

Photographer's urban landscapes reveal layers of perspective
Michelle Jones. [The Tennessean](#). Nashville, Tenn.: [Mar 8, 2009](#).

Abstract (Summary)

FOR THE TENNESSEAN John Dowell's images of cities -- convention centers, skyscrapers, squares -- display a startling clarity, a crystal-clear sharpness that can take one's breath away. Getting the shot In 2007, Dowell was asked to photograph excavations of the President's House, the executive mansion used by George Washington and John Adams from 1790 to 1800 during Philadelphia's stint as the U.S. capital.

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Full Text

(805 words)

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FOR THE TENNESSEAN

John Dowell's images of cities -- convention centers, skyscrapers, squares -- display a startling clarity, a crystal-clear sharpness that can take one's breath away. So far he's photographed about 12 cities, including New York City, Chicago, Atlanta and his hometown of Philadelphia, where he teaches printmaking at Temple University's Tyler School of Art.

"What guides me in traveling is that, I'm in 70 museums. They didn't come looking for me, I go there and knock on the door," Dowell says by phone from Atlanta. "Every time I visit to show somebody some work, I'm shooting photographs."

He planned to do the same this weekend in Nashville -- "Hermitage in the daytime, skyline at night," he says -- while in town for the opening for a show of his works at *Twist Art Gallery's* Space 58.

He doesn't really consider his photographs to be skylines; to him they're "urban landscapes." The idea, Dowell says, is to capture several layers of a city as a metaphor for the continuum of time.

"There's an old African saying about the past and the future and the present; that continuum exists all the time," he says. "I'm always looking at how (to) show that dual existence."

One way he does this is through reflections and nocturnal scenes.

"I can shoot a building and that, especially with the glass, will reflect what's in front of its facade, and then I'm also photographing the facade," he says. "But if it's in the evening and the lights are on, I can penetrate that space and put you inside. So, I'm looking at a building, I got a reflection of another building on it, I still see the building itself and I can look into that building. That's when I'm happiest."

Getting the shot

In 2007, Dowell was asked to photograph excavations of the President's House, the executive mansion used by George Washington and John Adams from 1790 to 1800 during Philadelphia's stint as the U.S. capital. Though he first balked at the assignment -- "I shoot buildings; that's just a dirt hole," he thought -- Dowell found himself contemplating history as he spent long nights photographing the site, which included remnants of slave quarters.

This led him to plan a series of lithographs and paintings called *The Dinner Party*, based on the celebrations he imagined slaves had when masters were away. During a panel in Memphis, he mentioned the project to Kevin Bartoy, archeological director of The Hermitage. Bartoy in turn told Dowell about evidence of slave celebrations at The Hermitage and invited him to Nashville.

Meanwhile, Dowell is preparing for a 2010 show of 40 nighttime images of Atlanta. Things were going well this trip: He'd been given access to a penthouse undergoing renovation, a law firm with spectacular views, a building's entirely empty 16th floor and the Atlanta campus of the Savannah College of Art and Design.

"I like to shoot down, but at the same time, I don't want to be up too high; I want you to be able to see and identify with it," he says. "Ideally, I'm happiest around 20 stories."

Even Dowell's wonderful shots of the Chicago River meandering under bridges and past buildings in the Loop were shot from inside, not from, say, a helicopter hovering over the water with Dowell hanging out into the elements.

"No, I'm in a hotel room, very comfortably, with the raging wind outside. Drinking tea, shooting," he says, laughing.

Overcoming technical difficulties

Still, getting from negative to print is a lengthy and costly process.

"Some of the people that process my stuff and some of the curators say I couldn't have picked a more difficult subject matter to do," Dowell says, laughing. "So at retirement age, I start spending more money than ever (in) making my art."

Dowell uses a large-format camera and still shoots film. "There's a group of us, the archivists, we call ourselves," he says. Dowell says the cost of a digital camera of a comparable size would cost about \$60,000. Still, he admits he faces certain technical challenges.

"They no longer make tungsten for what we call night illumination, so I can only use daylight film," he says. The images are then scanned and the color balance tweaked in Photoshop. "Then there's this testing and testing and testing, right until it's printed."

Those prints are usually 22 by 30 inches, or 27 by 34. But he has also gone larger.

"I've had a couple printed at 44 by 55 inches," Dowell says, "and they're just as sharp, and that's . . . oh, my God, it's wonderful."

IF YOU GO

What: Photographs by John Dowell

Where: *Twist Art Gallery's* Space 58, 58 Arcade

When: Through March 28

Hours: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday-Friday, 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday

Admission: Free

Contact: 1-888-535-5286 or www.twistartgallery.com