

Our Town

[snip] **If you think horoscopes are bunk, you don't have to call yourself a "non-astrologer,"** writes Sam Harris on the blog the Huffington Post. "Likewise, 'atheism' is a term that should not even exist. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make when in the presence of religious dogma." —Harold Henderson | hhenderson@chicagoreader.com

Odysseys

From Saint Louis to Shining Sea

Photographer Richard Mack spent two years trying to see America through the eyes of Lewis and Clark.

By Nicholas Day

The walls of the Newberry Library are decked out in America. Stretched from the ceiling are snow-flecked Idaho pines at dawn, a sky that's a range of blues on the North Dakota prairie, a cloud exploding over the Montana flatland. The hangings, measuring 10 by 22 feet, were blown up from 35-millimeter negatives—a mite of dust in comparison.

It's a useful way to think about photographer Richard Mack as he shot these images—as a speck on the landscape. Part of the library's new exhibit, "Lewis and Clark and the Indian Country," the photos were taken over two years as Mack slowly

with Mack simply being short of work.

A commercial photographer, Mack, a lifelong resident of Evanston, makes his living shooting advertising and annual reports, work that requires being on location around the country. But after September 11 four assignments for the fall were canceled: no one was flying anywhere. That's when he happened to read an article on the 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Although he only knew, as he says, "what you knew in high school about Lewis and Clark," he was looking for a book topic. "If you're a photographer, you always want to do a book," he says, sheepishly. He'd tried before—he'd had permission from the National Park Service to photograph the restoration of Ellis Island, for example—but had given up because there was more money in corporate work. Now suddenly he didn't have any.

"I read the article and ten minutes later the idea was formulated and I started research," he says.

Sent by Jefferson to explore the Louisiana Purchase, Lewis and Clark set off in May of 1804 from Saint Louis, at the mouth of the Missouri River, and went upstream, through what would become South Dakota, North Dakota, and Montana, and then, after a desperate climb over the mountains, made it down to the Pacific. Then they headed back, a



Richard Mack

and shifted, often by several miles. Furthermore, most of the rivers the expedition took have been dammed to control flooding and produce electricity; there's now a string of more than 20 dams along the route. And, modern-day difficulties aside, where Lewis and Clark were, even in largely unchanged country, remains unclear. Besides the few spots through which it's been definitively established the expedition passed—there's a photo in the book of the most obvious, a carved "W. Clark, July 25, 1806" on a bluff along the Yellowstone River—cartographic accounts of the expedition vary significantly. Last year, for example, the National Park Service had to revise the National Register listing of what they had believed was the exact spot of an expedition campsite in Montana when research uncovered better physical evidence a mile and a half upstream.

Working from Evanston with a pile of books, Mack mapped out his itinerary. (Later he discovered that roads that had looked promising on the map were nothing at all. Out west he

ended up on dirt roads 90 percent of the time.) Because of his determination to cover the trail as Lewis and Clark saw it, he didn't simply drive the trail straight through. "If they were there in the winter, I needed to be there in the winter," he says. "And since they were there over three different years, for any given month I had three places to be." His first trip wasn't to Camp Wood, where the expedition started, but to North Dakota, where he hurriedly drove to photograph a campsite in the midst of a late blizzard in the spring of 2003.

"I traveled the whole trail, but I never did it in one fell swoop," Mack says. "I would go out to Montana for a week and then come back and go out to Missouri for a week." Leapfrogging across the country, he racked up 30,000 miles of driving over two years of part-time work. He did it alone, though his brother-in-law tagged along toward the end. "No one wants to go with you if you're a photographer doing landscape work," Mack says. "You'll sit in one place for hours on end." A four-

Richard Mack lecture: "The Lewis & Clark Trail and the American Landscape"

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"You're smelling it and you're feeling it and yet you've got to get some kind of shot that says, 'This is the kind of area that they left from.'"

made his way across the country, shooting 1,200 rolls of film. He eventually culled the photos for a massive art book, published in March as *The Lewis and Clark Trail: American Landscapes*, a paean to the diversity of what Thomas Jefferson purchased and the only attempt, two centuries on, to approximate what the expedition might have seen.

It's a project that started, however,

round trip of 8,000 miles.

For Mack, photographing the trail as Lewis and Clark saw it meant not only a commitment to cross two-thirds of the country but to be in each location at the same time of year as the expedition. But figuring out where he had to be, period, was hard enough.

Technically the expedition's route has vanished: after being dredged for shipping, the Missouri has widened

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[snip] **Rahm Emanuel's 2006 Contract With America.** Joshua Green writes in *Rolling Stone* that Emanuel believes Democrats should run in 2006 on a platform of "universal college education, universal health care for anyone who works, bringing down the national debt and cutting U.S. dependence on foreign oil in half within a decade. If expanded, such policies could form the basis of a Democratic version of the Contract With America, the weapon that Gingrich wielded to such devastating effect [in 1994] in his campaign to take control of Congress." —HH



A beach in Oregon where the expedition made salt, buffalo in North Dakota, old growth cedars west of Lolo Pass in Idaho

by-five large-format camera—standard for landscape photography—was too cumbersome, so he shot with a 35-millimeter from shore and, occasionally, from a plane.

The first year, after dark, he'd often pull into a fishing right-of-way and set up camp. The second year, tired of putting up tents in the dark and rain, he bought a pickup with an attached camper. (He speaks of it with the reverence of someone who's found true luxury.) "I got stopped more than once by a rancher," he says. "Once you say what you're doing, most of the time they're pretty cool about it. And if they're not, you just turn around." Chance encounters were almost always more serendipitous than problematic. Frequently he'd get suggestions from strangers in bars and restaurants. "You'd meet someone out there who'd say, 'Oh, I know somewhere you need to go. I'll call this guy and let you get in on his land.'"

The only part of the trail Mack didn't follow is what runs through modern-day Kansas City; problematic sites he couldn't skip, he shot around.

Take the first photo in the book, of Camp Wood, which is now underwater. He expected that. He didn't expect that it would be surrounded by chemical plants. "They've got a very small little park that's right there, but 50 feet either way they're loading up barges with gasoline," he

says. "So you're smelling it and you're feeling it and yet you've got to get some kind of shot that says, 'This is the kind of area that they left from.'"

What he settled on was an angle across the Mississippi toward the mouth of the Missouri, a scene that appears bucolic save for the dim outline of electrical towers in the distance, something Mack could've digitally deleted. "At some point," he says, "you've got to be true to the idea."

When a book's ambition is to retrace the path of a transcontinental expedition, publishing the book should be the easy part. It wasn't. When Mack discussed contracts with publishers, "the numbers they proposed were so low that it wouldn't have paid for me to do the book," he says. "But the biggest part was the issue of wanting to produce the best book." The publishers he spoke with insisted on a lower cover price, which meant sacrifices in quality—a smaller size, cheaper paper, and the loss of creative control.

Mack decided to do it himself, forming Quiet Light Publishing out of his office in Evanston and covering the start-up costs with a bank loan. (It's not a one-off enterprise: he's working on a book on the disappearing grain elevators of small-town America, and he hopes to publish other photographers as well.) He contracted out the printing to the artisanal Stinehour Press in

Vermont, where he ultimately spent five weeks supervising a print run of 10,000 copies. (His day-by-day account of the process is at mackphoto.com/Vermont.html.)

"I thought originally that'd be reasonable," Mack says, "considering the number of people hitting the Lewis and Clark Trail." He pauses. "I wouldn't have printed that many if I'd known what I know now. I would've stayed at 5,000." He's reluctant to say what the printing costs were, adding that the money is secondary to the time involved, but the book's price ended up at a vertiginous \$90.

It looks it, at least. *The Lewis and Clark Trail: American Landscapes* is a 256-page full-color slab of a book. It's a rapturous representation of the American landscape, seen both in grand wide-angle vistas and in the surfaces of wildflowers and water, with each photograph geographically labeled and arranged chronologically along Lewis and Clark's route. Apposite quotes from the diaries run alongside. It's a book that John Muir would've liked. Unfortunately, John Muir isn't buying books for bookstores.

"What I didn't know was how hard the distribution end was—getting it to store shelves," Mack says. "That's the number one thing." He has a distributor, but for the most part he's sold the book slowly by hand, talking to chains and small bookstores him-

self. Amazon and other online retailers have picked it up as well; half of his total sales have come from the Web. He's also gotten a boost from the awards he's won: the book took second place in the nature category at the International Photography Awards this year and was named a semifinalist for photography book of the year by the Independent Book Publishers Association. (The winner, Mack says with a laugh, was of nudes on Lake Superior.)

The book's also available at the Newberry bookstore. "I was thrilled to find his work," says Riva Feshbach, the Newberry's exhibits manager, who worked on "Lewis and Clark and the Indian Country" for four years. The show, which also includes books of the era, maps, and period photographs, aims to put Native Americans back in the Lewis and Clark story, complicating the popular narrative of the explorers conquering a basically blank continent. "From the beginning, we wanted the landscape to be the visual theme for the exhibit." But they didn't want it to look "antiquarian," she says, as many representations of the expedition do. They wanted a modern look. "The idea of the landscape is such an important link for people to the subject of the expedition," Feshbach says. "As part of the story, it's really important."

Over the course of his project
continued on page 20

What Are You Wearing?



Min Song

Rebel Rebel

Min Song, 23, works at Hejrina, paints commissioned animal portraits, and was recently asked to design a T-shirt for Brighton Park Press.

Your outfit is kind of opulent—the velveteen minidress and pumps are both trimmed in gold. Is feeling luxe when you get dressed important to you?

It's kind of funny... honestly these things come from secondhand stores. It's more about working with what you have monetarily and not looking like everyone else.

How do you feel when something you love becomes the current trend and everybody's wearing it? I feel cheated. It's really mind-boggling to realize people aren't aware of things until Vogue trots it out. This past season, everybody you see is wearing these big old-lady necklaces. They were always out there—why must everyone do the same thing all at once?

What contemporary designers do you like?

I love Dries Van Noten—though

the new collection is a little safe—and Junya Watanabe. Hussein Chalayan is pretty amazing. Ooh, and Viktor & Rolf. Benoît Méléard—he makes these shoes with white soles and tiny little kitten heels and giant circular shapes. They're great, but probably not very wearable. But I like that rebellious spirit.

Rebellious against what?

Against the general public's idea of fashion, and against the bigger, more established lines. I don't even like Marc Jacobs. His stuff is all totally ripped off, without putting any of his own ideas into it, and that's offensive. It's cute, but... where's that gonna get you really? He's always looking for the next muse for a celebrity photographer. The ads are so bad... I would never want to be in those ads, or an American Apparel ad.

What do you think of those ads' emphasis on the "exotic" woman? It seems like such an old idea. You'd think people would have moved past that. But I don't take it all that personally. —Kim Soss

continued from page 19

Mack, who began it with a casual professional interest, went native: talking about Lewis and Clark's journey he displays an expansive, geeky knowledge of the trek, focusing more on the esoteric details of it than his own. "It was a great project and I wish it was still going on," he says.

In some ways, it is: Mack had hoped to photograph the famous White Cliffs of the upper Missouri by canoe, but the trip fell through. Instead he flew over the cliffs in a friend's plane, shooting their bleached, jagged profile from above. The photos are crisp and striking; they're in the book. But next summer—in his off time, over a year after the book's publication—he's planning to return, to shoot from the river, surrounded by the same craggy cliffs that shadowed Lewis and Clark. **Q**

Our Town

The Beautiful Life

Tweezer Whiz

Rashida B. has some strong opinions about your eyebrows.

By Tasneem Paghdwala

The tiny bride-to-be sitting in Rashida Balogun's high-backed chair is in trouble and she knows it. She waits with her eyes shut, hands folded tightly in her lap, one kitten heel tapping against the chair leg. Rashida frowns into her upturned face and then, obviously irritated, turns to wipe rubbing alcohol over her tweezers and scissors.

The young woman started coming to Rashida's salon, a one-woman operation on the top floor of a Wicker Park loft building, every few weeks when it opened in the spring to get her brows in shape before her wedding. She'd heard that the B Spot was the only salon in Chicago that specialized in brows and lashes, which tickled her bride-to-be sensibilities. She was late this Saturday morning, and Saturday is Rashida's tightest day, with back-to-back appointments from eight to noon. Luckily the 10:40 showed up early, so the two appointments were simply swapped. Rashida could've forgiven and forgotten, but she noticed something else: the bride-to-be had been at her brows.

"You went in. I can tell," Rashida says sternly, her tweezers poised in the air above the woman's temple. She uses instruments by a Swiss company called Rubis that's been around since 1922, when it designed tweezers for watchmakers who needed to manipulate minuscule jewels and gears.

A set of thin brushes stands in a vase on the corner of her table, next to a hand mirror and some tubes that look like oil paints. Conspicuously missing are a pot of wax bubbling on a burner and thin strips of muslin. Rashida refuses to use wax. This is like going in for a checkup and the doctor telling you he doesn't believe in stethoscopes. Waxing is de rigueur: you go somewhere to get your brows waxed because you can't trust yourself to do it right. Rashida only tweezes—and what's more, she charges \$45 to do it. That's triple what most places charge for any method. I'm watching her work today to find out what she does that the 50 or so other women (and two men) who have waxed, plucked, threaded, and trimmed my own eyebrows in the past didn't.

Over the course of the morning she'll repeat her mantra, "Waxing is evil," seven times. "All the beauty magazines say the skin around the eye is the most delicate on the body—don't pull at it, pat moisturizer on with your little finger," she says. "Turn the page and they're telling you to put burning hot wax there and rrrrip it off! Keep waxing long enough and the eyelid loses its structure and droops.

"You want precision, a subtle arch, not the same generic shape on every face walking down the street," she

[snip] "Neither the Ten Commandments nor the teachings of Jesus seem to command any more practical adherence in America than in Europe," writes Australian commentator John Quiggin on the blog Crooked Timber, even though many more Americans than Europeans profess to be religious. "The (apparent) unimportance of religious belief for social outcomes was one of the great surprises of the 20th century, although, like most negative results, its significance is not fully appreciated. In the 18th and 19th centuries, nearly everyone thought that religious belief made a big difference, for good or ill." —HH



Rashida B. of the B Spot (top)

continues. "How are you gonna get a precise line with a blob of wax?"

The clients like to hear the philosophy behind Rashida's unorthodox method. Some of them tell me they ended up in her care after years of nomadic wandering from one salon to another. They have stories about going home from a bad waxing experience with burn marks around their eyelids or crying in the rearview mirror at an overly dramatic arch when all they asked for was a simple cleanup job. "The 'angry woman' arch," Rashida says with a nod.

As Rashida tweezes, incense burns

in one corner and low bass-heavy music drifts from another. The salon is huge—it takes up the entire third floor at 1471 N. Milwaukee. Wide windows run all the way up the chocolate-colored walls. It's a mostly empty room; there are two overstuffed brown suede settees, a low dark-wood cabinet stocked with wine, Rashida's worktable and chair, and then foot after foot of dark, glossy hardwood. A little crate by one of the settees holds a stack of beauty magazines and a coffee-table book called *The Eyebrow*, which includes a photographic history of Bette Davis's eyebrows. They start