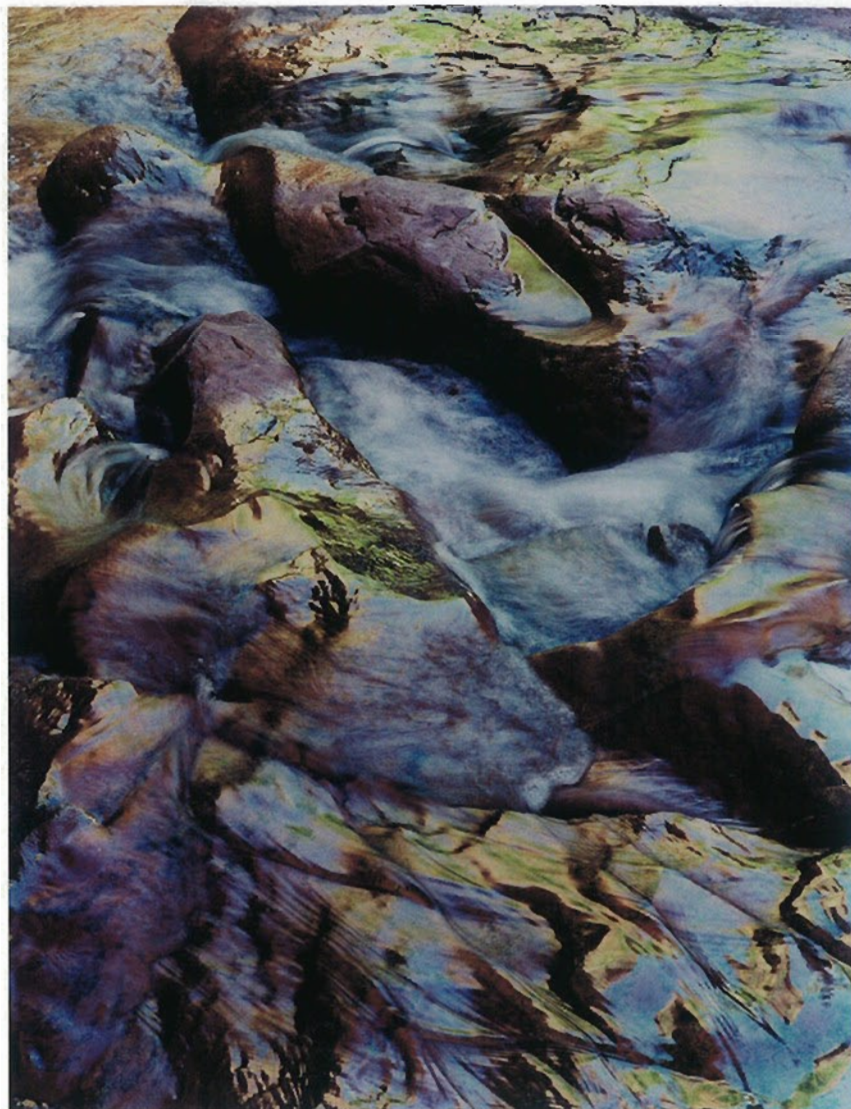
Left: Elliot Porter, *Tent Caterpillar, New Hampshire, 1953*, dye-transfer print.



Right: Elliot Porter, *Rainbow Bridge, Glen Canyon, Utah, August 28, 1961*, dye-transfer print.



Clockwise, from above: Elliot Porter, *Whiskered Owl, Cave Creek, Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona, May 1959*, dye-transfer print. Elliot Porter, *Green and Blue Reflections, Coyote Canyon, Utah, August 14, 1971*, dye-transfer print. Elliot Porter, *Lichen and Pine Needles on Boulder, Madison, New Hampshire, October 12, 1953*, dye-transfer print.



THE PARADOX OF ELIOT PORTER'S nature photography is the paradox of postwar nature itself: nature at once more and less real than it had been before, more proximate and farther away, more readily fathomable and yet harder to see without state-of-the-art optical prosthetics. Foregoing sweeping landscapes for teeming microcosms, Porter—whose photographs have recently caught the attention of new generations of viewers at New York's Museum of Modern Art and the 2013 Venice Biennale, among other venues—created hyperdetailed images that push verisimilitude past its limits, toward the registers of pop culture, kitsch, and technology. Here, historian JIMENA CANALES assesses the work of an artist who, in the middle decades of the twentieth century, envisioned a biosphere in which there is no such thing as unspooled wilderness, delving into the contradictions of nature photography in the Anthropocene.



Left: Eliot Porter, *Red Maple and Birches, Road to Passaconaway, New Hampshire, October 11, 1953*, dye-transfer print.

Right: Eliot Porter, *Birches and Hemlock in Snow Storm, West Otis, Massachusetts, March 8, 1957*, dye-transfer print.

Below: Eliot Porter, *Pool in a Brook, Brook Pond, New Hampshire, October 4, 1953*, dye-transfer print.



WHAT IS A PHOTOGRAPH by Eliot Porter a photograph of? The standard response to that question would be nature, but the more one contemplates the extraordinary color photographs Porter began taking in the late 1930s, the less convincing that answer seems. Take Porter's image of russet leaves floating gently on ultramarine water, which appears in his 1962 book *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World*. Beautiful as it is, there is something about it that feels insistently familiar, even clichéd. It looks as if it could have been taken by anyone, like a postcard image or a stock photograph. What commands our attention most powerfully, in fact, are those saturated oranges and blues, captured in Kodachrome.

Nature's colors have been painstakingly depicted by painters since ancient times, but in the '30s, with the development of color photography, the hues of forests and flowers, deserts and jungles, could impress themselves on paper at the mere push of a button. Porter was one of the earliest adopters of Kodachrome, the first widely available color film, and he used it throughout his career. Nature gained a new kind of ubiquity as polychrome images of the wild filled magazines and ads.

Porter was not interested in sweeping views, which are notably scarce in his work. His true *métier* was the close-up, especially the extreme close-up.

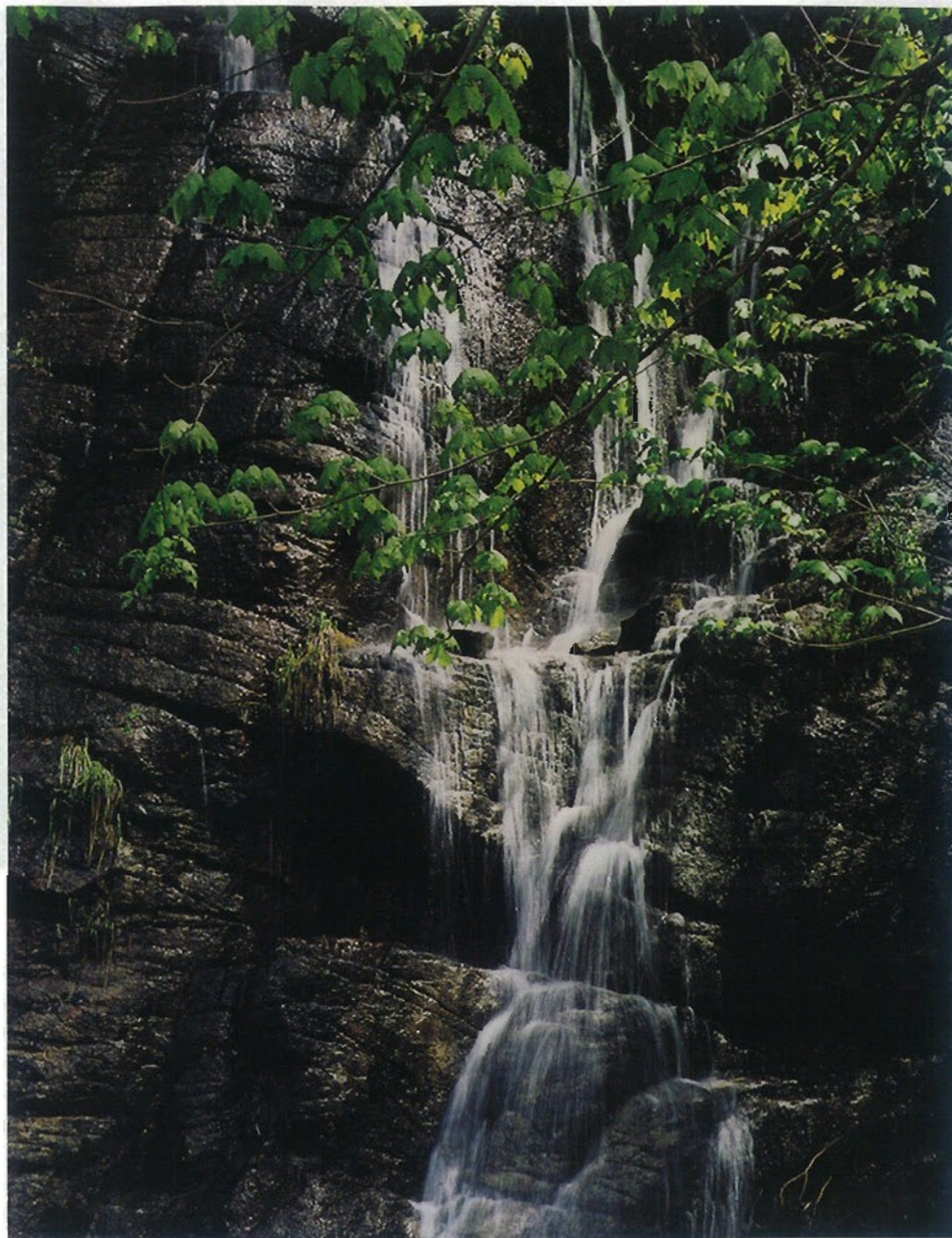
Even in the nineteenth century, while it remained a laborious and idiosyncratic craft process, photography was generally understood as a rote, technical mode of image production—"the pencil of nature," as William Henry Fox Talbot famously put it. Artists who aspired to transform photography into an artistic medium felt compelled to fight against its mechanical, automatic qualities. The introduction of color into photography made the battle even more difficult. The skeptical attitude of Ansel Adams, midcentury nature photographer nonpareil and master of black-and-white, is exemplary in this regard: Far from viewing Kodachrome as an expansion of expressive possibilities, he felt that it limited them. For him, black-and-white was not merely a formal property; it was a border of sorts, a line drawn between (colorful) reality and the artist's transformative depiction. "You don't make a photograph just with a camera," proclaimed Adams, who, along with his colleagues in the collective Group *f/64*, was a staunch proponent of "pure" photography. "You bring to the act of photography all the pictures you have seen, the books you have read, the music you have heard, the people you have loved." Every aspect of his work—large-format cameras, tiny *f/64* apertures, oversize or even mural-size prints, black-and-white film—worked in the service of this subjective approach. (And if these tactics transposed the aesthetic of the "masterpiece" to photography, so much the better.)

Porter admired Adams and concurred with some of his artistic decisions. "The wide blue sky, the big landscape, the mountain scene . . . these I believe are best portrayed in black and white," he said.¹ But Porter was not interested in sweeping views, which are notably scarce in his work. His true *métier* was the close-up, especially the extreme close-up. His laser-sharp images of bark, rocks, mulch, spiderwebs, woodland flowers, and the like, often close to life-size in the small prints he favored, reveal a different side of nature, one in which the cold, formal lines of a monumental cosmos give way to a system of

"interrelationships" and "interactions between living things and the physical environment." In one such image, dried pine needles and wilted leaves carpet the forest floor, which lies close and parallel to the picture plane. Another seems to capture a miniature world, as caterpillars cluster on a densely woven gossamer web, tiny flowers nodding over them and shadowy foliage below. Yet others simply present all-over patterns, such as pebbles or wood grain.

Porter's optics are those of the atomic age. The constructedness of wilderness, its status as museum

and laboratory, rather than a domain apart from human organization, is now taken for granted. But half a century ago, it was still common to posit categorical distinctions between civilization and its other. How did Porter draw this distinction? Nature, in his work (as in the stock images his photographs often invoke) appeared as such thanks to certain preconceived notions of what constitutes technology, industry, and culture. He certainly wasn't concerned about recording unspoiled wilderness exactly as he found it. He thought nothing, for example, of



Elliot Porter, *Waterfall and Maple Leaves*, Adirondack Mountains, Keene, New York, May 21, 1964, dye-transfer print.



Above: Elliot Porter, *Detail of Eroded Sandstone, Carol Canyon, Lake Powell, Utah, September 11, 1968*, dye-transfer print.

Right: Elliot Porter, *Fossil Sponges, Dark Canyon, Lake Powell, Utah, September 10, 1968*, dye-transfer print.



applying ice to trapped lizards and then posing the benumbed creatures “in an appropriate position” in their “natural settings” before firing his shutter. Now we understand that nothing is less natural than Porter’s nature photographs.

Porter photographed shrines, churches, and cemeteries, many in his beloved Southwest (he settled in Santa Fe, New Mexico, later in life). There are no skyscrapers, no dams—nothing that, as he put it, was “actually created” by people, by which he seemed to mean, built by trained engineers and architects. Roads, fences, electric wiring, post offices, gas stations, and one-stop shops enter into his depictions of nature as well. Worshiping was natural; mining was natural. Farming, husbandry, prospecting, and hunting for food were all natural—as natural as land exploration, exploitation, and occupation. His understanding of art functioned as a potent marker between creation and destruction, between what was considered to be natural and what was not.

Photographic reproduction is often discussed as if it occurs by magic, as if the resources and technologies that sustain it come from thin air. Yet this has never been true. Photography’s connection to deforestation is obvious, while the industry’s demand for silver helped drive the silver booms that in turn drove the development of the American West. Nitrate, cellulose, acetate, and polyester film were sold by the same chemical corporations that manufactured dyes and explosives. Eastman Kodak played a key role in the Manhattan Project’s enrichment of uranium, and many other corporations with ties to photography, such as DuPont, were knee-deep in military R&D.

The irony of such entanglements, with respect to nature photography, is clear. Porter’s oeuvre, for its part, is tightly intertwined with the environmental movement of the second half of the century. *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World*, with its ravishing shots of delicate flora and misty forests, helped to establish the reputation of its publisher, the grassroots environmental organization the Sierra Club. Porter’s next book, *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado* (1963), aided the passage of the Wilderness Act when it found its way into the hands of congressmen and catalyzed the long-stalled legislative process. His intimate, near-abstract images of craggy canyon walls and rock formations were truly antediluvian—they were shot just before a new dam flooded the area, and had the force of a requiem. “Without question, [Porter’s photographs] helped . . . to establish new national parks and wilderness areas,” said Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club.

Porter traveled the world, documenting threatened or pristine ecosystems, from Antarctica to Maine. When he learned that the “Galápagos Islands were in danger of losing their unique value as a natural museum and laboratory of evolution,” he threw

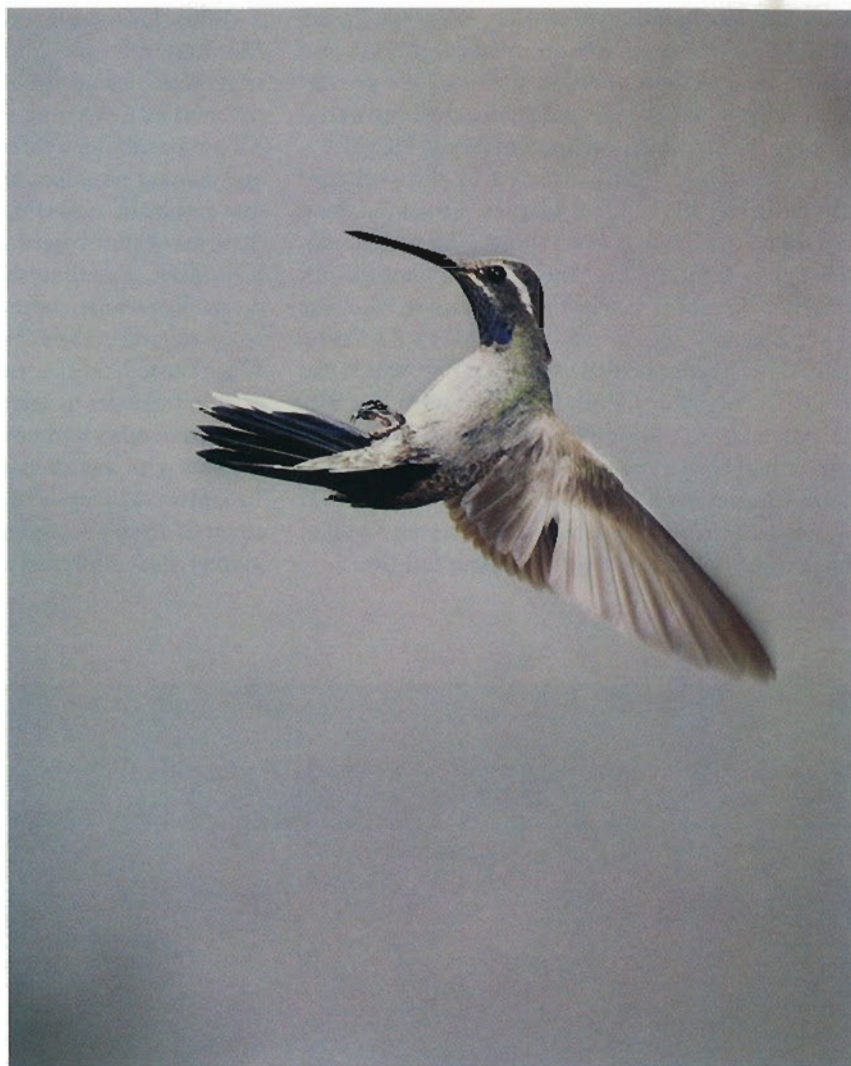
Elliot Porter, *Ice Cave, near Scott Base, Ross Island, Antarctica, December 7, 1975*, dye-transfer print.





Left: Elliot Porter, *Land Iguana Eating Cactus Pad*, Barrington Island, Gal, 1966, dye-transfer print.

Right: Elliot Porter, *Blue-Throated Hummingbird*, Southwestern Research Station, Chiricahua Mountains, Arizona, May 1959, dye-transfer print.



Nothing is less natural than Porter's nature photographs.

his camera into a travel bag and set off for the archipelago, where he spent five months taking photographs. But his approach would not endear him to today's environmentalists. "We caught and ate dolphin without suffering more than a moment of shame," he reminisced, recalling the Galápagos trip. He allowed that "to catch a dolphin is to commit an act of ultimate disdain for the miracle of creation, and to ingest a dolphin is to perpetrate an ultimate indignity to the species." Yet at the same time, he felt that such a repast was entirely natural, because people are carnivores, and dead dolphins are meat: "No longer a dolphin, he had become a dead fish merely."

When Porter was presented with a two-volume book containing his Galápagos photographs, which he had assumed were to be published under his name, he was shocked to see that in fact his "name was not on either volume." Demanding an explanation, he was told "that it was because there were so many contributors that no one could be named."

The event was deeply disturbing. "I was so shaken and speechless I left the meeting," he recalled. This occurred in 1968—a difficult year for Porter. He had grown used to thinking of himself as a prominent spokesperson for nature, and he was now asked to adopt an authorless voice more befitting the needs of the documentary genre. What's more, he increasingly had to contend with moving color images, as wildlife movies, a television-friendly genre, threatened to displace his fine art.

Porter, one might say, revered the miracle of creation, but in a way he seems to have viewed it as *his* miracle. Born in 1901, he grew up outside Chicago in an atmosphere of Anglo-Saxon Protestant gentility. It is worth noting here that Porter's younger brother Fairfield, the painter, once told the ironfisted potentate Clement Greenberg to shut up. The Porter brothers perhaps possessed the blasé temerity that comes with affluence and good connections. Eliot began taking photographs as a little boy, but unlike

Fairfield, whose lifelong vocation was painting, he did not devote himself fully to his chosen medium until his late thirties.

One gets the impression that technocratic and Romantic tendencies of his era—space-age tech and Beat road trips, ray guns and AbEx—warred in Porter's temperament as well as in his work. The latter tendency was in evidence when, after graduating from college, he journeyed cross-country by freight train with his friend Francis Birch. The pair traveled with, and sometimes worked alongside, migrant workers, many of them Wobblies. Porter joined the union, but only after realizing that it was "advantageous" to have an IWW membership card while "on the bum."² The gravity of the workers' circumstances seems to have escaped him. He recalled earning "a little over two dollars a day" and being arrested on the barest of pretexts as if it were all great fun—and perhaps it was, since, policemen could presumably be intimidated once they realized that he and Francis

were Harvard grads and not day laborers. Porter returned to the East, went to medical school, and taught biochemistry at his alma mater for a decade. During these years, he pursued photography part-time, gaining the favorable attention of Alfred Stieglitz.

He was profoundly affected by the events of December 7, 1941: "The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor . . . changed everything," he was to say. Though hopeful that his "knowledge of photography might be of some use in the war effort," he was assigned a low-level clerical job at MIT's Radiation Laboratory, better known as the Rad Lab, which had been established in collaboration with the War Department to develop radar systems. He felt his career had been a failure: "I had made no contributions to scientific knowledge, and my prospects for an academic career were fading," he wrote.³ And so he decided to become a photographer full-time.

While his traveling companion Birch joined the Manhattan Project and helped design Little Boy's triggering mechanism, Porter would play war in a different way, shooting at nature with his camera. He adopted strobe lights, developed largely for industrial and military purposes, and constructed his own delicate automatic-triggering mechanisms. By combining these innovations, he was able to capture his famous high-speed, crystalline shots of birds in flight, gliding, descending on their nests, desperately extending their wings to protect their chicks from the intruding flash. When the federal government started selling surplus field ambulances to veterans, Porter enviously asked a relative who had enlisted to buy one for him. Military gear was essential for following birds. When "a Universal Jeep with a canvas top, the civilian counterpart to the original military jeep," entered the market, Porter jumped at the chance to acquire it.

How is the world transformed every time we push a button? One of the most entrenched notions of photography is that it is not transformed at all—that it gives us a "double of the world," without altering the original. *Nature photography*: The term itself assumes that photography is *not* part of nature. In Porter's images so much undermines this assumption. Reprising Walter Benjamin's legendary diagnosis of the age of mechanical reproduction for a different historical moment, we might say that in the era of postwar photography, nature lost its aura with techniques for mechanical *color* reproduction. In a world where everything is natural, we no longer know what is not. The culprit was not just photography but Kodachrome.

How is a leaf that captures the light of the New England fall different from a paper sensitive to the full range of the visible spectrum? Why are the trees



Left: Elliot Porter, *Scum and Driftwood*, Hite Marina, Lake Powell, Utah, September 9, 1968. dye-transfer print.

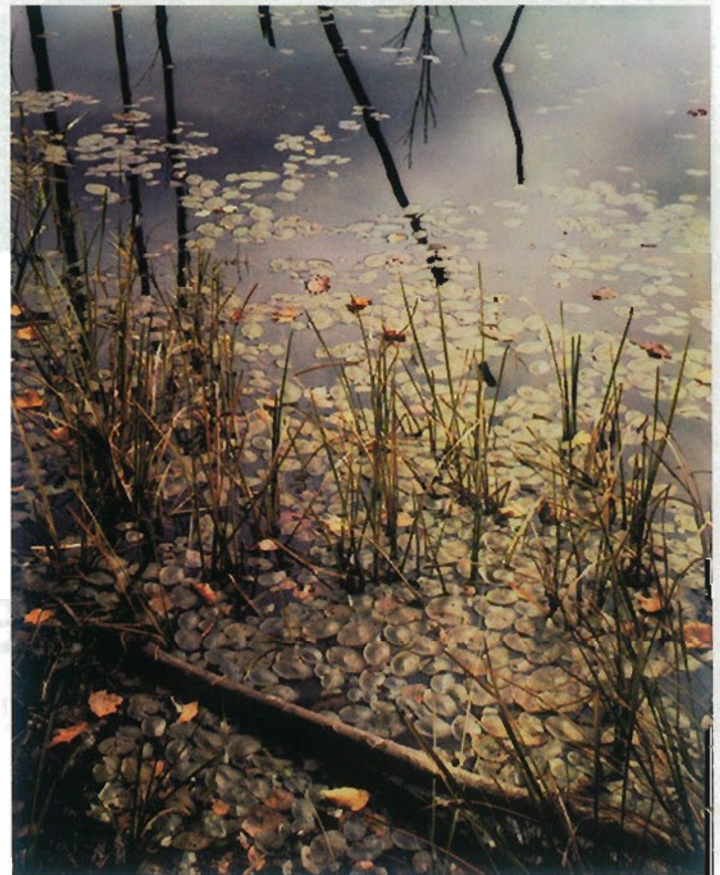
Right: Elliot Porter, *Blue Crucifixion*, Yanhuiltén, Mexico, March 4, 1951. dye-transfer print.

The technocratic and Romantic tendencies of his era—space-age tech and Beat road trips, ray guns and AbEx—warred in Porter's work.





Clockwise, from left: Elliot Porter, *Yellow Leaves and Asters*, Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Santa Fe Basin, New Mexico, September 20, 1950, dye-transfer print. Elliot Porter, *El Pintado and Scalesia*, Santa Cruz Island, Gal, 1966, dye-transfer print. Elliot Porter, *Pond, Grass and Lily Pads*, Madison, New Hampshire, October 1, 1952, dye-transfer print.



reflected on the surface of a pond not a liquid photograph in nature itself? Some twenty-five years after Porter's death, people still dream of the impossible—photography without photographic industry and art without science—even as this fantasy becomes harder and harder to maintain. A new look at Porter's work permits us to see how the concept of the natural is used not only to sanction particular forms of exploitation (environmental and cultural) but also to entice us to see certain things at the expense of others. We focus on the color of the leaf but forget the paper, the chemical dye, the trigger mechanism, the viewfinder, the steel frame, and so on. Porter gave us photographs of nature, to be sure, but he showed us that there's really no such thing as nature photography. □

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NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, Elliot Porter quotations are from *Elliot Porter* (New York: Graphic Society Books, 1987).
2. Quotations in this paragraph are from *Elliot Porter's Southwest* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston).
3. *Ibid.*