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## Homebrew Electronics Turn Landscapes Into Unearthly Sci-Fi Scenes

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1/16 Rodeo Beach  BARRY UNDERWOOD

If while on an evening walk through the woods you encounter a strange glow emanating from behind the foliage, you may have stepped into one of Barry Underwood's carefully lit photographic installations.

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Using low-power light sources like LEDs and glow sticks, Underwood takes long exposures to produce images of environments full of motion and suffused in an eerie glow. The results can look like lovely radioactive debris or *Tron*-like vistas, lightsabers thrust through the trees and cybernetically enhanced flora. Each is inspired as much by nature as science fiction.

The scenes are built to exist in their physical environments as much as to make pictures; part of the fun for Underwood is living out a version of the scene from *Blade Runner*, where a static image becomes a space he can explore.

"You can imagine going into the landscape, manipulating the landscape a little bit ahead of time to then document it," he says. "It's sort of like stepping into the photographic image, a temporal shift."

The wide variety of looks in Underwood's photos are all achieved by placing lighting elements in different orientations and intensities and letting the camera soak up their glow. By gathering several hundred LEDs and varying the power of battery packs he can precisely control the balance of light and form. His technical tweaks also lead to star streaks, color bleeds, and other beautiful effects.

## Like Photoshop IRL

Underwood also wraps bulbs and light sticks (sometimes as many as 500) in wax paper to diffuse them, or uses climber's rope to suspend various parts of the installations. Shots from Underwood's artist residency at Banff (slide 13) made use of the low-lying clouds to scatter light from a high school in the distance.

"A lot of it is planning—there are several stages, sometimes drawing ahead while I'm in the studio, then finding a location to sort of tie it in with," he says. "In Banff it was my first artist residency so I was doing a lot of scouting around the town, looking for something that would pragmatically or logistically work. Looking for businesses or any kind of street lights that are gonna help give me ambient light or atmospheric light. Being a low emitting light kind of allows for those longer exposures, and then so the atmospheric condition kind of accumulates, it doesn't blow out the film."

Underwood has been photographing environments invaded by artificial light since 1988. After first pursuing an education in theater he learned an appreciation for the constructed image and the potential power in crafting a visual scene meant to be viewed from a fixed perspective. Now he builds rigging to support lighting structures out in the wild and carefully arranges elements that will sit in place for the entire exposure—sometimes as long as six hours. His myriad of techniques allow him to treat the real world like a session in Photoshop writ large.

There are elements he can't control of course, like whether an aurora will appear (slide 6), or the size of a ship that may cross the frame during the exposure (slide 1). The combination of craft, planning and dependence on the whims of the environment make each work equal parts photograph and physical installation. It all leads up to the moment where he simply sits back and lets the camera absorb the image.

"Its not so exhaustive—there are moments where there's quiet contemplation, like when the pieces are installed and the camera is exposing – those are the most peaceful ones, but just sitting in a location and studying it, sort of looking at what's around, trying to figure out point of view, where I'm going to put the camera, what the installation might be, and trying to pre-vision it. There's always checking the weather 24/7; checking the moon, checking particular schedules that might be important."

## An Homage to Odd

Underwood wears his influences on his sleeves, often citing them in the titles of the photos themselves. John, for example (slide 8 above) is a grid of cross hatches floating above the environment in a manner evoking three separate Johns. First and most obviously is John Pfal, who created similar illusions of mediating [viewfinders over landscapes](#). The second is John Baldesarri and his photos of [airborne oranges](#) that appear to float in straight lines. Thirdly is John Glenn, a nod to the [crosshatched celestial photographs](#) produced by NASA in the '60s and '70s.

Most of the images are taken outdoors as a study on natural environments, and a subtle commentary on the human effects on nature. The yellow glow from beneath the water could as easily be an alien algae as a radioactive leak. A number of commissions have had Underwood setting up his light installations in architectural environments as well. Ultimately, the work unfolds as Underwood's interests do—there isn't a unifying statement at work, but rather a prolonged meditation on the fantastical worlds in his mind and the real one that surrounds him.

"I think about it like they're all songs on an album, so there's some shifts here and there, but I kind of see it as all the same body of work."

*All photos by Barry Underwood*