



KIM WEIMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A video artist focuses on the remains of America's industrial might.

DISSOLUTION/RESOLUTION

By GWEN SHRIFT
STAFF WRITER

When a factory falls to dust, it's like a mountain eroding. Marc Reed freezes the moment, paradoxically, in art videos that capture quiet cadences of decay.

Reed, 45, an illustrator by training and a web designer and developer by profession, grew up around Freehold, N.J., where industry once thrived.

The decline of American manufacturing was front and center. "I sort of experienced New Jersey going through this whole de-industrialization process," says Reed, who lives in Lambertville with his wife, Michelle, and their two children. "I also experienced an extreme degree of suburban sprawl."

The post-industrial landscape introduced him to a visual and cultural context he first explored as a painter, moving into photography as a natural outgrowth of recording images in the field for reference in the studio.

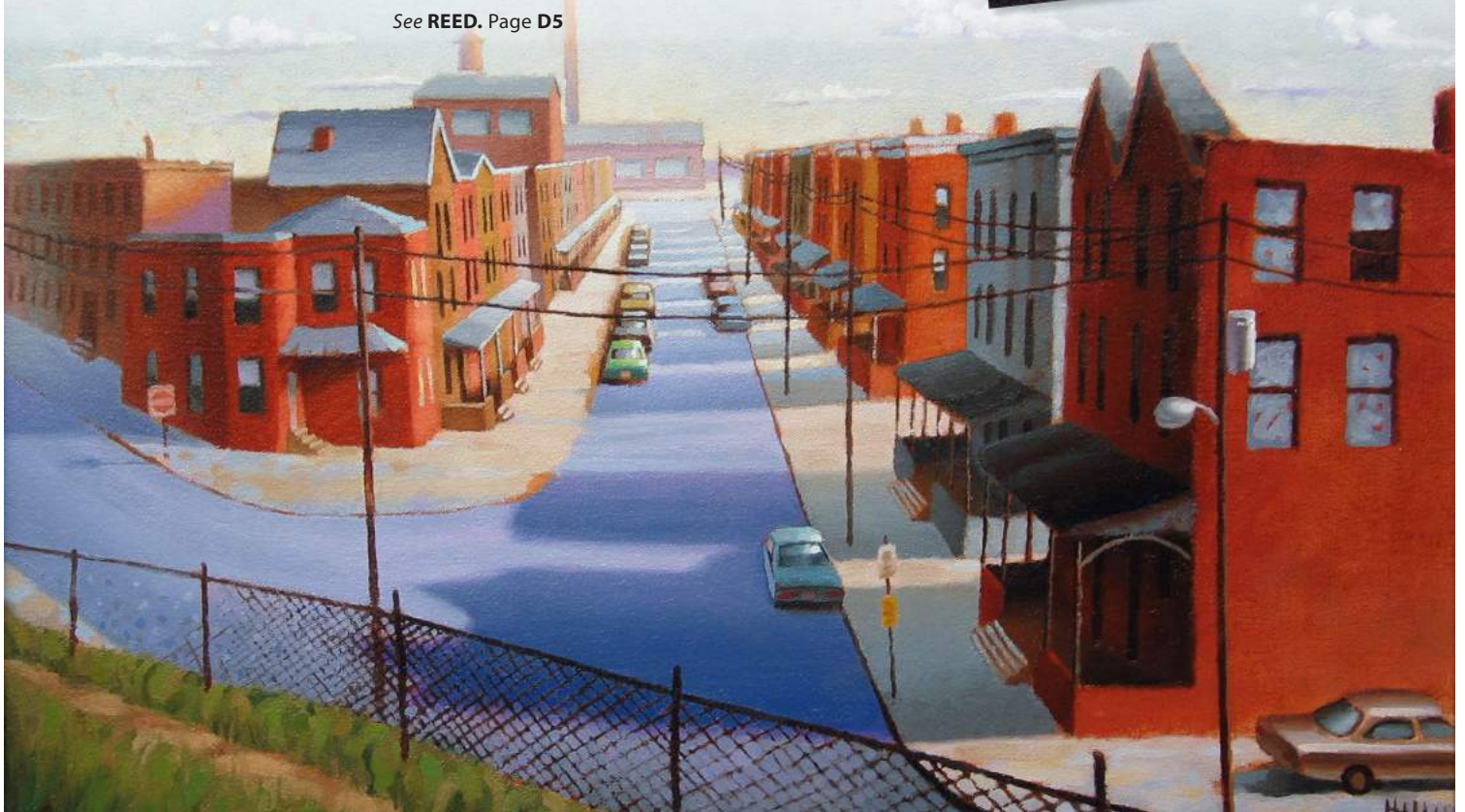
Reed took pictures of the vast steel mill that once animated Bethlehem. Someone suggested a video, so the artist visited the shuttered plant on a cold winter day a decade ago to gather more images for what became a 20-minute project, "Almost Gone," in collaboration with Garden Bay Films.

The steel company was legally dissolved at midnight of the same day, Jan. 31, 2003, upon being sold to a business that bought up moribund mills. Reed, who was unaware of the proceedings at the time, believes he was the last one out the door while Bethlehem Steel was still Bethlehem Steel.

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Rusting cars inspired Marc Reed's painting "Three DeSotos" (above), as well as a photo "It Came from the Woods" (left); his oil "Steefton Neighborhood" (below) is about the decline of Bethlehem Steel.





Marc Reed took a driver's side view for his oil painting "Saturn's Winter."

REED

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"Almost Gone" documents those last hours as the old mill lies sleeping, cloaked in rust like a sunken ship.

Using video, Reed paints in the details -- huge ladles, wheels, ladders, engines; towers and broken equipment; a gargantuan hook looming over the emptiness -- and sparingly flashes back to archival photographs. The fact that the mill site has since been converted to an arts and entertainment facility and a casino makes Reed's record of its lost past even more compelling.

Since that project, Reed has documented the desertion of heavy industry in "The Paper Mill," "Coal's Kingdom" and "The Lost Junkyard."

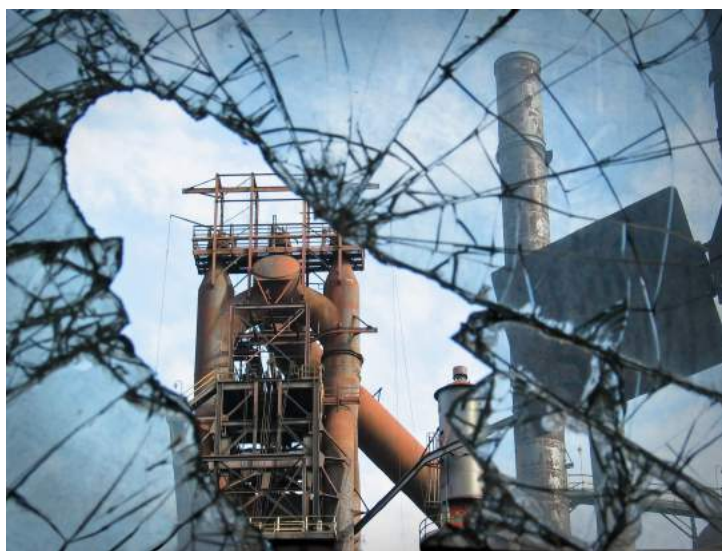
In "The Paper Mill," the artist composes a poem in time-lapse as fingers of sunlight trace across the factory floor and up a wall. The place is wrecked and vandalized, ragged vertical blinds flutter through broken windows, birds perch on a smokestack.

"Coal's Kingdom" incorporates old images of workers (some of them boys who look 9 or 10) with pictures of the site as it is today -- decayed and shattered against a background of green Pennsylvania hills shot through with dark, dripping, empty caverns.

Reed's work most vividly encompasses outrage for the human cost associated with vanished enterprises in "Abuse and Neglect," a look at the abandoned buildings of the Pennhurst State School and Hospital.

The artist uses footage from a TV documentary shot by Philadelphia broadcaster Bill Baldini for NBC10 in 1968, when residents with disorders such as autism and epilepsy were effectively imprisoned. Baldini's cameras recorded grown men relegated to cribs or lying in the fetal position on the floor.

When Reed visited in 2007 and 2008, a quarter-century after it closed, Pennhurst looked like it had been destroyed in a war, the people gone, their wheelchairs and hospital beds strewn about rooms and hallways.



Reed framed part of the former Bethlehem Steel works in the broken glass of a factory window

As did many others, Reed disregarded the security surrounding the site to shoot the tumbledown buildings. "It was sort of in the woods -- the trees were everywhere, which gave a great quality to it," he recalls.

So many photographers and curiosity-seekers were willing to risk fines for trespassing that "it dawned on (the owner) what he had here was a tourist attraction," says Reed.

Pennhurst has since been reinvented as a "haunted asylum," with tours and a new, fictional backstory involving ghosts and diabolical medical experiments imported from Europe.

"It's good and it's bad," says Reed of the entertainment project. "Someone is there, caring about (the site). I hope in the long run, they can do a full historical renovation. It's a dance with the devil."

Reed's work tracks people who are no longer there through the powerful artifacts that remain, such as a rail line with trees growing between the cross

ties or a discarded shovel in "Coal's Kingdom."

In "The Lost Junkyard," cars that once flaunted gleaming tail fins and ferociously shiny grilles lie stacked like cordwood, tires crunched into windshields. Reed tags his record of their fate with the poignant line, "The woods are full of Detroit muscle."

Like most of Reed's videos, "The Lost Junkyard" was shot in the winter, snow adding a further dimension to the collapsing artistry of the carmakers and the aspirations of their one-time owners.

Reed prefers to shoot in cold weather, when the lack of leaves on trees enables use of time-lapse videography. At the moment, he is documenting old silk mills in Easton and Cumberland, Md., and has discovered a former textile factory in Trenton.

The artist also has his eye on Detroit, a virtual megalopolis of decay the artist calls "probably the most dramatic example of the results of globalization

that America can offer."

Reed's work stands on its own as visual art, as when he records a flock of hooked baskets hanging like jellyfish in the dim, concrete-walled depths of the steelworkers' locker room, or when he captures light radiating from the windows of a mill building set against a glowing sunset.

Commentary is restrained, but no less moving, when the artist finds a young woman with the skyline of the old steel mill tattooed across her back, and when he gives the viewer a look at the modest grave markers of children and young people in a neglected cemetery at Pennhurst.

In a particularly arresting sequence, Reed juxtaposes an old photo of a steelworker in front of a control panel with his own picture of the setting taken from the same angle and distance. As the shot fades from old to new, the worker vanishes, leaving only the equipment under a heavy accumulation of dust.

These images are undeniably powerful, even subversive, but have not engaged film festival jurors who grade submissions on narrative and character development. "Mostly, I get rejected," Reed says.

However, the 2012 Bucks Fever FilmFest in Doylestown honored his documentary "Fonthill," and "Ruination," a compilation of five short videos, was one of the standouts of the New Hope Arts Center's recent "New Media" exhibit.

There's plenty more where those works came from, such as the Mon Valley of western Pennsylvania that rivals the derelict industries of Michigan. Unlike the New Jersey of Reed's childhood, which found a new economic base in commuter suburbs, "there's no salvation for the towns in the Rust Belt," he says.

It's a subject worth exploring for reasons other than art, as well.

"My videos tend to spawn a lot of conversation," says Reed. "It's good for people to have these conversations."

More information about the artist's work is available on his website, www.marcreed.com.

Gwen Shrift is a feature writer at Calkins Media. Phone: 215-949-4204. Email: gshrift@phillyburbs.com. To subscribe, go to phillyburbs.com/order/BCCT.