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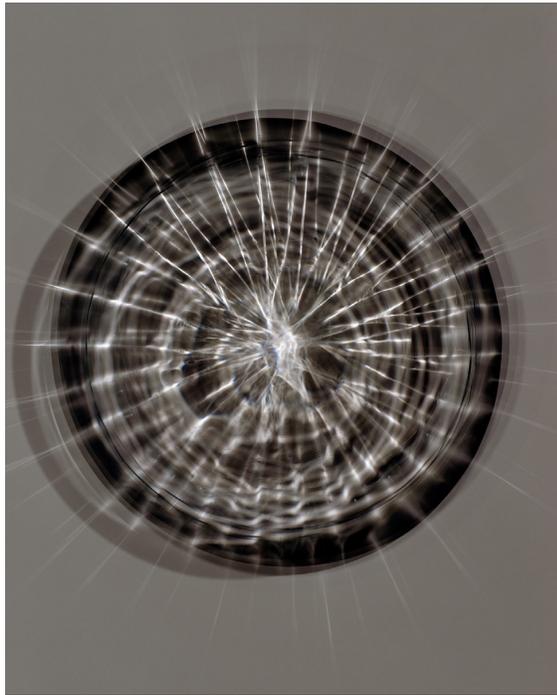
# Through a Glass, Brightly: A Review of Doug Fogelson's "The Witness" at Bert Green Fine Art

JANUARY 30, 2023 AT 7:00 AM BY [SUSAN AURINKO](#)

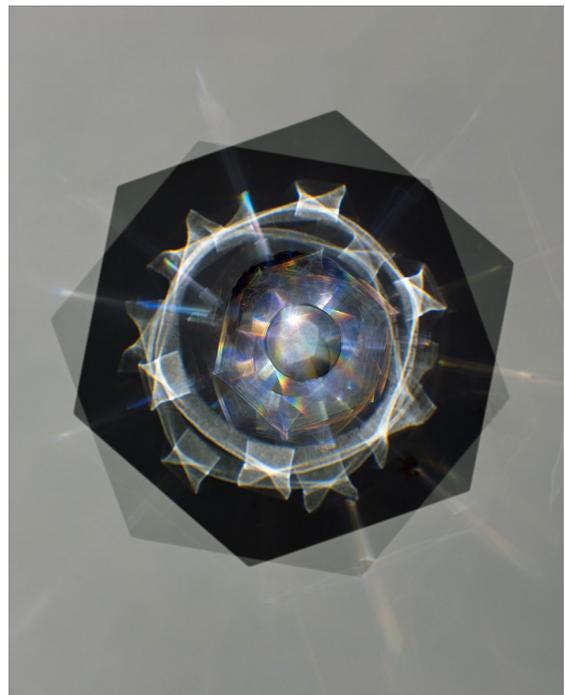
Doug Fogelson is not a photographer you'd see on the street, camera around his neck. Rather, Fogelson has made a photographic career of looking at things differently. His work, which is mostly camera-less, explores the possibilities offered by alternative ways of creating images. In this most recent work, Fogelson avails himself of the darkroom, using it as a tool to expose light-sensitive film.

The title of the show partially comes from the eye-like appearance of the finished work. Fogelson works with the enlarger as a kind of camera, photographing stacks of clear objects from above. He exposes the film, stacks the objects differently, and exposes again until he has what he's after, image-wise. Cut glass or etched crystal is particularly fascinating, causing rays and interesting geometries. All of the photograms in this series are color, using different kinds of photo papers to create warmer or cooler backgrounds. To Fogelson the enlarger is also a witness to the objects beneath its gaze as it records them.

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*Doug Fogelson "The Witness No. 22," 16" x 20"*



*Doug Fogelson "The Witness No. 10," 16" x 20"*

In a few images, "The Witness No. 10" and "The Witness No. 04," for example, Fogelson used prisms or tinted glass to create actual spectrums or colored areas. "The Witness No. 22" was captured looking down into an etched champagne flute, creating a dazzling star-like form, and in "The Witness No. 10," Fogelson used the six-sided base of a candleholder to form a geometric shape, turning it so one exposure is a skewed shadow of the other. "The Witness No. 01" has incredible depth, in the center of which is something that



*Doug Fogelson "The Witness No. 01," 16" x 20"*

appears to be a sun flare, as if the image itself has caught fire.

Fogelson, who meditates and performs Pranayama breathing, says some of these images are similar to visualizations he's had during practice. There is no question they are mystical—to me they feel like mandalas. You're looking at them, but with their resemblance to the eye's pupil and iris, they seem to be returning your gaze. As you move around the room, these beautifully framed "eyes" observe you, much as the eyes of certain paintings do. The gallery is small, but there is plentiful space between the ten twenty-by-sixteen-inch pieces, allowing them to breathe and to be viewed individually.

With this show, Fogelson has departed completely from any possible association to figurative work. In his earlier photograms, notably "Last Year's Leaves," "Fauxrest" and "Cassettes," there is a sense of veracity— something identifiable remains and is recognizable. In "The Witness," as in his work titled "Dirt," Fogelson leaves all reality behind and asks the viewer to regard only the essence.

*"The Witness" at Bert Green Fine Art, 8 South Michigan. Through March 24.*

<https://art.newcity.com/2023/01/30/through-a-glass-brightly-a-review-of-doug-fogelsons-the-witness-at-bert-green-fine-art/>

# Featured Exhibitions

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# Great Lakes Writers & Artists

AN

INTERMEDIAL

DIALOGUE

A zine  
Produced  
by the  
Great Lakes  
Writers Corps



This project was made possible by funding support from the Arts Initiative at the University of Michigan and is co-created by the University of Michigan Museum of Art and the Department of English Language and Literature. All photographs of the *Watershed* exhibition are by Charlie Edwards and courtesy of the artists. Exceptions include: cover, detail, Doug Fogelson, *Headwaters No. 10*, from the *Chemical Alterations* series, 2018, archival inkjet print. Courtesy the artist. © Doug Fogelson; pages 8–9, Matthew Brandt, *Bridges over Flint*, 2016, gelatin silver prints, developed with Flint, Michigan, tap water, Vitamin C, bleach, red wine. Courtesy of Detroit Institute of Arts, Museum Purchase, funds from the Friends of Prints, Drawings and Photographs; page 17, detail of Doug Fogelson, *Headwaters No. 19*, from the *Chemical Alterations* series, 2018, archival inkjet print. Courtesy the artist. © Doug Fogelson; page 20: detail, Shanna Merola, *Methylene Chloride CH<sub>2</sub>Cl<sub>2</sub>*, from the *Love Canal* series, 2021, archival pigment prints. Courtesy the artist. © Shanna Merola

Lead support for *Watershed* is provided by the U-M Office of the Provost, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Michigan Arts and Culture Council, Susan and Richard Gutow, and the U-M Institute for the Humanities. Additional generous support is provided by the U-M School for Environment and Sustainability, Graham Sustainability Institute, and the Department of English Language and Literature.



## ABOUT

### Great Lakes Writers Corps

The Great Lakes Writers Corps is a community-engaged, experiential course sequence offered over three semesters (winter, spring/summer, fall). Through the course, GLWC students learn how to research and compose purposeful, community-engaged nonfiction narratives and longform journalism about the Great Lakes region—exploring topics such as geography, cultures, natural resources, borderlands, ecosystem, history, and/or home.

### Watershed

*Watershed* was a public exhibition of contemporary art, on view at the University of Michigan Museum of Art June–October, 2022. The exhibition features the work of fifteen contemporary artists, including seven artists who have been commissioned by UMMA to create six new works for the show. *Watershed* seeks to immerse visitors in the interconnected histories, present lives, and imagined futures of the Great Lakes region. The artists of *Watershed* demonstrate how art can contribute to and shape current dialogues on the critical problems confronting our region.

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## Thank You

Thank you to the featured writers: Lucy Baker, Sadie Esch-Laurent, Aly Gessner, Meera Kumar, Olivia Long, Noah Manuszak, Will Orr, and the featured artists: Khaled Al-Saa'i, Matthew Brandt, Bonnie Devine, Doug Fogelson, Kate Levy, Shanna Merola, for their contributions and collaboration.

Special thanks to Christopher Ankney, Molly Beer, Jennifer Friess, Michael Hinken, and Anna Sampson for facilitating the inaugural collaboration between UMMA and the Great Lakes Writers Corps. And thank you to Angie Stranyak for designing this zine.

In this painting, one can recognize North Campus, Packard Street, and Church Street. These were locations that populated Al-Saa'i's memory. However "eventually, it is all based on the major structure of the painting which is the Arabic letters, calligraphy, but it is a kind of symbolic way." In some ways, this painting is like peering into Al-Saa'i's mind, as it is a collage of his memories.

Both of the featured paintings are on large canvases and are done in watercolor. The paintings themselves, at first glance, certainly invoke an aquatic essence. The use of fresh blue hues and twisting strokes that mimic the movement of waves display Al-Saa'i's infatuation with nature, particularly water. Although water is oftentimes captured artistically, it is rarely depicted with agency.

One of the only realms that depicts water with such importance is the history of civilization. Al-Saa'i discusses how all human based civilizations rely and have relied on water. The very beginning of life occurred right next to water. The ancient world, like Mesopotamia and Egypt, were located in the fertile crescent, next to the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Nile. Even in Europe there is the Rhine, the Seine, and many more. He describes water as "the main key of our life." Water is unique because its boundaries are fluid. Forty-one countries border the Pacific Ocean, one hundred thirty three countries and territories border the Atlantic, and the Great Lakes are bordered by six US states and a part of Canada. None of these countries, territories, or states own any of these bodies of waters, they are shared and these boundaries are understood universally. In some ways, this is like Al-Saa'i's art. Because he breaks down boundaries, one can understand his art in the universal language of art. ■

# The End of an Era

Written by Aly Gessner  
featuring artist Doug Fogelson



For nearly 12 years, Doug Fogelson has traveled the world photographing natural landscapes. Then, he ruins the film. Through bleach and chlorine-based industrial and household cleaning agents, he transforms these beautiful original photographs into something new. "I wanted to make something that reflected the slow-moving catastrophe of climate change and ecocide, and showed some of the invisible things that are happening," said Fogelson.

Five of Fogelson's photographs are featured in *Watershed*. Fogelson has chosen images connected to the Great Lakes, and has always been interested in threats to global water. When visiting the exhibit, one that stands out is *Headwaters No. 19, 2018*: a photograph of an unlabeled waterway. At the top of the photograph, the water is dark blue, but as the alterations set in on the bottom half, the water turns pink and unrecognizable against an almost white background. It creates the illusion of the water transforming into a pink sludge dripping off the edge of the Earth.

For Fogelson, the *Watershed* exhibit serves “almost like a tombstone, to be honest — *Chemical Alterations: 2012-2022*.” He began this series in 2010, and it was displayed in its first show in 2012. The series has taken him around the world, from his hometown in Chicago, to Iceland, to Asia. A full decade after its debut, Fogelson has decided it is time to move on. He said he’s “spent 12 or 13 years with my face buried in a chemical bath.”

Twelve years of work has left its impression on Fogelson. “I wanted to try to illustrate, in a way, some of this toxic stuff that’s going on through my process, and also pay homage to the landscape as it changes, and to show how everything is connected,” he said, “For me, anyway, this series is a way to look at growth, destruction, temporality—which I think is completely connected to my materials and photography as a medium—ephemerality, and time, and how that impacts my life, and how that impacts everyone’s lives and the future.” It is through the chemical alterations that the images evolve.

At first glance, the altered photographs might still appear beautiful, but more attention reveals the deadly truth behind the display. “It’s kind of a hard pill to swallow, these changes that we all face.”

In order to create these haunting images, his process is two-fold. First, he photographs. He described, “My process in a nutshell is I go out. I go take pictures of the landscape. I omit any signs of the human, any built-world structure like power lines, houses, roads, stuff like that.” He then has his films developed and examines them on a light table, displaying the beautiful full-color images he’s taken.

The second part of his process is what makes his art unique. “I start to become the agent of change by adding liquid cleaning chemicals in different ways: spraying, dipping, dunking, soaking, and such,” Fogelson explained.

“In a way, I’m experiencing a loss of a landscape in a visual exercise...If the image doesn’t turn into something cool, then it’s gone.” He tends to stick to bleach and chlorine-based agents because they have the most stunning impacts on the images.

The inspiration for his work draws from environmental writers like Derrick Jensen, Joanna Macy, and Edward Abbey, as well as anarchist-style advocacy groups like Greenpeace. He is not an artist hoping to sway public opinion through the beauty of the natural environment. Instead, he is destroying his art with the cleaning chemicals we use every day.

While this technique may appear abrasive and violent, Fogelson views the chemical process with a sense of hope. “Out of that interaction, out of that destruction, something new is happening.

And even if that something new is foreign to us, it’s like a crystal pattern, or a fractal,” he says. “In a strange way, that sort of gives me hope that the Earth will remain. Of course. The Earth has gone through multiple different extinctions and eons of change and it has bounced back with life coming from the depths.”

Reflecting back on the 12 years of work on this series, Fogelson remarks that his work has become more abstract. During the pandemic, his show *Dissolution* at Bert Green Fine Art in Chicago included photographs that had been almost entirely destroyed. “The full abstraction of some absolutely gorgeous thing, say a waterfall in Hawaii, that is now just dust in the wind,” he said. His pieces in *Watershed* reflect this evolution as well, as *Headwaters No. 22*, 2019 is so altered it is nearly impossible to identify what the original image may have even shown.

Fogelson’s *Chemical Alterations* series leaves us with a visualization of our own invisible impacts. His art exists nestled in dichotomies: destruction and beauty, water and man, and a life source and a poison. ■