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FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT

Museum of Science exhibit captures US National Parks on a large scale



QT LUONG

A photograph by QT Luong from the Museum of Science exhibit “Treasured Lands: The US National Parks in Focus.”

By Joe Incollingo | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 15, 2016

Though QT Luong was a published researcher on artificial intelligence when he got to the Bay Area in the early '90s, he didn't head to Silicon Valley. Instead, he was drawn to the cliffs of Yosemite, having fallen in love with mountaineering — and the photographs he took while doing it — while growing up in the shadow of the French Alps.

The hobby soon became Luong's full-time gig, taking him across the 50 states and to every national park therein, shooting with a large-format camera to capture the miles of dimension before his eyes. When he completed his trek in 2002, he was the first to have done so in the large format.

He's continued to expand the project since, tacking on new parks and circling back to those he'd visited already. In his downtime, he's appeared in Ken Burns's documentary about the parks and written a seven-pound book about his experience, out this year for the National Park Service's centennial. A traveling exhibit with one photo from each park — 59 out of well over 12,000 — is on view now at the Museum of Science. Luong discussed the project by phone from San Jose, where he still lives.

Q. What inspired the project?

A. The diversity of the parks, and the fact that everything I saw was new for me. I started the project soon after I arrived in the US, and there were things I saw here that I just hadn't seen before. The mountains in Alaska, those glaciers that stretch out to the sky, the desert environment — we don't have that in Europe. The parks taken individually were very beautiful, but the sum was more than its parts. Plus, I realized before I started the project that

nobody had done this in large format. This was in 1993, so there were no digital cameras. You had 35mm film and large format, and I saw that only photographing in large format would do justice to it.



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Q. Would you have used digital, if you could have?

A. I might have. But one of the reasons I did it in large format was that, when I arrived here, I learned all about the American landscape photographic tradition, like Ansel Adams, and others whose work was only ever done with large-format film.

Q. What sorts of challenges did you face throughout the project?

A. Most of the time I traveled by myself. Some of those places are pretty wild — many of the parks in Alaska, for instance — and I don't always stay on the park roads. So one challenge was always travel.

Q. How has the collection expanded since you reached 59? Is it ongoing, or do you see it more as a finished product?

A. I've actually been working a lot since then. By then, the thing that I'd done was to complete the goal of visiting each park, but I still wanted to return to try more varied images of the parks, in different seasons, or areas I hadn't visited. In the 2000s, when the digital camera appeared, I was so sure that this opened new possibilities, so I actually bought one of the first full-frame digital cameras that was available. One of the new possibilities available to me was the ability to photograph at night, which you couldn't do with film because film wasn't sensitive enough.

Q. What should people take away from the collection, in seeing the parks how you saw them?

A. It's really to inspire people to visit those places for themselves, to realize how much beauty is there. Some of them are pretty well-known — everybody's aware of Acadia — but there's a number of parks which aren't very well-known but still so beautiful. The reason I'd like everybody to go and visit those places is that it's been an incredible experience for me, it's been extraordinary, and I'd like people to have the same experience. It could bring a lot of joy to people, and I think the national parks need that. People tend to care about lands with which they feel a connection. If they visit the parks, they'll care about their protection.

TREASURED LANDS: THE US NATIONAL PARKS IN FOCUS

At Museum of Science, through Sept. 18. Tickets: \$23, seniors \$21, children 3-11 \$20. 617-723-2500, www.mos.org

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