

Kay Westhues



by Andrew S. Hughes

As a photographer and, now, a gallery owner, Kay Westhues knows how much sales mean to artists.

She believes, however, that galleries such as hers have more value than just the dollars that Artpost brings in for individual artists.

“I know there’s an artistic community here,” she says, “but you’re so isolated in a broader sense... Sometimes all you need to get things more exciting is a place for people to gather and kind of feed off each other. I feel like I have more of a photography community than I have ever had.”

Westhues and sculptor and poet Jake Webster opened Artpost Gallery in the fall of 2009 in the first floor of their home at 216 W. Madison St.

“Most of the time, I love it,” she says about having the gallery in her home. “I like the unpredictability of it. You don’t know who’s coming in, but everyone who’s coming in is interested in art.”

As the closings of New Galleries on Lincoln Way and Spurious Fugitive have shown in recent years, the art market in South Bend can be “difficult.”

But Westhues remains optimistic about art’s commercial prospects here and says there are local collectors who support the area’s artists.

“I would like to connect somehow to a Chicago market, which isn’t that far from here—it’s in Michigan,” she says. “I think there’s totally valid and interesting work being done here.”

Born in 1961 and raised on a farm outside Walkerton, Westhues pursued an early interest in photography at the town’s high school, where art teacher John Thomas granted her access to the school’s darkroom and she learned to develop film.

“I think it’s interesting the way the camera can document things,” she says. “The things you take for granted in your daily life, [when seen] as an outsider, they can say something interesting.”

She studied photography at the Rhode Island School of Design from 1980-82 and earned a bachelor’s of science degree in photography and ethnocentrism in 1994 in Indiana University Bloomington’s individualized major program.

While in Rhode Island, Westhues found her signature subject and context: her native Midwest.

“When I went to RISD, it was the first time I knew what people thought about the Midwest,” she says. “It was a total revelation to me that people thought nothing happened here, and when I left RISD, I wanted to photograph this area because I thought it wasn’t being done.”

Over the years, Westhues’ topics have included a series about young mothers, symbols of patriotism in rural Indiana, daily life in Walkerton and, farther afield, portraits of everyday people at Cuba’s Malecón seawall in Havana Bay from her five trips to the communist island.

The Walkerton series began as “Fourteen Places to Eat,” a response to a letter in the local paper that the town had enough places to dine out, including four restaurants, three gas stations, four bars, a truck stop, a convenience mart and a bowling alley.

That project tested Westhues’ ability to shoot as an outsider because she had recently moved back to Walkerton to care for her ailing parents.

“I was thinking I could take pictures of people in a foreign place and have no accountability,” she says,

“but I was living in Walkerton, so I was accountable.”

Westhues’ latest exhibition, “Well Stories,” opened March 5 and continues through June 5 at the South Bend Museum of Art.

On June 6, 2010, the *New York Times* featured Westhues’ project in an article about artesian wells in Indiana, the subject of the exhibition.

“So many things came from it,” she says about the article. “That evening I was interviewed on BBC radio on a program they were doing on water. I was invited to lecture at Sarah Lawrence College for a colloquium they’re having on science and art. A Fort Wayne museum has contacted me about promoting the well stories show and possibly doing a traveling exhibit in Indiana.”

Westhues learned about Indiana’s artesian wells—pressurized springs that people use to gather water—while working on “Fourteen Places to Eat.”

“They’re kind of leftover from a time when we had things in common that we used,” she says. “I wanted to focus on something that was specifically rural and, of course, with an anthropological focus. When I stumbled upon people using these wells, it amazed me that people were getting water this way.”

The SBMA exhibition also includes two videos that accompany Westhues’ stills. Projected on a wall, “Water Catchers” uses nine grids to show people gathering water simultaneously at different wells.

“I did this because the motion of getting the water is very similar, the containers are very similar—they’re usually plastic,” she says. “I like the compare and contrast of all of them running at once.”

The other video is titled “Well Stories” and is more reflective.

Although Westhues takes different approaches with each project—color, black-and-white, digital and, now, video—she doesn’t feel that equipment choices define or drive her work.

“To me, it’s the image, not so much the process,” she says. “When I look at someone else’s work, I’m not concerned with the process they used. I’m concerned with the image.” ●●●

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