

Manna

Literally translated to mean "What is it," the ancient Israelites asked this question of the small white substance that laced the desert floor "like frost" every morning. Sweet, like bread with honey, the story goes, the small grain-like element was miraculously provided by God every day as food to sustain the tribe of people who were wandering the desert for 40 years. The people were only allowed to collect the amount needed for a single day (and double portion for Shabbat) reminding them of a certain kind of trust and dependence on this daily form of provision. If they did not trust the provision and collected more, the food would be rotten and full of maggots by morning, except for the seventh day of the week, when they were granted rest from their labor of gathering. At some point in those 40 years, the Israelites complain about the monotony of the manna and lose sight of its miraculous sustenance.

Initially inspired by the description of a miraculous "frost on the desert floor," the images in this exhibition were born from a daily devotional practice carried out over the last two years. The images originated simply by observing moments in both nature and daily living that visually resonated with this description of manna. Eventually, as the work progressed, it metaphorically explored the ideas of provision, sustenance, appreciation, rest, devotion, and wonder. The work continues to inquire about both the synergy and conundrum between Wonder and Knowledge. In wonder, the camera beholds the microcosm of nature's vast life-sustaining power. Within a meditative devotional practice of looking closely, one may think they are gaining knowledge of a place or a thing or phenomenon or idea.

With deeper and longer practice however, one realizes that knowledge is perhaps more akin to familiarity, and that wonder always remains at the core of looking and studying deeply. The compositions lean toward abstraction, inviting you to look at what the photo depicts with both wonder and knowledge. You may recognize, for example, an image of ice, or gravel, or salt, or cloth, or snow; but each composition, and the volume of images amassed together, along with their enlarged scale, cause familiar things that we may "know" to appear otherworldly. I invite you to look at these works without having to "know" what they are about, without having to understand them, or even feel anything toward them. I invite you to look simply with an openness to wonder at the patterns, the shapes, all the subtle colors, and the absolute magnificence of creation. Notice even the beauty of the patterns that emerge from humanity's interaction with creation over time. Allow yourself to wonder at the familiar.

Within the disillusionment of artistic, professional, and personal burn out, this exploration came from a place of longing to wonder at creation and let go of an agenda of artistic and professional gain. It is not just scientific or spiritual knowledge for care, the benefits of devotional life, or conservation of ourselves and our planet that produces action. These images propose that wonder (perhaps in tandem, or in lieu of knowledge) is an underutilized source of inspiration, encouragement, nourishment, and motivation for environmental, emotional, and devotional stewardship. This work ponders what sort of environmental future, human care, divine instruction, or even intuitive knowledge might be born from looking, appreciating, and most of all, wondering, "What is it?"

-Sarah Bernhardt

