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The Berkshire Eagle

Clifford Ross will catch mountains, storm surge at Mass MoCA

Photographer brings traditional camera into 21st century



Clifford Ross' 'Mountain IV' will appear in a photographic exhibit at Mass MoCA. (Clifford Ross / courtesy of Mass MoCA)

North Adams >> Clifford Ross has designed a camera to capture a mountain range in Aspen, Colo., and tethered himself to shore to photograph surf before a hurricane.

"He's an explorer," said Mass MoCA Director Joe Thompson. "The image he provides has him in a wet suit crawling out of the waves or out west in a big hat, looking like Roosevelt could come out on stage left — revealing the splendors and power of nature."

His solo show, opening May 23 at Mass MoCA, blends the force of the land with technology, music, digital projections and even smartphones.

It's a wider array than he usually uses, Thompson said.

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"People think first of landscapes," he said, "in the tradition of Ansel Adams."

But Ross is an inveterate experimenter, he said. His last major public commission incorporates a wall of stained glass. He often begins with traditional technique, Thompson said — he uses a camera the way it's been used for 150 years — and then in the processing he inserts nuances in editing, framing, printing on paper or wood or glass and adapting to their textures.

"He loves to push technology," Thompson said.

Ross knows cameras and enjoys experimenting with them, and he has taken great pleasure in building his own.

He has patented a high resolution camera, which can take the largest high resolution images ever created, said curatorial assistant Alexandra Foradas.

He takes enormous panoramas, she said, and he can then extract pieces in far more detail than the naked eye can see. He feels a sense of wonder and desire in these places, in their size and scope, and he wants to translate that feeling through realism and abstraction.

"He's interested in the way an image you understand flips into abstraction — drawing close or moving away, it changes focus," Thompson said. "It's interesting to have his work at the same time as Liz [Duchenes'] show."

They take almost 180-degree different approaches, he said. Ross invents and experiments beginning with identifiable scenes and equipment. She heads into complete abstraction.

Ross has found influences in the 19th-century landscapes of the Hudson River School.

In his college years at Yale, discovering artists like Frederick Church led him in a different direction from his aunt, Helen Frankenthaler, famed color field and abstract artist in the 20th century and an alum of Bennington College.

In his work, he recognizes the beauty and the rhythms of a landscape, leaves and shadows, storm surge. "Wave Cathedral" translates fluid dynamics, wave motions, into an algorithm and then into moving color — he told Foradas he had Jackson Pollack in mind when he created it. Ross' "Harmonium" — turning details of landscape into digital images

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as bright as stained glass panels and setting them to music — calls up for her Ellsworth Kelly's Chicago panels and Andy Warhol's silkscreens.

He has adapted images to an intimate scale, she said, into a series of digital projections in the courtyard during performances and has commissioned his own music for it from Phillip Glass. And he has added an element people can only see through smartphones, skimming 3-D images around them.