

# Showcase Portfolio

## Fred Zafran: *Small Town Empty*

by E.E. McCollum

**I've known Fred Zafran and his work for over 10 years now** and am an admirer of both the man and the photographs. So, it was a pleasure when Tim Anderson decided to publish this body of Fred's work and asked me to do the accompanying interview. Fred has always chosen to explore the depths of photography both visually, in his stunning use of light and shadow and conceptually, in the ways in which his images ask how we make sense of the world in which we find ourselves. This could be a dry and, frankly, uninteresting pursuit were it not for Fred's virtuoso technical skill and the stunning photographs he produces. We look at Fred's prints because they are beautiful, and then see something more. Born out of the isolation of the COVID pandemic in a small town in Virginia, *Small Town Empty* asks us to consider the range of experience to be found in those dark and silent times.

Artist Project Statement (Zafran):

By March 2020, the pandemic had reached us and our small town in Virginia had shut down. Businesses closed, services were suspended, and our town became empty. The absence of activity was visible, but the strange emptiness unseen was new and unknown.

I began to photograph our town at night when darkness revealed with greatest clarity this new terrain of apprehension and uncertainty – the deserted streets, the closed storefronts, the furtive solitary figures. Even the night sky, its muted light and the shadows cast was different somehow, hushed, with new secrets to tell. Over the months I photographed the arc of the town's struggle to contend with the pandemic shutdown, its tentative efforts to reopen, and the returning necessity to close once again. This photo essay emerged as the result.

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ERIC (EMc): First, a little bit of history. How and when did you begin to make photographs seriously?

FRED (FZ): Photography first came into my life in my teenage years. I grew up in Philadelphia which has miles of beautiful inner-city parks and wilderness and I was particularly fond of the wilderness area of the Wissahickon Valley not far from my home. I would borrow my father's 35mm Mamiya Sekor and head out to photograph my friends and the woods. It was all analog photography at that time of course. Tri-X is what was used and I had access to a pretty good darkroom where I learned to develop and print my photos.

At sixteen, I made what I consider to be my first "good photograph," an image of a young woman, Martha, a friend of mine, crouching under an umbrella in the rain and mist by the bank of a woodland creek. That image opened my mind to the possibility that a photograph could be more than simply a depiction and a remembrance. A photograph could be poetic.

EMc: Why photography? What is it about photography that leads you to choose it as a vehicle of artist expression?

FW: Perhaps it is astonishment – quite simply the astonishment at the very fact of one's own existence in the world. Everything deserves our careful attention and awareness, even the smallest details may contain great secrets. I suspect this is what brought me to photography and led me more deeply into a photographic practice. With each passing year, I have become more certain of the symbolic power of the photograph, and that

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metaphor is more revealing than literal depiction. Consider the first image in the Small Town Empty portfolio, entitled “Threshold.” This opening image is a photograph of the town, but it is less an actual depiction, than a symbolic representation of a landscape transformed by the pandemic, ominous and shrouded, under a now too distant moon.



*Threshold.*

EMc: I would like to explore this answer a little further. In a presentation you made earlier this year, you spoke about the importance of poetic narrative in your work. Would you share these thoughts with us?

FZ: When I speak of the “poetry” of the photographic image, I mean something very specific. In literature, poetry exists because of the limitations of language (prose). The poet, moved by the world around her, uses words to point beyond themselves, to express some deeper meaning or insight. The same is true with a photograph as poetic narrative. The expressive (poetic) photograph points beyond the limitations of the depicted subject matter. The images are suggestive, evocative, rich in symbolism and metaphor.

EMc: How did Small Town Empty come about?

FZ: It was 2020 and COVID had descended upon us. Suddenly everything became unknown. I live in a small town in northern Virginia and decided that I would use this time of apprehension and uncertainty to explore what had fallen upon our town and society. I wandered our town in twilight and darkness and made photographs. There was a visible emptiness everywhere, with only a few individuals venturing out. There was also a palpable silence, a veil upon the town, something unknown at work.

In the first nights of the project, I felt a measure of apprehension, of potential exposure to a virus whose effects we didn't fully understand. But this concern quickly passed, replaced with the excitement of exploration and discovery of a new terrain. The nights were filled with mystery and were particularly beautiful.

EMc: What was the trajectory of the project? Did you know immediately what you wanted this project to be, or did it develop as you made the photographs?

FZ: At first, I didn't fully understand what I was seeking or the photographs I was making. Although I had lived in the town for nearly three decades, the pandemic had created an unrecognized and unfamiliar domain. With excitement and trepidation, I ventured out at night every week for 18 months and let the photographs guide me. Over time, the images began to speak to each other, to contextualize each other, and the body of work began to take on form and direction.

As an example, the second photograph in the portfolio — entitled “King and Market Streets” — became particularly resonant for me when the image was first “received.” It revealed the direction for the entire body of work. The signs and symbols in this photograph would echo repeatedly in the images I subsequently selected for the essay.



*King and Market Streets.*

EMc: The project took shape during the early COVID epidemic here in the US. Is it specific to that situation or do you find in it a larger meaning, a meaning that speaks to something more universal?

FZ: Although the initial impetus to create this work was the arrival of COVID, ultimately this project was

not about the epidemic. As I continued to photograph at night, the empty town began to shimmer with insubstantiality, with a lightness and fragility. The few individuals who ventured out appeared as lonely apparitions. The body of work became a reflection on the nature of our brief and uncertain lives – just flickering lights of transience and ephemerality. Unexpectedly, I felt a deepening sense of kinship and compassion for my fellow travelers in the night.

EMc: The viewpoint in the series seems to be one of distance, isolation and, perhaps, because they were all made at night, hiding in the shadows. When people appear in the photographs, they aren't involved directly with the photographer. Why was this viewpoint important to you in this project?

FZ: In this body of work, when people appear in my photographs, the distance and isolation shown are intentional. People were fearful and cautious at that time; their lives upended by a perceived danger they didn't understand. In a sense, they become shadows of themselves. I photographed people just as such, shadows blending into the fabric of the empty night.

EMc: What else would you like us to know about *Small Town Empty*?

FZ: When COVID hit, everyone stopped going to galleries and I stopped exhibiting. When we emerged from the pandemic, I was on to other projects, initiatives and exhibitions. The portfolio and story of "Small Town Empty" has not been exhibited to date, and I am grateful for the opportunity to share this work in *Shadow & Light Magazine*.



*Colors of the Night.*



*The Coffee Roaster.*



*Three on Loudoun.*



*King and Royal Streets*



*On Market Street.*





*On the Corner.*



*King's Tavern.*



*Closing Time.*



*Empty.*