

Subhankar Banerjee  
Where I Live I Hope to Know

## The Detective

I became a detective of the desert. —SUBHANKAR BANERJEE

When Subhankar Banerjee moved to the small bedroom community of Eldorado, New Mexico, in 2006, his mental habits already inclined him toward making questions out of quotidian sights and statements. He knew himself to be an artist with an investigative, even scientific, turn of mind; the former Boeing physicist spent most of his time during 2000–02 in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge making large-scale color photographs of the vibrant wildlife that seasonally animates the landscape in that vast region. Shortly after he arrived in Eldorado, Banerjee made a photograph of a dead house finch that he found on the flagstone pavers of his porch. Birds fly into windows and die. We know this, and yet the surprise of coming upon a dead bird on the porch is unsettling enough to provoke handwringing and regret, even a sense of responsibility. Banerjee put hawk decoys on his windows but returned, over time, to thinking about the mechanisms of light and reflection that cause these avian mortalities. Several years and several dead birds later, he made another photograph that put him into the role of the canny, searching detective, the gumshoe. In *Looking Outside I Saw Dead Birds and Looking Inside I Saw How They Died* (2009), Banerjee put an answer to the implicit questions of how and why the house finch died: taken from and measuring the same size as his living room window, the photograph suggests a confluence of factors that make more of an individual bird death than the simple, dumb fact of shiny windows. We viewers are home, in an interior space looking through a window that gives a view onto another window, as well as onto the flat, black shape of a hawk, an old-growth piñon tree, and, tiny within its branches, another house finch, this one alert and upright. The bits of information—clues—that we viewers piece together to make sense of the photograph remind us that even something as seemingly banal as a reflective window pane, an architectural convention as well as an aesthetic convenience for humans, puts us into a dynamic relationship with other living things.

Banerjee's curiosity about the dynamic relationship between humans and the natural world, as well as inter-relations in the natural world that do not directly involve humans, eventually became his internal prompt for the body of work that he refers to as the Desert Archive and from which the exhibition, *Where I Live I Hope to Know*, is drawn. Simultaneous to making the bird photographs, he began taking long walks through his neighborhood, making photographs along the way of a hearty species of cactus called the cholla that dots the high desert landscape. This is not a picturesque plant, nor even a remotely inviting one; instead, its elongated appendages are covered with spines that pitch easily, pricking hikers and animals alike. Yet periodically, the cholla plant becomes a bird home, an ideal defensive fortress for nests that birds laboriously construct in the springtime and abandon in late summer. Like the American photographer Eliot Porter (1901–1990) before him, Banerjee was riveted. He began photographing the chollas through the different seasons of the year, recording the



Dead Bird: Tribute to Ryder, 2006

same nests being built and destroyed, and returning again to see the process anew.

The resulting corpus of photographs of chollas gave way to new questions and new mysteries: what exactly happens to the birds and their nests, and how does the cholla itself survive the changes in season? What does it look like in winter? What animal sets upon it each summer to eat the buds that precede its brightly colored flowers? Dying, unearthed chollas suggested another mystery: that of human destruction. Banerjee discovered through looking closely at his own photographs, though, that a burrowing creature such as a deer mouse could upend a cholla plant in a single season. His observations would not only uncover evidence of the human relationship to plants and animals, but would also unlock relations within the natural world that seemed, on the surface at least, not to involve humans at all.

Banerjee's walks, increasingly ritualized over the course of several years—even to the point where the priority of the walk dictated the choice of a relatively small camera that could fit in his daypack—were organized around three local boundaries: the Powerline, the Railroad, and the cholla near the House with a Dog. During this same period, he noticed large numbers of dead and dying piñon trees alongside the regional highways. Much like chollas, piñon trees are everywhere in the high desert landscape of New Mexico; they are so ubiquitous that it is easy to take them for granted. Mature piñon trees of several hundred years might be as modest in height as twelve to twenty feet high, but they are wide and their branches create dense tangles of needles and cones. Their relative shortness belies the fact that the slow-growing trees form an old-growth forest that covers much of the state and is as important to the landscape as the dramatic vistas and cloud formations that tourists and artists alike notice first. The trees are hardy, and so large numbers of dead piñons are an anomaly, even in a harsh, dry environment like the high desert. Increasingly curious about the trees as well as the chollas, Banerjee turned his walks

into an opportunity to look more seriously at the piñons; they became a subject unto themselves. He confirmed his roadside observation that masses of piñons were dying and learned that in the process of dying, the trees were already subsumed into a harsh economy of desert life: his camera, then his eyes, observed isolated bulbs of cholla plants that the deer mice hauled into the cores of dead tree trunks, the better to turn their new homes into defensive shelters (the birds are not the only animals that understand that spines can protect as well as harm); the bluebirds found dry, exposed trunks ideal for coring into shelters; and the exposed tangle of an upended piñon's roots proved fertile ground for the berries and seeds that birds and mice store there for safekeeping. In *Where Dead Piñons and Live Junipers Are Almost Bound Together; On My Way to the Railroad* (2009), stored seeds have long since germinated, and the resulting junipers thrive.

The photographs Banerjee made are thus the product of a set of given circumstances in terms of the systematic walk, the small camera, and the animating questions. Yet in a real way they follow the methods of the gumshoe, the artist-detective. They are built, visually and procedurally, around clues. They offer the promise that looking closely is a way of learning not just of the marvels of the faraway, but also fine textural details that sustain our everyday relationship to nature. Banerjee followed his nose, essentially, and his curiosity, from the dead bird on his front porch through the minor mysteries of bird, cactus, and mouse behavior in his idyllic desert neighborhood; in doing so he stumbled upon a big mystery, a great one: the large number of mature dead piñons. Midway through the project, Banerjee realized he was participating in the creation of a visual archive that extended vastly beyond his daily walks. He was witnessing a mass die-off in western forests occasioned by an unusually massive infestation of the bark beetle. Scientists believe that a sustained global rise in temperature has caused the normally steady population of bark beetles to grow explosively in the forests of the western United States and Canada in recent years.<sup>1</sup> While most of the scholarship on the bark beetle infestation has focused on mountain pines and other younger-growth forests, Banerjee's photographs reveal the perilous status of the old-growth forests of New Mexico piñons.<sup>2</sup>

The chain of events that I have sketched here begs important questions about what role photographs can play in scientific discovery. Early British photographers had a clear sense that the value of the new photographic medium was fundamentally scientific. Many of the earliest British photographs are of botanical specimens, and the pioneering photographers in Britain were keen observers of the natural world. William Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877), credited with inventing paper photographs, made many such images of leaves and flowers, describing photography's ability to render them “with the utmost truth and fidelity, exhibiting even the venation of the leaves, the minute hairs that clothe the plant, etc.”<sup>3</sup> To Talbot and his peers, photography promised a new and comprehensive understanding of the natural world premised on the technical ability to image details clearly and into theoretical infinity. The long-sought infinity of detail

has changed much in the generations of photographic technology between Talbot's early paper negatives and Banerjee's color photographs, in which digital technologies and large-scale printing have significantly upped our ability to render the fine details of dead and dying trees, like the scene of a crime. Banerjee's Desert Archive participates in one of the oldest tasks of photography, fusing its role as the patient cataloguer of facts with its task as the keeper of memory.

The Desert Archive not only created a visual record of the destruction of the forests but became a way for Banerjee to piece together the disparate bits of information to understand the ecology of his local landscape. The broad, looping narratives he uncovered were multiple and sometimes contradictory: while many of the photographs are nominally about dead piñon trees, new forms of life are everywhere here, pushing in from all angles of the photograph. The opposite is also true. Several works from the project, those that are literally at the end of the line, such as *When I Arrived at the Powerline I Saw a Small Live Piñon* (2009), include the image of piñon trees so young and diminutive within the landscape that we viewers are more aware of what is lost with the death of the mature growth trees. While Banerjee's focus on these young trees offers a hopeful caveat to the image of death, the youth he depicts conveys both optimism and a measure of the scale of the destruction. We are well aware that the mystery may have a sad conclusion, yet Banerjee's continued interest in the minutiae of desert life prompted him to continue looking for details of the desert's recovery—the busybody doings of deer mice and desert birds often result in cross-pollination. In the final stages of the project, Banerjee tipped his camera toward the shifting gray skies to remind himself and future viewers that in the end so much depends on rain.

JESSICA MAY Fort Worth, Texas

<sup>1</sup> Jim Robbins, “Bark Beetles Kill Millions of Acres of Trees in West,” *New York Times* (Nov. 18, 2008): D3, and Robbins, “What's Killing the Great Forests of the American West?” *Yale Environment* 360 (March 15, 2010). <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; see also Werner A. Kurz, et al., “Mountain Pine Beetle and Forest Carbon Feedback to Climate Change,” *Nature* 452 (April 24, 2008), pp. 987–90, which addresses Canadian forests. <sup>3</sup> William Henry Fox Talbot, “Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing” (1839), as printed in Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), p. 39.