

Transcending the Camera

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*Robert Buelteman, Alpine Lupine, 2004.
Chromogenic development print, 72 x 31
inches.*

Jackson gallerist **Shari Brownfield** says she could barely explain what she was seeing when she first set eyes on photographer **Robert Buelteman's** luminous, other-worldly images of wildflowers, grasses and leaves.

The Woodside, California photographer, for many years a chronicler of Western landscapes — most notably the peninsular area he calls home — had walked in unannounced to show Brownfield, then working at a Palm Springs gallery, his portfolio.

“My colleague and I talked with him for quite a while, and we didn’t understand a word he was saying; it felt like language from another planet—but here he was showing us these images that were so new and fresh. He had a stellar reputation for his black and white photography, but this new work was untried. There was a gripping element to it, he was a young artist we’d never seen before and we decided to give him an exhibit,” says Brownfield.

She is giving Buelteman another exhibit, this time in Jackson, Wyoming, at her 55 S. Glenwood Street space, Shari Brownfield Fine Art. “every thing shines” is on exhibition July 19 – September 3, 2021. An opening reception takes place on Thursday, July 22nd, 4:00 – 7:00 pm. The artist will be in attendance.

“When I opened my space last year I suggested he bring his work here. And although these images are not from Jackson specifically, they are all from the southern Rockies’ habitat, the flora that’s abundant in high elevations: lupine, columbine, Indian Paintbrush and aspen trees.”

Wildflower watchers here are observing an accelerated blooming time this summer. With only one or two days of rain since the beginning of June (as we write, it is nearing mid-July) and temperatures in the 90’s, end-of-season natives such as Indian Paintbrush and fireweed are already abundantly visible.

Bloom timetables are indicators of climate change, **the EPA says**, and the question is, how long can the flowers keep up this pace? Disruptions in the onset of Spring events, such as blooming dates, can have significant impact on ecosystems, and by extension, on society itself.

Impermanence. How much time before our wildflowers disappear?

Even if we enjoy our alpine flora for a long, long time to come, these staggeringly beautiful photographs will take your breath away. Mounted as they are in Brownfield’s compact log cabin space, the setting cannot be beat.

Buelteman’s otherworldly flora appear to be floating in space, simultaneously ghostly and alive. His images, literally electrically charged, connote thoughts of spiritual intangibles and transcendence. Like the characters and symbols in Stanley Kubrick’s **“2001: A Space Odyssey,”** Buelteman’s photographs are enigmatic.

We are fascinated, but we need to learn more about the artist to understand why.

Buelteman marked years of success with his black and white analog photographs taken in and around the West, and particularly in the San Francisco area, where he gained access to that region's **Crystal Springs Watershed** and published a well-received photographic survey, "**The Unseen Peninsula.**" Well-intentioned, repetitively literal responses he often received caused Buelteman to wonder how he could communicate deeper, more spiritual feelings about Nature. For him, the capture of any object taken from the wild is not only about its exact location.



Robert Buelteman, Field Flowers, 2010. Chromogenic development print, 20 x 25 inches. "Photography as an art form poses special challenges as its creation and entire history, right up to this second, was and is geared towards greater and greater accuracy in its renderings of its subjects. Probably could not have chosen a more poorly suited medium to study transcendence." ~ Robert Buelteman

"Yes, my life is an ongoing inquiry into **transcendence**," explains Buelteman. "First, as an unwilling recruit into a progressive Christian church by my parents, then listening to the lectures of Alan Watts from his ferry boat moored in Sausalito, followed by Werner Erhard, Bucky Fuller, Ram Dass, Steven and Ondrea Levine, and too many others to list here. Transcendence is everywhere if you have the eyes to see it and the ears to hear it, from the poetry of e.e. cummings, in the stories of **Wallace Stegner** who helped me get my first monograph published in 1995, to the music of David Byrne, and, of course, the world of art."

In essence, I regard these as paintings made with the energy of visible light and electricity, using the living plant as both source and filter. ~ Robert Buelteman

The notions of transcendence and impermanence—the realization that all conditioned substances eventually vanish—and the fact that living things are imbued with energy, are apparent in Buelteman’s electric nature photographs. Embracing these concepts may have even more meaning to the photographer, as he is extensively disabled by **Neurologic Lyme Disease**, which affects the central nervous system, and is confined to bed up to 16 hours a day.



*Robert Buelteman, Thimbleberry, 2001.
Chromogenic development print, 50 x 40
inches.*

Buelteman’s search brought him back around to an early, ground-breaking photographic method known as **Kirlian photography**, a process that captures the occurrence of electrical **corona discharges**. **Semyon Kirlian**, a Soviet researcher, discovered the technique in which an object, placed on a photographic plate, is hooked up to a very strong electrical pulse to elicit an image. Buelteman’s subjects produce auras, another natural phenomenon caused by the interaction of electric energy and the moisture present in all living things.

There’s no camera involved.



***Robert Buelteman, Indian Paintbrush, 2005.
Pigment print, 72 x 31 inches. Buelteman's
subjects produce auras, another natural
phenomenon caused by the interaction of
electric energy and the moisture present in
all living things.***

Buelteman begins his process by sculpting his flora with surgical tools. Once in the darkroom, he uses an easel surrounded by dense pieces of wood in order to avoid electrocution; an aluminum sheet floats in liquid silicone, sandwiched between thick plexiglass. A spark plug cable delivers 40,000 to 80,000 volts.

After a several more steps, Buelteman's subject is wired to a grounding source, and high-voltage electricity is introduced to the exposure matrix. He then uses a variety of light sources to diffusely illuminate his subject, guide light through it and onto film.

"In essence, I regard these as paintings made with the energy of visible light and electricity, using the living plant as both source and filter," Buelteman says.

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High profile collector and Founding Partner at Embarcadero Capital Partners, John Hamilton, focuses on building creative environments and counts Buelteman among his favorite artists.

"Rob was telling me how he was spending a lot of time at the **Santa Fe Institute**. Which I knew a little bit about, enough to be dangerous," says Hamilton. "I had a friend of mine pass away up there not too long ago, who won the Nobel Prize in physics for identifying the **Quark**, so I knew they were all high intellectuals up there. I asked Rob how he fit in, was it because he zaps things with electricity? Up to the time Rob was at the Institute, and he and **Cormac McCarthy** were the only two non-scientists invited to work and commune there. So, that was impressive."

Embarcadero does things big, and when the collector saw Buelteman's large scale images he commissioned several pieces on the spot and installed them at **100 California Street** in San Francisco.

"People loved the work," reports Hamilton. "I just commissioned six more pieces from Rob for some new buildings we've bought, structures in Silicon Valley. The two buildings are 180,000 square feet each and were designed by **HOK**. He's always been a warm, thoughtful person, but it seems like he's been even more in tune with the environment recently. His craft is fascinating."

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"My landscape photographs are all about those moments when the separation between the observer and the observed disappears and is replaced by a sense of timeless unity. It was the tremendous frustration of having made what I thought was the ultimate expression of self/being, only to be asked by an enthused viewer, 'Where did you take that picture?' Now I understand that when people are inspired they want to engage and acknowledge the artist, and are simply looking to open a conversation, but it made me crazy," says Buelteman. I

figured if I got rid of the tools of the medium *designed* to make more ‘accurate’ photographs, (lenses, cameras and computers) I might be able to see behind the veil that tends to occlude this sense of unity I seek.”

It’s literally difficult to comprehend what you are looking at; and he doesn’t really care if people feel that way. In fact, it might be better they feel that way. ~Shari Brownfield

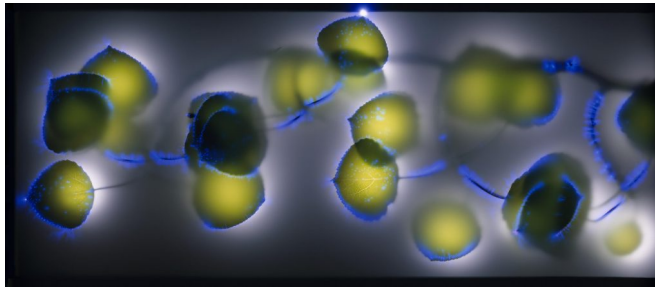
Buelteman and Brownfield are on the same page when it comes to the former’s evolution as a photographer and these ethereal images.



Robert Buelteman, Golden Columbine, 2004. Chromogenic development print, 50 x 40 inches. “As for impermanence, I have long thought that it is the only thing that binds us all together, not love, not intellect, not passion, but the fact that everything that is eventually won’t be. What grace!” ~ Robert Buelteman

“There’s so much more than what meets the eye with his work,” Brownfield muses. “Usually visibly process-based art is something I naturally gravitate to. It’s an extension of the artist. But I realized my interest in Robert’s work is about the fact that his process is quite invisible. It’s not in our face. That’s what brought me to appreciate his work. It’s literally difficult to comprehend what you are looking at; and he doesn’t really care if people feel that way. In fact, it might be better they feel that way.”

As to viewer curiosity about these new images, Buelteman likes to think that the best questions about his work inspire *inner* dialogue.



Robert Buelteman, *Green Aspen*, 2005. Dye-sublimation metal print, 31 x 72 inches.

“Is this how nature expresses itself? Where is my attention that I don’t see the beauty at my feet? I like the idea that art gives us new eyes with which to see, and I think this work does that,” says the artist. *“And I am often asked why I moved from landscape photography to this method, and that dialogue is more personal to me and my process. As for impermanence, I have long thought that it is the only thing that binds us all together, not love, not intellect, not passion, but the fact that everything that is eventually won’t be. What grace! Can you imagine having to carry all that stuff around for the rest of time? We get to leave it all behind, and a new blank slate at birth. Sounds like a pretty good system to me.”*

every thing shines at **Shari Brownfield Fine Art** includes three sizes of each of Buelteman’s images. Each photograph has a total edition series of 25: 10 each of a small and medium-sized images and five large-sized images. In addition to the large works exhibited on her gallery walls, Brownfield plans on having a selection of 25 – 30 works on hand.

[View the exhibition here.](#)

[Learn more about Robert Buelteman on his website, here.](#)