



EVERYDAY
Beauty

Local photographer John Vlahakis finds beauty in the place that taught him to appreciate it—home.

EDITED BY LAURA BROWNING



“I’m trying to get people excited about the environment,” says North Shore photographer John Vlahakis. “You’d be surprised by what’s in your own backyard.” Vlahakis’ photographs are full of these backyard surprises, from the hyper-local (the indigo-hued beads of a flower’s pistil) to the expansive (hazy waves splashing against mossy rocks). Although photography has taken him all over the world, he often shoots on the North Shore, smitten with the beauty of his everyday surroundings. “People don’t believe that beauty exists close by,” he says. One good look at his photographs should convert any nonbelievers.

The North Shore has long been important to Vlahakis, not only as the subject of many of his lush color photographs, but also as the root of his environmentalism. Vlahakis considers photography an expression of his love for the environment, the kernel of which was planted by his seventh grade teacher at Springman Junior High in Glenview. The teacher encouraged the class to celebrate the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970. The classmates collected paper shopping and lunch bags and wrote environmental slogans on them, then stood on street corners and handed the bags out to passersby and drivers.

Their youthful enthusiasm was not well received by the local police. The seventh graders were cited for not having a permit and were taken into the police station, where they had to call their parents to come pick them up. Undeterred, Vlahakis and his classmates decided to go before the village council to ask for a variance for minors—after all, this was something for the greater good. The variance was granted, but with a restriction: They could only hand out their paper bag slogans at the commuter train station after



JOHN VLAKAHIS
PHOTO BY PAUL ZARETSKY

school. This was of course far too early an hour for evening commuters, and Vlahakis says that even at the age of 12, this defiance of common sense got him “fired up.”

Since then, many of Vlahakis’ personal and professional endeavors have revolved around the environment. (He also owns Winnetka-based Earth Friendly Products, a company that makes environmentally-friendly household cleaning products). He began shooting photos in earnest in high school and college, and, after a creative period in the 1970s, took something of a forced break from photography while raising a family and starting a business. In the last three or four years, he has returned to the everyday beauty that first inspired him as a seventh grade environmentalist.

Landscape and still life photography excite Vlahakis in the same way that his early activism did. Highlighting the more mundane things—like a blue railing that stretches along a beach into infinity or a bare, knotty tree that rises out of its own watery reflection—is



both a childlike joy and an adult responsibility to share the world around us. Vlahakis doesn't undercut the importance of selling eco-friendly cleaning products, but says that photography reaches people on an entirely different plane. "It's something to expand people's souls. It's goes beyond the drudgery of everyday cleaning."

Although he finds himself drawn over and over to the environment, and to his home, Vlahakis also builds photography into his travels. Fascinated by how people play in their environment, photography has taken him to the world's great cities—Paris, London, and Athens are just a few—and many of his shoreline photos were shot near his second home on the Jersey Shore or along the coastlines of California and Washington state. "You don't have to travel across the world to find whimsy in a flower petal or exotic beauty in a landscape," Vlahakis points out.

Vlahakis often uses his lens to explore horizons, whether it's the manmade blue railing along a beach or the many-layered horizon of the nearby Skokie Lagoons. Perhaps it's only natural that a conservationist and environmentalist would seek out infinite horizons in a finite world, a hopeful bid that we'll still have those horizons for future generations. In a color photograph of the lagoons, stormy skies and still gray waters are broken up by a stretch of forest. The skinny, leafy trees and their reflection give the photograph four distinct horizons. The clouds seem to be readying themselves for a Midwestern thunderstorm, but their reflection in the manmade waters is quieter. The scene is at once dramatic and hushed, and you might expect it to be, well, somewhere else besides Illinois. Vlahakis clearly delights in the surprise he elicits when he tells people the scene was shot nearly in his backyard. The lagoons are one of his favorite local spots to shoot, and he experimented with infrared film and used the lagoons to create a scene that is both familiar and disorienting. The result is a faux icy wonderland, an

eerie wintry scene fashioned from a summer's day.

Of Chicago, Vlahakis says, "We don't have mountains or canyons—we have a manmade forest. It's easy for people to get blasé about it, so I try to capture its beauty. It may not be Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon, but there is still beauty around us, and we need to protect it."

A selection of John Vlahakis' photography will be shown as part of a group exhibit at ZIA Gallery through August. ZIA is located at 548 Chestnut in Wilmette and online at ziagallery.net. □