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Written in stone

Brian Sandford
Dec 29, 2023

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Large Animal with Long, Undulating Tail (2021, southern Utah)
Courtesy Peyton Wright Gallery

William Frej

One of archaeologist Polly Schaafsma’s favorite photographs shows a sweeping view of the Great Basin in Northern Nevada, a valley cresting into mountains in the distance. In the foreground, a road sign cheekily advises drivers, “Absolutely nothing for the next 50 miles.”

The sign’s definition of “nothing,” she says, is a powerful statement about the limits of Western

perception and imagination.

“You can’t stop and get a hotdog or Coca-Cola,” Schaafsma says of the terrain shown in the photo. “But Natives’ perspective was, ‘Oh my God. There’s water over here and piñon trees over there, where we can collect nuts, and we hunt over here.’”

That philosophy — viewing what non-Indigenous people might call “the middle of nowhere” as a living, breathing world of opportunities — guided the creation of *Blurred Boundaries: Perspectives on Rock Art of the Greater Southwest*, featuring 170 black-and-white images taken by photographer William Frej and a 20-page essay, as well as hundreds of detailed captions, written by Schaafsma.

DETAILS

Exhibition of photographs
from *Blurred Boundaries:
Perspectives on Rock Art of
the Greater Southwest*

Opening reception and book
signing 3-7 p.m. Friday,
December 29

Peyton Wright Gallery, 237
E. Palace Avenue

505-989-9888;
peytonwright.com

The 232-page hardcover book, published in the fall by Museum of New Mexico Press in Santa Fe, includes a four-page foreword by New Mexico author Frank Graziano, and the Land of Enchantment is featured prominently within its pages. In fact, the first image readers see upon opening the nearly 5-pound book shows a Northern New Mexico petroglyph estimated to date to the 14th century. The back cover features a note of praise for the book by Michael F. Brown, president of Santa Fe’s School for Advanced Research.

Both Frej and Schaafsma will attend an exhibition of photographs from the book Friday, December 29, at Peyton Wright Gallery. The exhibition also features paintings by Schaafsma.

“For me, rock art portrays a real mystery and a mystical feeling,” Frej says. “I think black-and-white photography captures that mysterious perspective better than color. It’s important to visualize rock art not as individual subject

matter, but something that’s part of a much broader landscape.”

Neither Frej nor Schaafsma is Indigenous, but both stress the importance of learning from people whose familiarity with the landscape goes back hundreds of generations. Frej recalls a valuable lesson from an Indigenous archaeologist who works at the Center for New Mexico Archaeology in Santa Fe. She told him not to just pay attention to petroglyphs individually, but to turn around and observe their placement within landscapes.

Frej's resulting efforts to focus on both art and landscape in *Blurred Boundaries* aren't lost on Schaafsma, who has written several books about rock art.

"There's something more stark and more direct about black and white," she says. "When I looked at the book, I thought, I'm not just going to write about archaeological periods, dates, or interpretations, because he really conveys a sense of exploration and discovery. I aimed to address how people react to rock art — what it means to observers including the Native community and how it continues to affect people who encounter it over centuries, basically."

The following sentence from the book is an example of her goal to dig deeper in the captions she wrote for the images: "This perplexing group of petroglyphs on a large boulder in eastern Utah appears to involve a birthing scene, to the right of which is a set of small human footprints paralleled by deer tracks."

Frej feels spiritually inspired when climbing or hiking to view art created by people of the past. While religion in Western culture involves attending church and is static, he says, Indigenous belief systems are more transcendent.

"Indigenous creators of this rock art have had access to this complex cosmology of meanings, symbols, visual metaphors," he says. "These figures in rock create a strong sense of otherworldliness to me, and they breach the boundaries between the natural world and spiritual dimensions."

Frej says the book could have been three times its size and maintained its level of quality. He praises Graziano and Schaafsma — whom he calls "probably the world's leading expert on rock art" — for providing vital context.

"We really intended this to be a visual journey, not a rock art book that defines where places are, as a

BY THE BOOK

William Frej, Polly Schaafsma, and Frank Graziano all have published other books.

Frej's include *Seasons of Ceremonies: Rites and Rituals in Guatemala and Mexico* (Museum of New Mexico Press, 2021), *Maya Ruins Revisited: In the Footsteps of Teobert Maler* (Peyton Wright Gallery, 2020), and *Travels Across the Roof of the World: A Himalayan Memoir* (George F. Thompson Publishing, (2022).

Schaafsma's include *Rock Art in of New Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 1992) and *Indian Rock Art of the Southwest* (University of New Mexico Press, 1986). **Graziano's** include *Historic Churches of New Mexico Today* (Oxford University Press, 2019) and *Miraculous Images and Votive Offerings in Mexico* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

guidebook would do,” Frej says. “Picking the images was an important part for me. We went through thousands of photographs, and I feel strongly they’re all very, very strong depictions of something that many people don’t yet understand.”

Brian Sanford

Pasatiempo reporter