

LUCAS FOGLIA

A Natural Order

DAVID WINTON BELL GALLERY, BROWN UNIVERSITY



Acorn with Possum Stew, Wildroots Homestead, North Carolina 2006



Cora Going Fishing on the Tennessee River, Tennessee 2009

A Natural Order presents an intriguing and seductive view of life off-the-grid. For viewers of a certain age (such as myself), it rings with remembrances of the 1960s, of hippie communes, free love, rebellion against the establishment, and a youthful joy of life. Today the focus has changed from unjust wars to unsustainable life practices, yet the youthful ability to visualize a better way and to act upon the vision persists.

Viewing the development of Lucas Foglia's series over the past few years, I have been struck by the intense beauty of many images. These notable and iconic photos—such as *Acorn with Possum Stew* or *Jasmine, Hannah and Cecilia Swimming*, to name just two—fluence a reading of the series as a contemporary pastoral, an idealized vision of humans in harmony with nature. Foglia's intentions are, however, more nuanced. He acknowledges a desire to be enticing, to use beauty to draw us in, in hopes of opening our eyes to the benefits of sustainable living.¹ And, along the way he grounds the series with images that speak to social issues: the divide between his subjects and mainstream society, the paternal hierarchy that is still in force amongst some of these communities. All of this, Foglia combines into his “narrative interpretation” of life off-grid.

More than a mere observer, Foglia shares his subjects' commitment to self-sustainability. His concern for the human connection to the land dates back to his childhood and has informed his photographic practice to date.

I grew up with my extended family on a small farm in the suburbs of New York City. While malls and supermarkets developed around us, we heated our house with wood, farmed and canned our food, and bartered the plants we grew for everything from shoes to dental work.

LUCAS FOGLIA²



Jasmine, Hannah and Cecilia Swimming, Tennessee 2008

As an undergraduate at Brown University, Foglia photographed at the Southside Community Land Trust, an organization that converts vacant lots into productive food gardens and market farms in low-income neighborhoods. Even at that early age, all of the factors were in place for his future photographic inquiries: his chosen subject, his considerable eye for color and composition, and perhaps most important, his ability to connect with his subjects via a fervent curiosity and an inherent and profound openness.

In two subsequent series, Foglia searched out people who have retained or reinstated their connection to the land as source of food, shelter, and sustenance. *Frontcountry*, his current work-in-progress, explores life in mining boom towns and in ranching and farming communities across the western United States.³ *A Natural Order*, (2006–2010), focuses on those who have left cities and suburbs to live off-the-grid in the southeastern United States. Beginning in the summer of 2006, Foglia met, stayed with, photographed, and recorded conversations with people at established “rewilding” communities such as Wildroots Earthskills Homestead, at Christian communities such as Russell Creek Community, and with smaller independent groups.⁴ His subjects have embraced a self-sufficient lifestyle

for varied reasons: religious, environmental, or political; liberal or libertarian. They all strive for self-sufficiency and sustainability, but none are totally isolated from the outside. As Foglia tells us, “Many have websites that they update using laptop computers and cell phones that they charge on car batteries or solar panels.”⁵

Throughout the series, Foglia demonstrates a telling lack of concern for journalistic narrative. Images from differing communities are intermingled in a manner that would not be used if his intentions were strictly documentary. Particularly telling is his use of the voices of his subjects. Although he keeps copious recordings of candid conversations and interviews, he chooses to use these quotes sparingly—almost atmospherically—and without direct association to images of the person speaking. When he does include quotes, they are enticingly specific, answering the questions that are forming in viewers’ minds. Why have these people chosen to live off-grid? How do they manage it? Or, as in the following, giving us a glimpse into a living that seems both adventurous and exotic.

Probably 20 percent of my food comes out of the swamp. Counting the meat, I get probably 80 percent of the wild meat out of the swamp. Beaver, otter, deer, raccoon, fish. Whatever I bump into. I’ve eaten owl.

COLBERT (GEORGIA)

Foglia begins his narrative with *Cora in a Realtree Camouflage Dress*. A particularly literal image, it sends an immediate message of difference: a young woman in a modest dress and head covering stands in opposition to brightly colored, modern clothing displayed in a store window. The fact that her “plain dress” is made from camouflage-printed fabric is somewhat perplexing. We recognize plain dress in dark colors and unprinted fabrics as religiously conservative. Camouflage reads either as functional for hunting or as fashionable in urban wear adopted from military surplus. As I learned, Realtree, the trademark creator and marketer of camo patterns, sells everything from bikinis and

cellphone cases to traditional hunting wear. Cora’s homemade dress may be evidence of a sub-culture that is unknown to this writer, or of a young girl’s striving for fashion within the confines of her community, or both.

In contrast to this and other literal, informational works are photographs of an iconic and evocative nature that bring to mind the pastoral. An idealized depiction of country life, the pastoral in literature dates back to the Greeks, interestingly demonstrating that even at that early point in history humans felt that an ideal state in nature (The Golden Age) had been lost. Literature on the pastoral is extensive and concise definitions difficult



Cora in a Realtree Camouflage Dress, Tennessee 2008



Victoria Bringing in the Goats, Tennessee 2008



Patrick and Anakeesta Swimming, Tennessee 2007

to find. Sometimes discussed as a landscape genre, the pastoral is at other times defined as a mode.⁶ *Victoria Bringing in the Goats, Tennessee* nicely fulfills the genre of the pastoral. We are presented with a sweeping landscape and the requisite flock and shepherd (Victoria), the “pastoralist” from which the term derives. Other aspects of the pastoral that are pertinent to Foglia’s series include the concept of the bounties of nature—of nature served up for mankind rather than worked from the ground—and a belief in nature as a curative for urban problems. Created for an urban audience, pastorals askew the depiction of labor, focusing instead on leisure or idles. Having grown up on a farm, Foglia is aware of the work involved in living off the land. Yet, he only occasionally presents us with people at work. A young man

clearing a field with a scythe reveals the only arduous labor within the series. An older man plows a field, employing a hand plow behind a truck rather than a horse. The message here is not so much one of hard work, but rather of the combination of old and modern technology. Women go fishing or gather berries, collecting that which nature has provided. And in *Woodcutting, Russell Creek Community, Tennessee*, while the title indicates their activity, the two young men are depicted at a moment of rest. Not concerned with work at all, the focus of this image is found in the brotherly hand on the shoulder of the younger sibling, an action of protection and kinship.



Woodcutting, Russell Creek Community, Tennessee 2010

Images of children are among the most bucolic. Quiet moments between parents and children are caught in *Creek, Kevin's Land, Virginia* (in which a mother watches as a naked child plays in a densely forested creek) and *Patrick and Anakeesta Swimming, Tennessee* (depicting a child climbing onto the chest of a nude man floating in a lake). And, what could be more demonstrative of nature's bounties than drinking milk straight from a goat's teat? A performance suggested by the subjects, *Andrew and Taurin Drinking Raw Goat's Milk, Tennessee*, is a complex composition of arms and goat and boy, rendered in harmonic tones of blonde.⁷

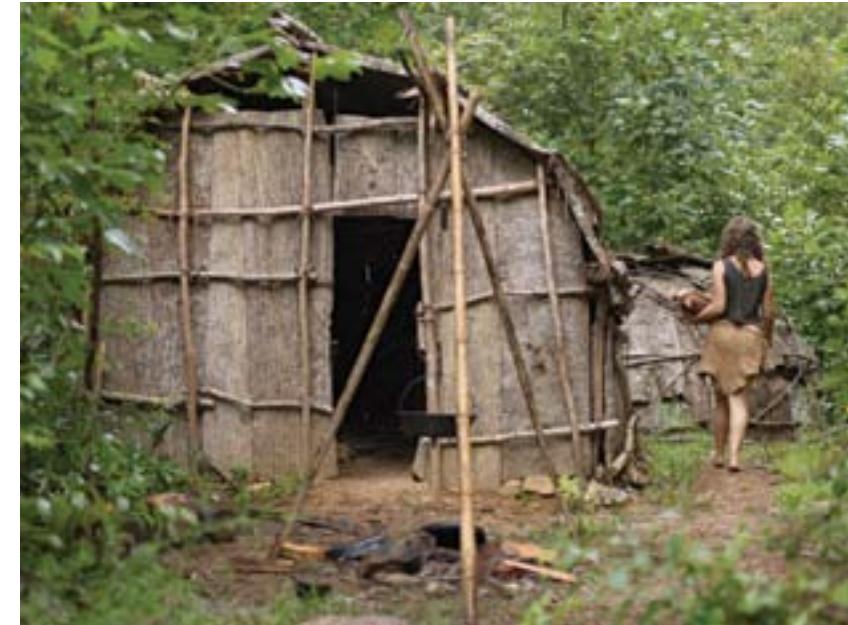
As beautifully composed, but to vastly different ends, is *Valarie and the Shadow, Tennessee*. Valarie, who is perhaps 11 years old, stands in the background, her body and face placed carefully,

half in light and half in shadow, while the shadow of a male figure looms in the foreground. Foglia has created a striking and foreboding image of coming-of-age. Valarie emerges into womanhood, but it is an adulthood that will be overshadowed by men. The image may refer to the patriarchal nature of the community, however, given the state of our society, it is almost impossible to read the image without sexual overtones.

Rebecca with Squirrel Loincloth, North Carolina portrays Rebecca in her "fancy," dress, worn on special occasions, alongside her husband and child. Ostensibly a family portrait, the image is rife with patriarchal symbolism. If the man were in a loin cloth and the child naked, Foglia would have a back-to-earth scenario of Edenic bliss and equality. The reality is, however, more complicated. In documenting Rebecca's regalia, he has created a bifurcated image—"primitive" on the right, civilized at left—that speaks to the pull between the two lifestyles and their shared and continuing sexism.

In *A Natural Order*, Foglia has taken on a timely topic and explicated it through images of exceptional artistry. We are presented with aspects of life off-grid that seem exotic in contrast to urban culture—from bark-covered huts in which inhabitants sleep on fur-covered straw and read *National Geographic* by gaslight, to roadkill stew and bathtubs full of venison. We are shown strong bodies (*James Aiming, North Carolina*) and death (*Bear, Poisoned by Neighbors, Virginia*, which seems more man than bear).

But Foglia saves his singularly most striking image for the closing. Illuminated by a shaft of morning light worthy of any old master, a man sleeps in an enclosure on the ground. A rose-colored blanket and dark turquoise cap glow against the neutral tones and texture of his smooth skin and a nubby wool sweater. In the shadows we discover a gas lamp, eating utensils, and a concave mirror that reflects a small patch of turquoise cap. It is difficult to imagine a more satisfying image of a hermit in his cave, or *David in his Wigwam*.



Natalie Carrying Firewood, Wildroots Homestead, North Carolina 2006



Andrew and Taurin Drinking Raw Goat's Milk, Tennessee 2009



David in his Wigwam, Kevin's Land, Virginia 2010

1 Toward this end, an area with zines and other publications about the communities and activities pictured in this series will be incorporated into the exhibition.

2 Artist's statement for *A Natural Order*, online at <http://lucasfoglia.com/a-natural-order-statement/>.

3 The title of the series is a regional term, referring to the boundary areas where the wilderness meets the outskirts of towns. Here, families struggle to make a living as ranching and farming become less lucrative, and industries that take from the land—natural gas, coal, oil, and gold, among them—often represent the only alternative source of income.

4 Originating in conservation biology, the term "rewilding" refers to the reintroduction of lost species and the recreation of natural habitats. It has been adopted by green-anarchist and earthskills communities who strive to overcome human domestication and return to a more natural (inherent) human state. To that end, Wildroots Earthskills Homestead teaches "primitive skills ... found in colonial times, such as timber framing, using a crosscut saw, canning ...[to] reclaim our ancestor's lost knowledge of living with the earth." [quoted from <http://wildroots.org/>]

5 Artist's statement, op.cit.

6 Paul Alpers, *What is Pastoral?*, University of Chicago Press, 1986.

7 The preponderance of people of European descent, discernible in Foglia's series and characteristic in these communities, is not representative of the self-sustainability movement as a whole. Urban sustainability projects, such as the Southside Community Land Trust in Providence and Growing Power, active in Milwaukee and Chicago, are run by and serve people of many races and ethnicities.

LUCAS FOGLIA

Lucas Foglia's first monograph, *A Natural Order*, will be released by Nazraeli Press in April 2012. Foglia's work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, the Pilara Foundation, and the Rhode Island School of Design Museum of Fine Art. His photographs have been published in *Aperture Magazine*, the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Washington Post Magazine*, and the *British Journal of Photography*, among others. Foglia is a graduate of Brown University and Yale University School of Art.

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