

ECLOGUES

Alf Bogusky & Allan Harding MacKay: A Collaboration

ECLOGUES

Memories

Imagine for a moment that you have been an art museum director or curator in a former life and, now retired, find yourself in an unusual situation. The pressures of the position may no longer be with you, but there remains a memory of all the art you have seen in your lifetime; if you are endowed with a good visual memory, the images and memories of art imprint on your mind.

Not only have you seen art firsthand, but you have read about it in books, newsletters, promotional items, exhibition catalogues, periodicals, essays, critiques, artists' statements, and all manner of commentary, perhaps pertinent, perhaps memorable. But most prominent of all is the visual memory, a compendium of images and emotions, unorganized in the messy files of the mind. Some are subconscious. Some may be conjured up spontaneously when something is seen. A slide in the carousel of one's mind flashes on an inner screen, crowding out other images, evoking still others you thought you had forgotten. Sometimes it is amusing, sometimes quite wondrous. Sometimes fondly remembered, sometimes still appearing as an enigma never entirely resolved, yet never forgotten.

We are conditioned by a variety of factors: where we grew up, the landscape(s) that surrounded us, the food we ate, the climate, the seasons, the language we spoke, our early education, everything, really, since in many of these areas, we did not always make conscious choices. It was all around us, and our senses enabled us to absorb it, almost by osmosis. Of all these things, the predominant landscape, especially if you lived outside an urban area or near enough to its periphery, the experience of nature, cultivated or not, was an ever-present source of wonder. Living by the sea or living in the mountains would certainly provide such a stimulus.

Living on the Prairies may suggest a landscape devoid of variety. And yet infinite space and limitless horizons offer something beyond topographical interest. One may turn to details and incidents in this landscape, the beautiful or the picturesque, or revel in the infinite. Edmund Burke identified such a limitless and somewhat terrifying landscape such as the prairie as the Sublime.

Kindred Spirits

Looking at Alf Bogusky's and Allan MacKay's professional careers, we find that both graduated from art schools between 1967 and 1975. At this time, many of the positions of director and curator of emerging public art galleries in Canada were filled by art school graduates. There were very few master's level programs in Fine Arts in Canada, and the curators and directors came from the ranks of artists with a particular interest and affinity in the organization and exhibition of artworks. There were certainly no programs in "curatorial studies." One learned the profession by "just doing it" a couple of decades before Nike launched its motivational slogan.

Lethbridge is at the origin of a friendship between MacKay and Bogusky. In 1975, fresh from a 5-year stint as Director and Curator of the Anna Leonowens Gallery of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (where he had graduated in 1967), Allan MacKay became the Founding Director and Curator of the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in 1975. In 1976, he hired a "Gallery Assistant" in the person of Alf Bogusky, a newly minted BFA from the University of Lethbridge. When MacKay left the SAAG to take the position of Director and Curator of the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, Bogusky succeeded him as the SAAG's Director and Curator in 1979.

Both their careers included many years on the Prairies. This extraordinary Canadian landscape seems to imprint itself on anyone born or spending a significant amount of time there.



A further collaboration occurred in 1986 after Bogusky was appointed Director of the Art Gallery of Windsor in 1985. He hired Allan MacKay as a consultant. When in 2001, Bogusky became the Director of the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery (KWAG), he again hired MacKay as a Curatorial and Collections Consultant. This collaboration lasted until 2009. Bogusky left the KWAG in March 2011.

As a result of years of collaboration, Bogusky and MacKay developed a friendship as well as a close working relationship. This experience is essentially at the root of the present accidental collaboration. Both having retired from the public art gallery arena, a new visual dialogue has emerged where their individual sensibilities are manifest.

Eclogues

An Eclogue is a text of prose or verse, usually in dialogue form, on a pastoral or bucolic theme. It is a very ancient classical tradition. The Greek poet Theocritus wrote a series of idylls about pastoral life as early as the Third Century before the Common Era. This nostalgic evocation of an imagined Golden Age provided a contrast to current unsettling events or troubled times. The famous Eclogues of Virgil were written during such times. The Roman republic was evolving into an autocratic government under an emperor.

The form was revived in the Renaissance by both poets and painters. The famous *Pastoral Concert* or *Fête champêtre* of ca. 1509 is today attributed to the young Titian, while Giorgione's contribution to the genre was *The Tempest*, painted in about 1508.

The pastoral genre was again revived by poets of the pre-Romantic era (16th and 17th centuries), such as Alexander Pope (whose *Pastorals* appeared in 1711) and the Scottish poet James Thomson, who wrote *The Seasons* between 1726 and 1730. (Vivaldi's famous *Four Seasons* were composed between 1718 and 1720).

Pastoral themes were popular during the Baroque and Rococo periods. The theme persisted through the early Romantic period in the work of William Blake and his young admirers, such as Samuel Palmer and "The Ancients" in the early 1800s. By then, British literary figures had debated the Sublime, the Beautiful and the Picturesque aesthetic categories, which inspired Romanticism and landscape painting. These considerations inform our understanding of landscape painting to this day.

Alf and his wife, Ann Pappert, moved to Guelph in 2013, purchasing a home in the Kortright Hills area. When in 2016, Ann took on an Assistant Deputy Minister's position in Toronto, it necessitated an early morning drive to the train station. The deserted pre-dawn cityscape of Guelph resonated with Alf, and he began to capture the images on his phone, a practice which ended in 2017 when Ann retired. Alf then shifted his attention to the sizeable undeveloped acreage behind his home, an enclosed miniature prairie still actively farmed. This landscape has become the basis of the visual dialogue that has emerged spontaneously in the last few years. A housing development surrounds the acreage. Still, it offers a landscape filled with incident, an open field, and an open sky reminiscent of the prairie landscape of Bogusky's youth. As a result, a daily photographic record of that landscape (and its surrounding wood) has provided never-ending inspiration, especially in the early morning and dusk.

Virtual Eclogues

The Bogusky-MacKay eclogues began in June of 2021. Alf had sent one of his photographs to Allan. Coincidentally, a collector of Alf's acquaintance had just acquired a large 1880s landscape by Homer Watson, and a digital image of it was also sent along to Allan.

Allan MacKay's subtle "intervention" was to incorporate the Watson and the Bogusky photograph, creating a new image. The intervention is not entirely gratuitous as the region around Waterloo and Guelph is Homer Watson country. The Homer Watson house is a mere 30 kilometres from Bogusky's present home.

This led to a series of images from Bogusky that received an intervention from MacKay, who used various online resources (paintings, stock images, book illustrations, public domain photographs, cinema video grabs), resulting in a virtual eclogue where Bogusky's landscape photographs provided the source images. An example is the melding of George Inness' *In the Berkshires*, ca. 1848-50 (oil on canvas in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum of Madrid) with Bogusky's photographed landscape.

The interventions on Bogusky's photographs continued. MacKay's additions often included images of nymphs and shepherds of the pastoral tradition, still favoured in French Academy circles throughout the 19th century. A typical example of this draws on established Salon painters such as William Adolphe Bouguereau's *Nymphs and Satyr*, 1873 (oil on canvas, 260 cm x 180 cm, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA), a genre of painting that was mocked by emerging Modernist painters such as Courbet and the painters of Barbizon. The rabbit group from Landseer's portrayal of *Tatiana and Bottom* from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* also makes an appearance. The source image here is the same that was merged with the previously mentioned George Inness' *In the Berkshires*, but the intervention is less emphatic.

The interventions are fascinating exercises in "bricolage," where a given image is modified to enhance, alter, or subvert its original intent or meaning. The series evokes the entire genre of landscape painting and its evolution. In the 17th century, Claude Lorrain sought to ennoble landscape painting by using the landscape as a setting for some biblical or mythical event. The tradition continued into the 19th century. Even Corot inserted goddesses, nymphs, and shepherds in his paintings, such as *Diana and Actaeon*, *Diana Surprised in Her Bath*, 1836 and his *A Morning*. *The Dance of the Nymphs*, ca 1850.



Homer Watson, *The Old Mill*, Oil on canvas, 1890, 76.2 cm x 101.6 cm, private collection, Waterloo Region.

Photo courtesy of Patrick Staheli, Canadian Art Specialist.



British artists, in particular, emulated Lorrain's 17th century landscapes. Both Constable and Turner owe much to Lorrain, but in different ways. Whereas Turner could transform a landscape with a title alone and endow it with new meaning, Constable sought to ennoble the landscape, removing any notable incident.¹

While Bogusky's original landscape photographs can stand on their own, the manipulated images take on a new significance, suggesting both fanciful, plausible, and, at times, sinister narratives. Some of MacKay's additions are drawn from Canadian art historical sources such as Cornelius Krieghoff, Blair Bruce, Frederic Verner, etc.

The suburban landscape is transformed through an art historical lens resulting in final images that are quite other-worldly, the stuff of dreams and fantasy. Visual memory and dreams meld together, creating new possibilities.

Et in Arcadia Ego

No evocation of Virgil's Eclogues would be complete without referencing Poussin's painting *Les Bergers d'Arcadie* (1638-1640), sometimes known as *Et in Arcadia Ego*, the title of the first version of the subject, which Poussin painted in 1628-1630. The subject may refer to the Fifth Eclogue, where shepherds gather around a tomb with the inscription, *Et in arcadia ego*, usually translated as "I too am in Arcadia." The inscription does not appear as such in the Eclogues, but a tomb is to be raised to Daphnis, a deceased shepherd, poet and singer. Thus, the derived meaning that death is also found in Arcadia.²

In his photographs, Bogusky generally does not emphasize the human presence beyond a cultivated landscape, a winter skating rink, a tire swing or a plastic swing and slide set. Through the imagery of the Kortright field, he evokes the prairie landscapes of his youth edged by woods.

An exception is an extraordinary photograph of an old, abandoned fire truck in a wood. Its skeletal ladder evokes death. The vehicle itself has apparent associations with disaster. MacKay's unique intervention here is subtle and mysterious in the series, almost incidental.

MacKay's interventions often echo this theme. Wreckage of old farm machinery is usually found on the prairie landscape. But in some countries, the machine is a downed warplane. An image of the remains of a vintage MIG fighter jet evokes past conflicts. In the context of 2022, mediated images of the war in Ukraine are conjured up.

End Time

Romanticism favoured eschatological imagery. This was one aspect of the Sublime, where infinity and awe and the inevitable cycles of time became the subject of artists such as JMW Turner. His *Fighting Téméraire*, tugged to her last berth to be broken up, in 1838, illustrates the impending ruin of past glories. His *Morning after the Deluge* (full title: *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – The Morning after the Deluge – Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* of 1843 and *Angel Standing in the Sun* of 1846 are explicit evocations of the beginning and the end of time.

Dawn and dusk imagery are filled with promise or foreboding. Every day, Bogusky records these times in his photographs. His images of the same landscape at sunset create a sense of wonder but also dread. Cloud formations and sunsets evoke climate catastrophe, marked by extremes of weather. Ruskin first observed the "grey clouds of the plague wind" in 1871. Yet, these images are already present in Blake's idea of "dark satanic mills." These had been depicted in de Louthembourg's *Coalbrookdale by Night* of 1801.

Such images are fertile ground for MacKay's musings of things to come. Here, the grim reaper (derived from Gustave Doré's *Death on a Pale Horse* of 1865) and his *Fallen Angel* of 1866 make their appearances. Are visions of Arcadia, visions of Blake's Jerusalem built "Among these dark Satanic Mills," now a lost paradise never to be regained, guarded by a host of sword-bearing angels?

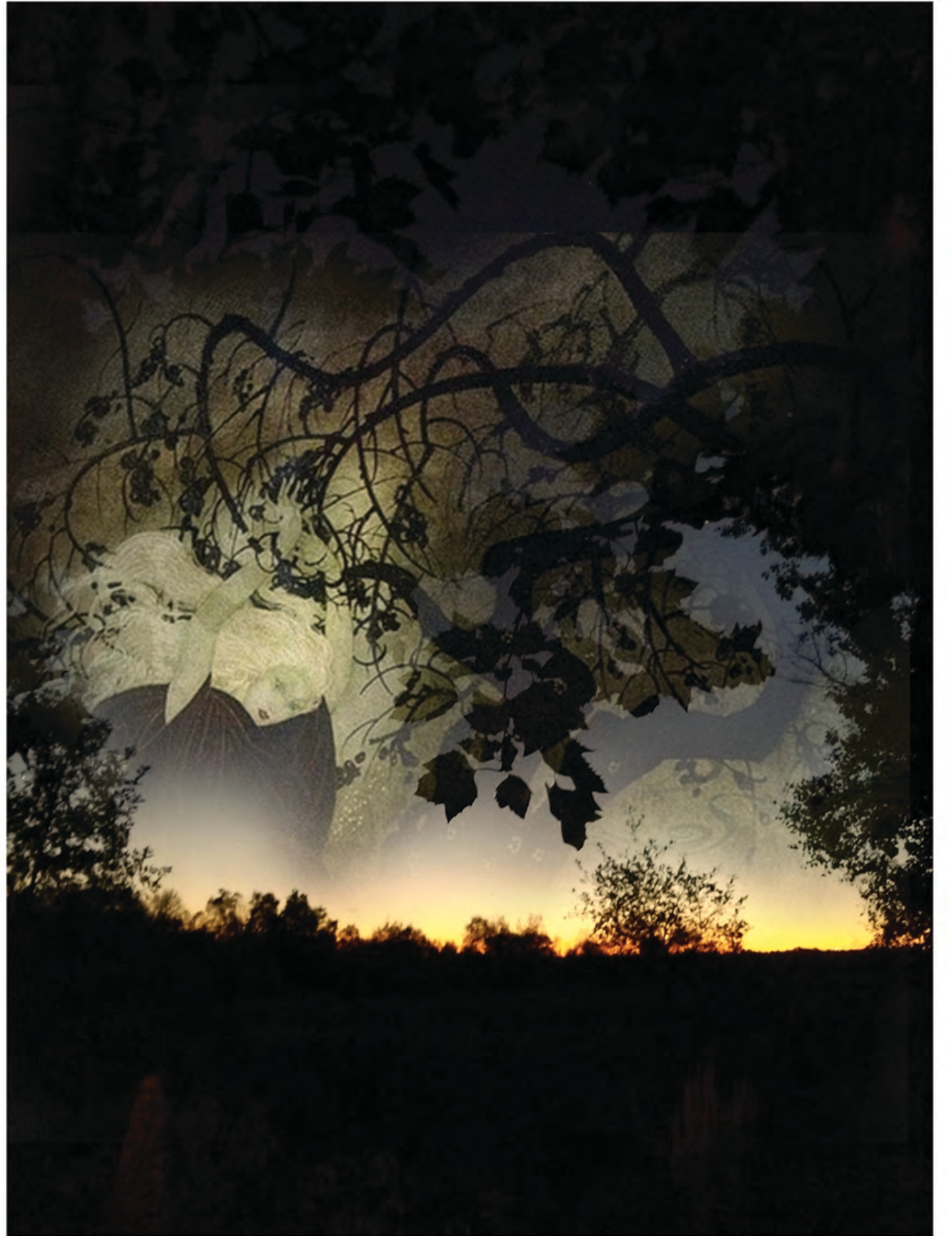
Roger H. Boulet
Summerland, BC
Michaelmas Day, 29 September 2022

1 Although scholars have recently pointed to incidents in some paintings, such as his *Dedham Vale* of 1828, of figures which allude to poverty and indigence, a direct result of the Industrial Revolution. See Michael Rosenthal, *The Painter and His Landscape*, New Haven: Yale University, 1983.

2 Panofsky, Erwin. (1955). "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition." *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. Doubleday Anchor Books. pp. 295-320.









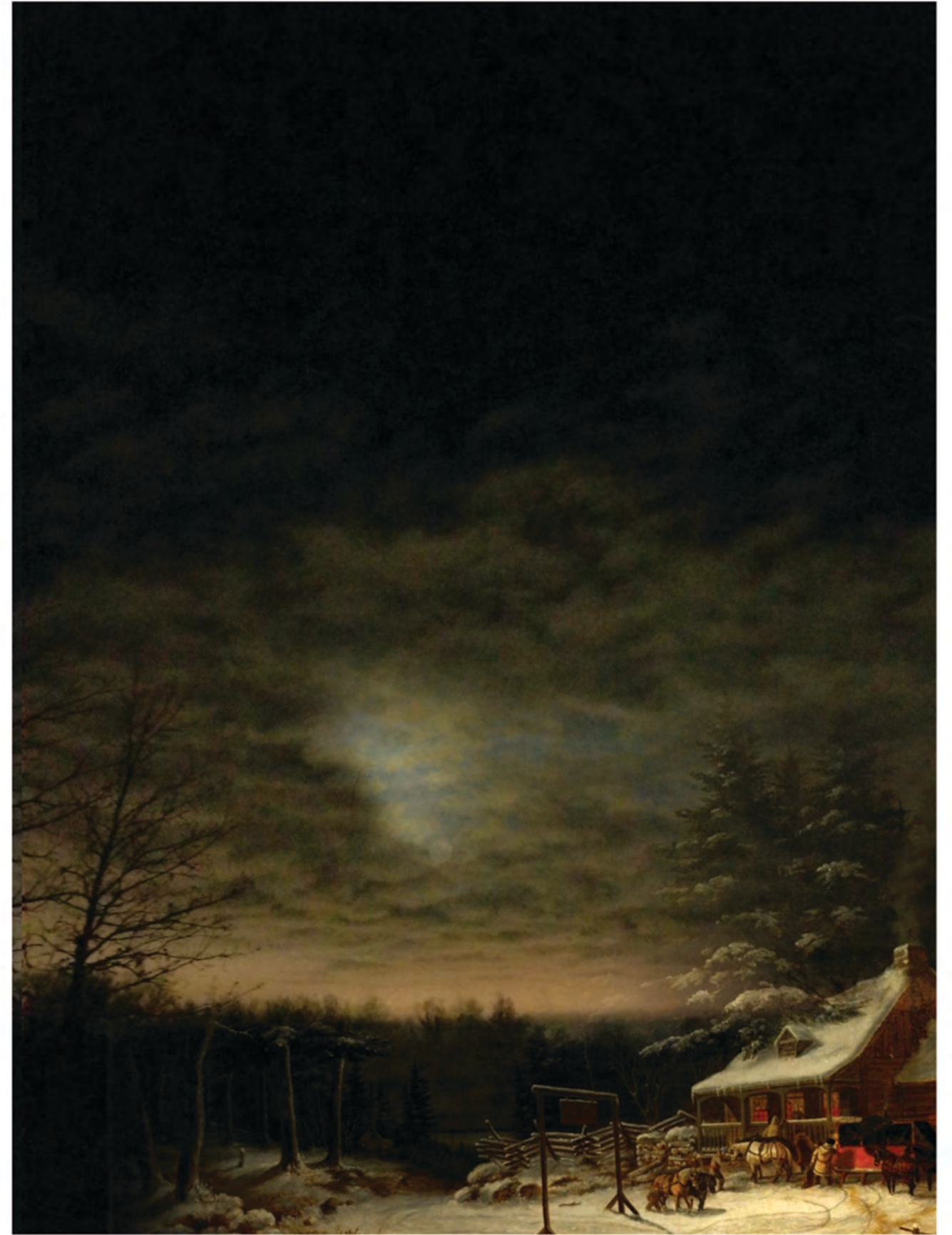






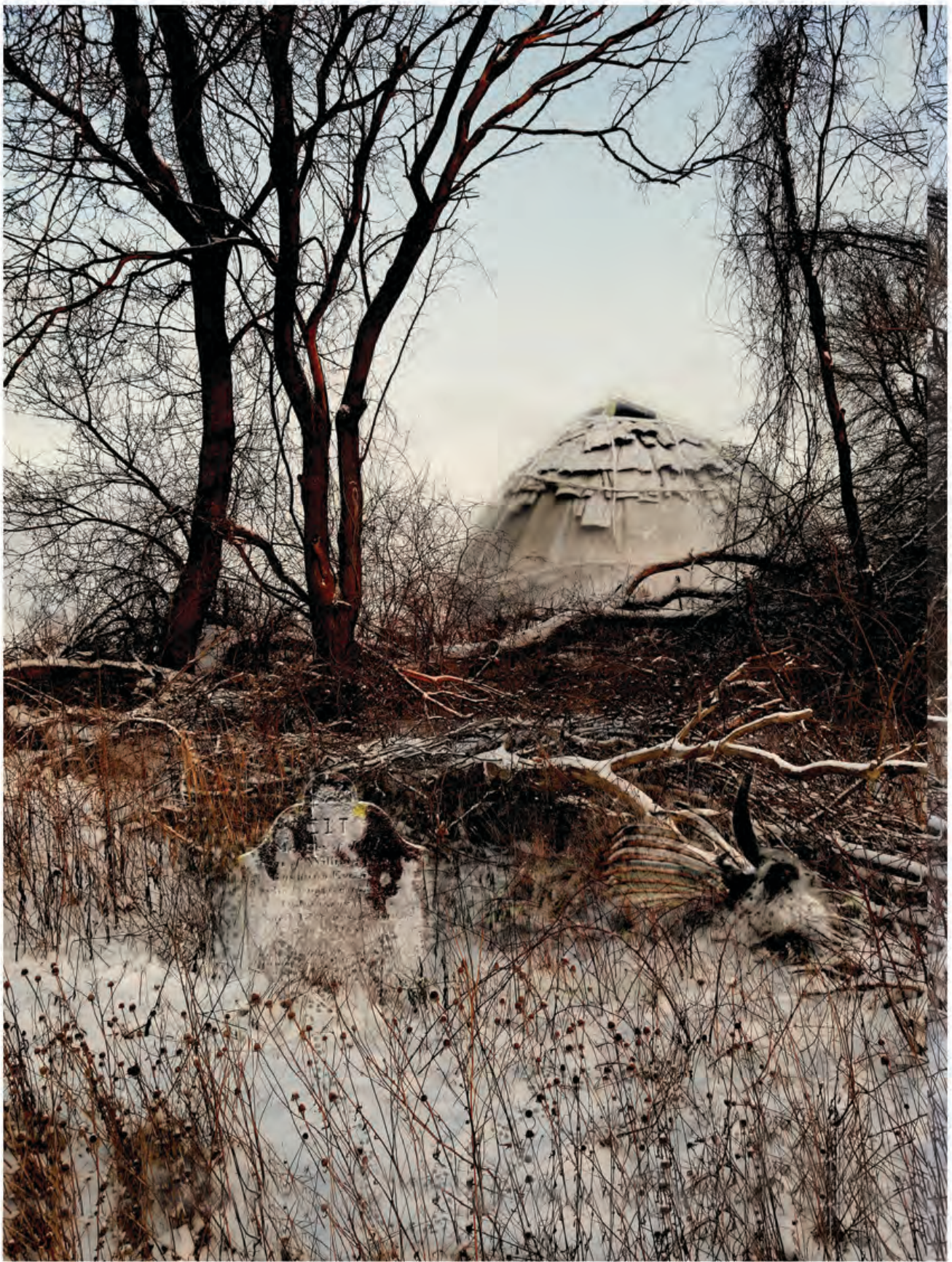










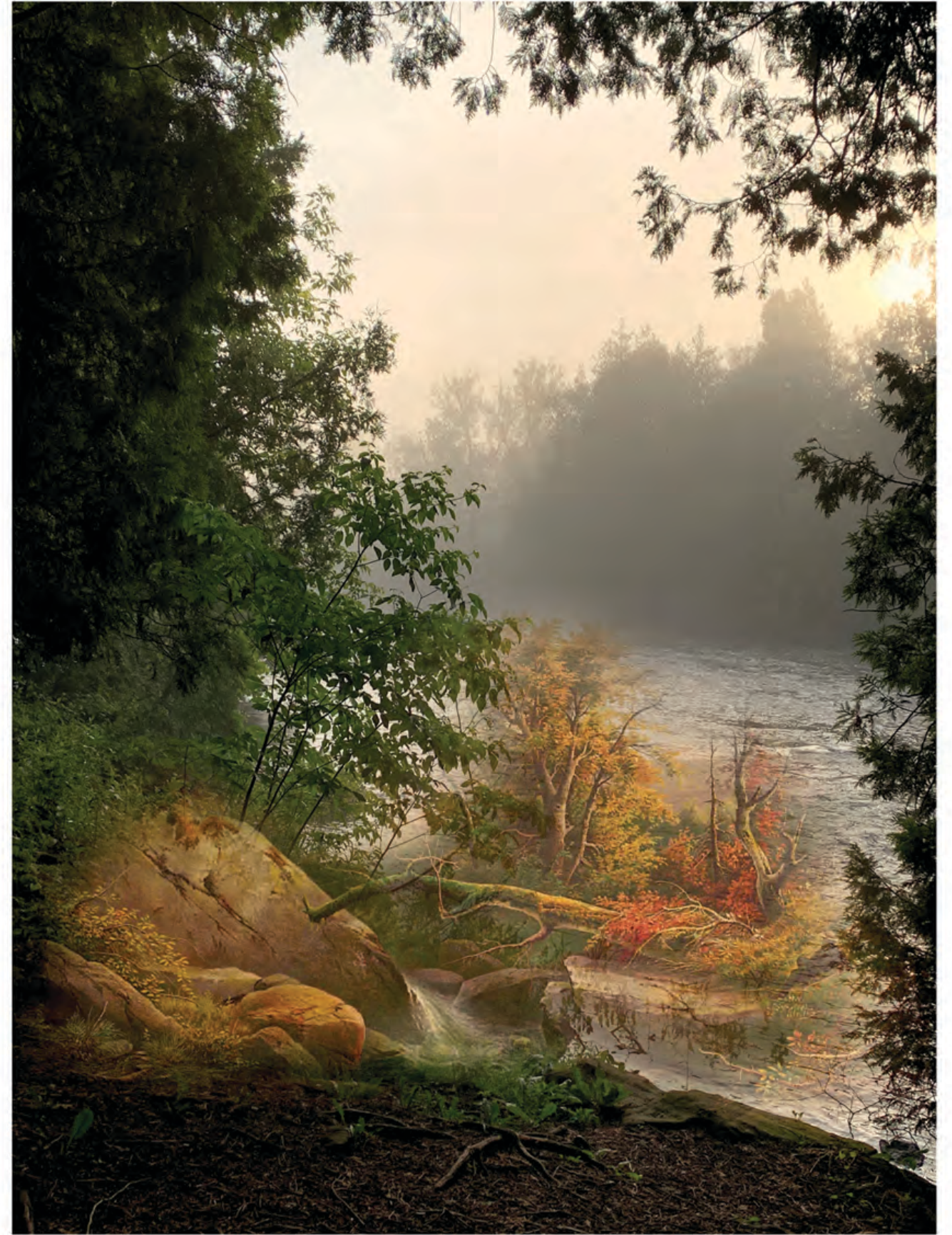


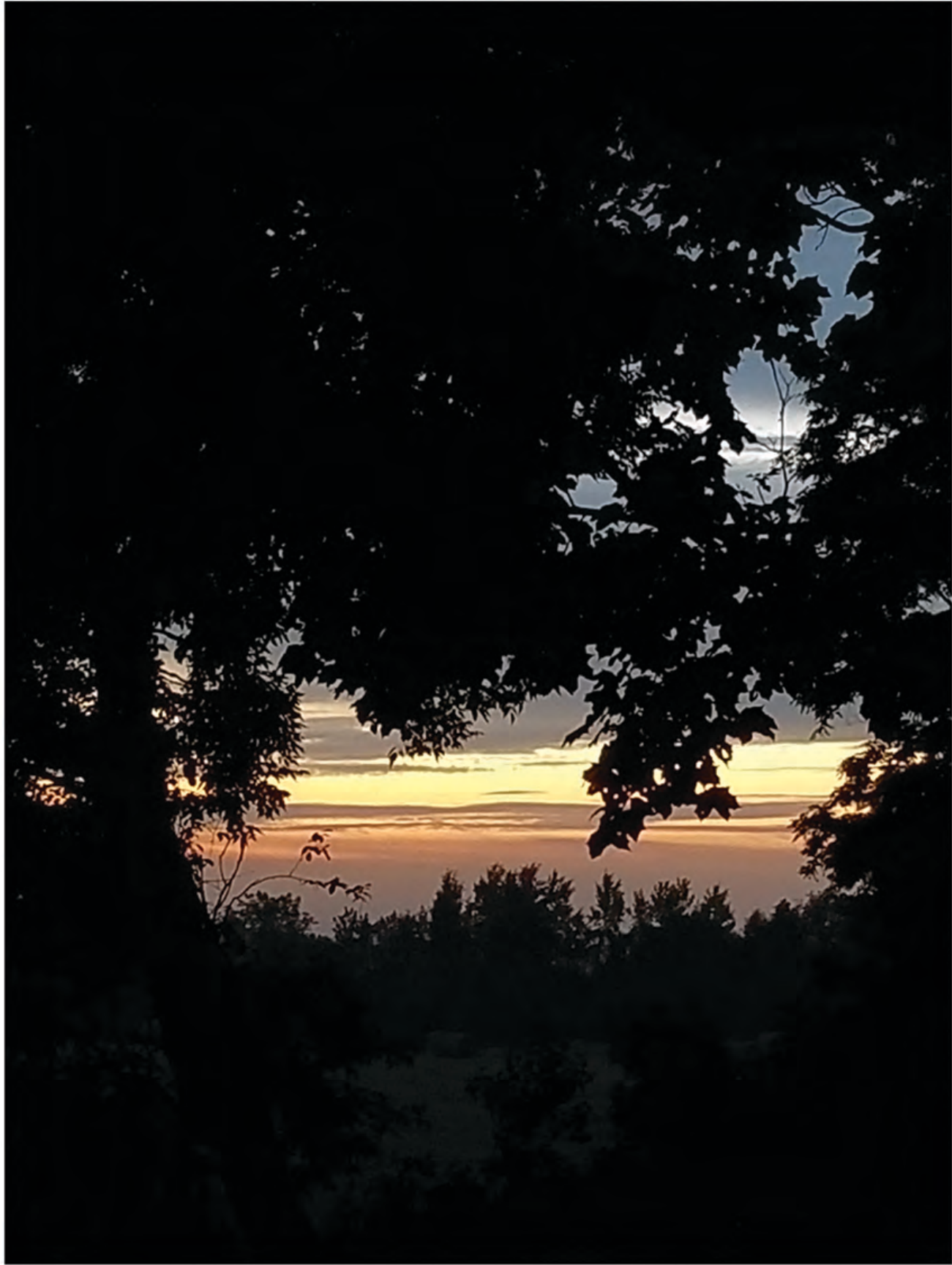












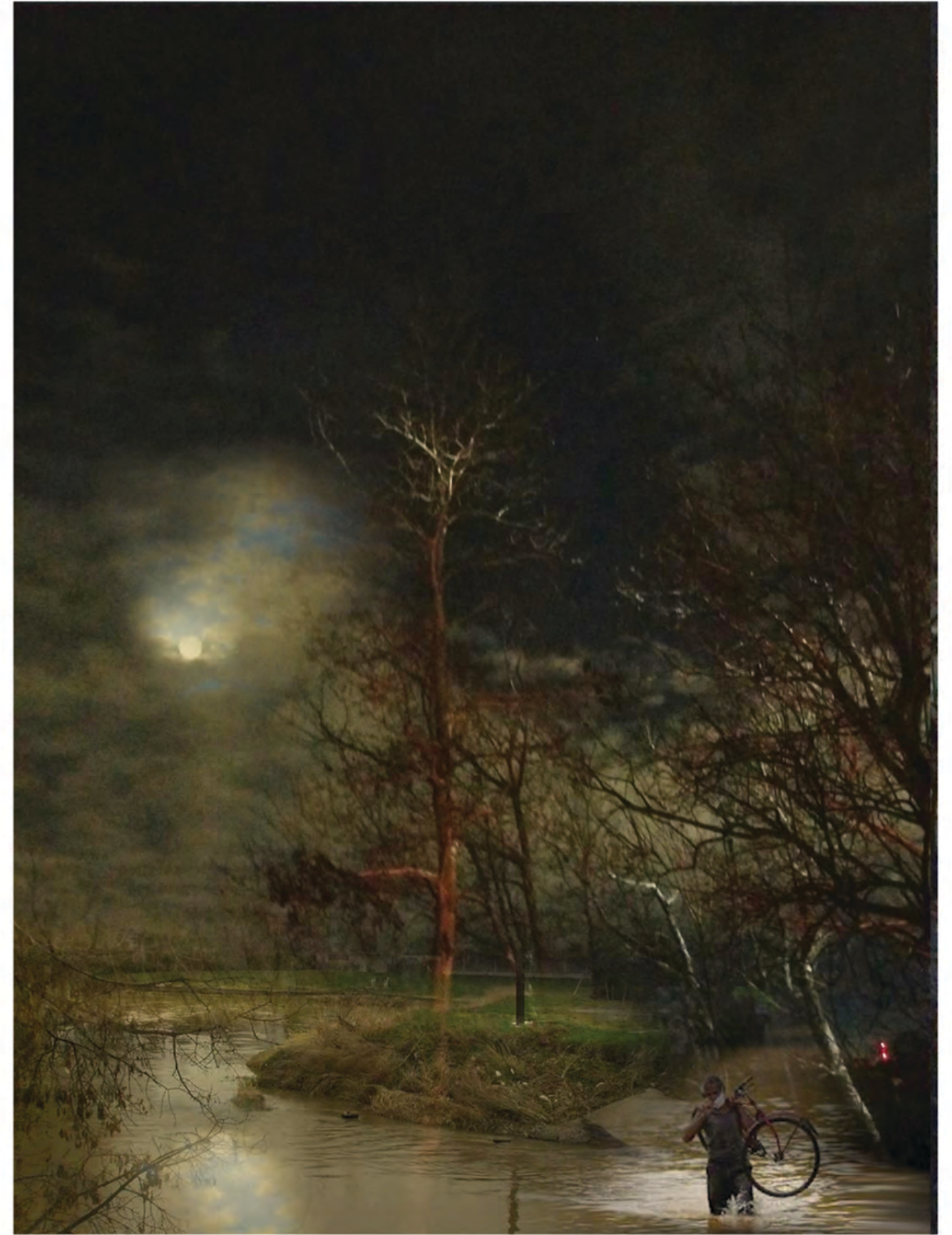


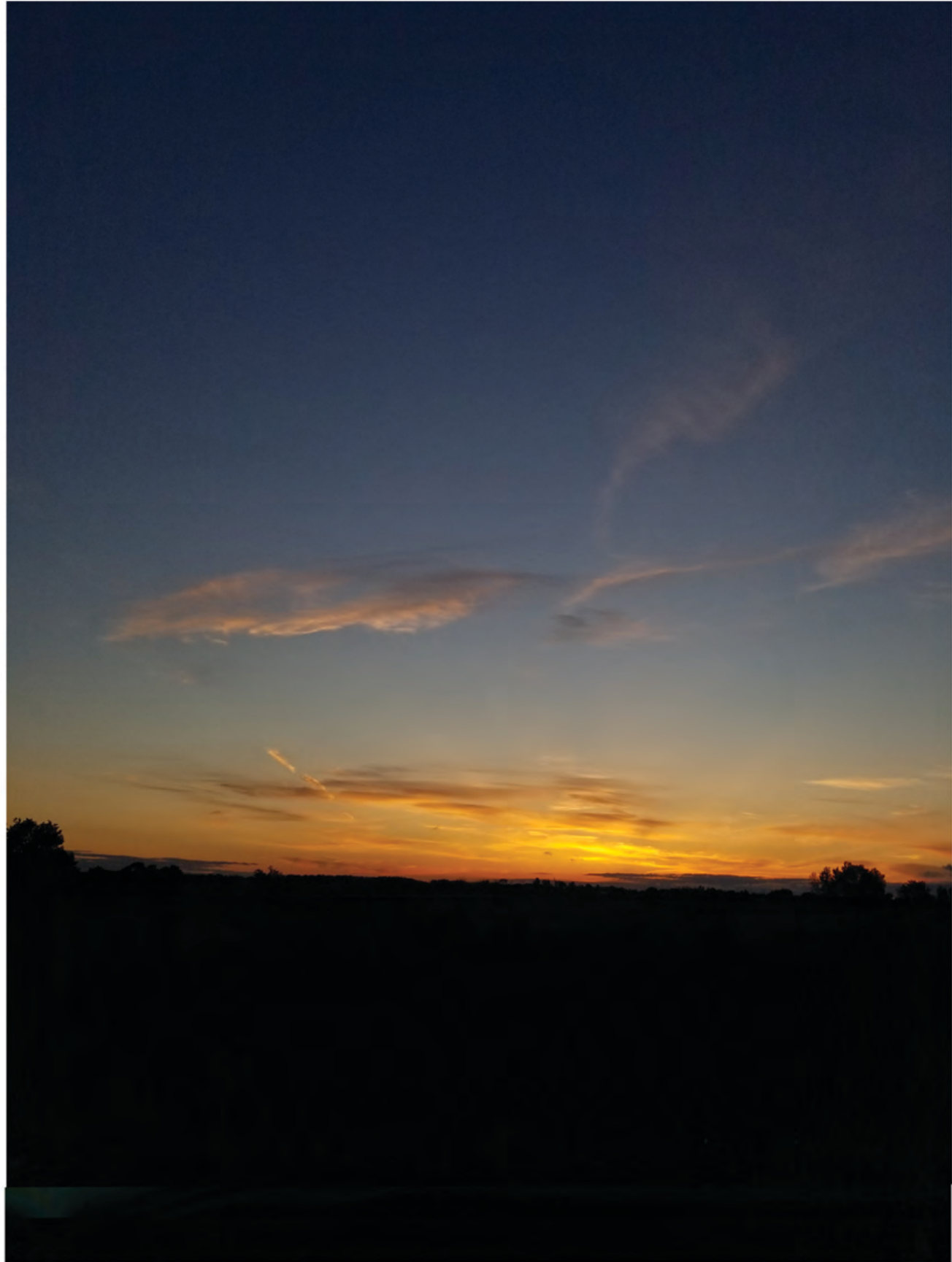
















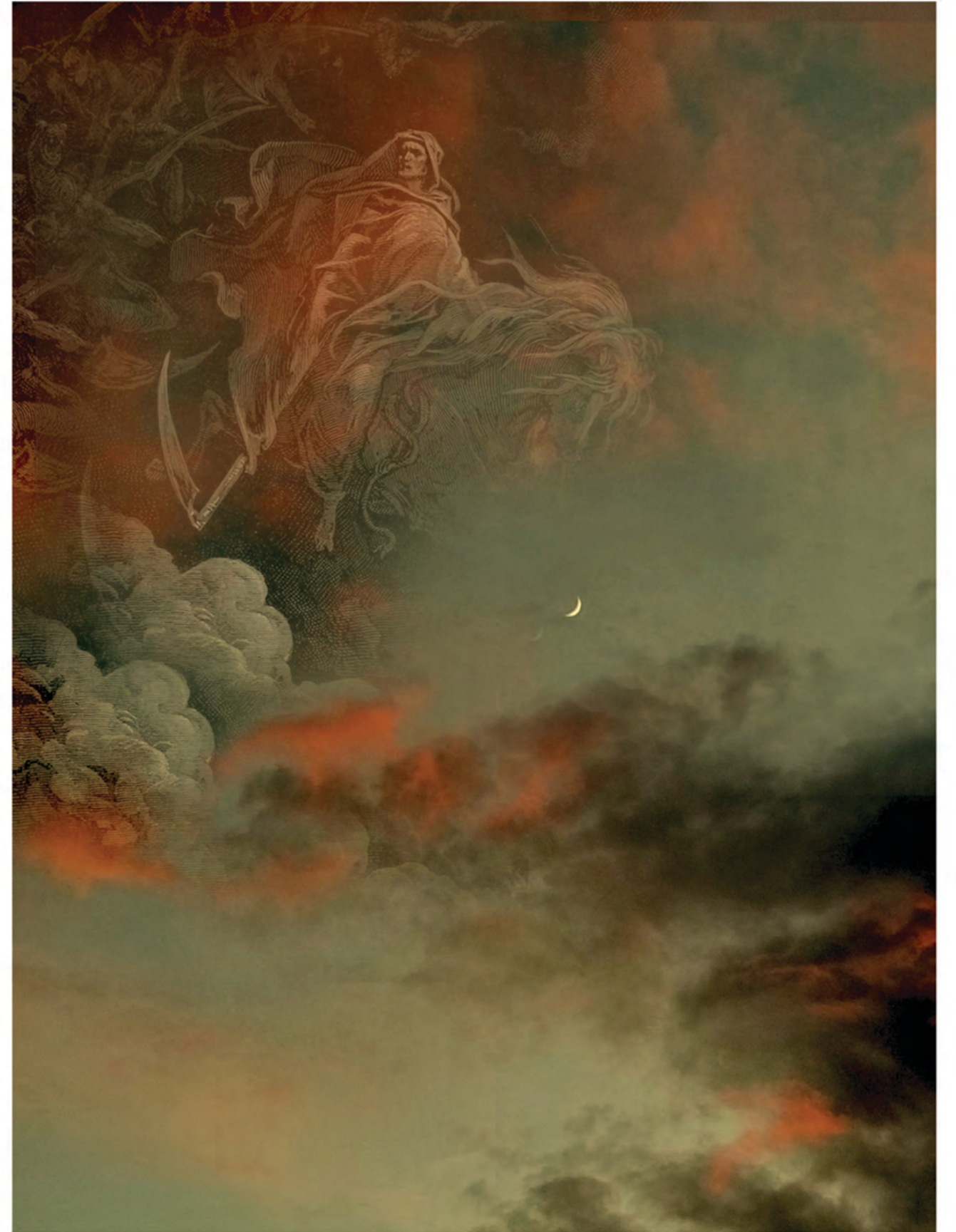
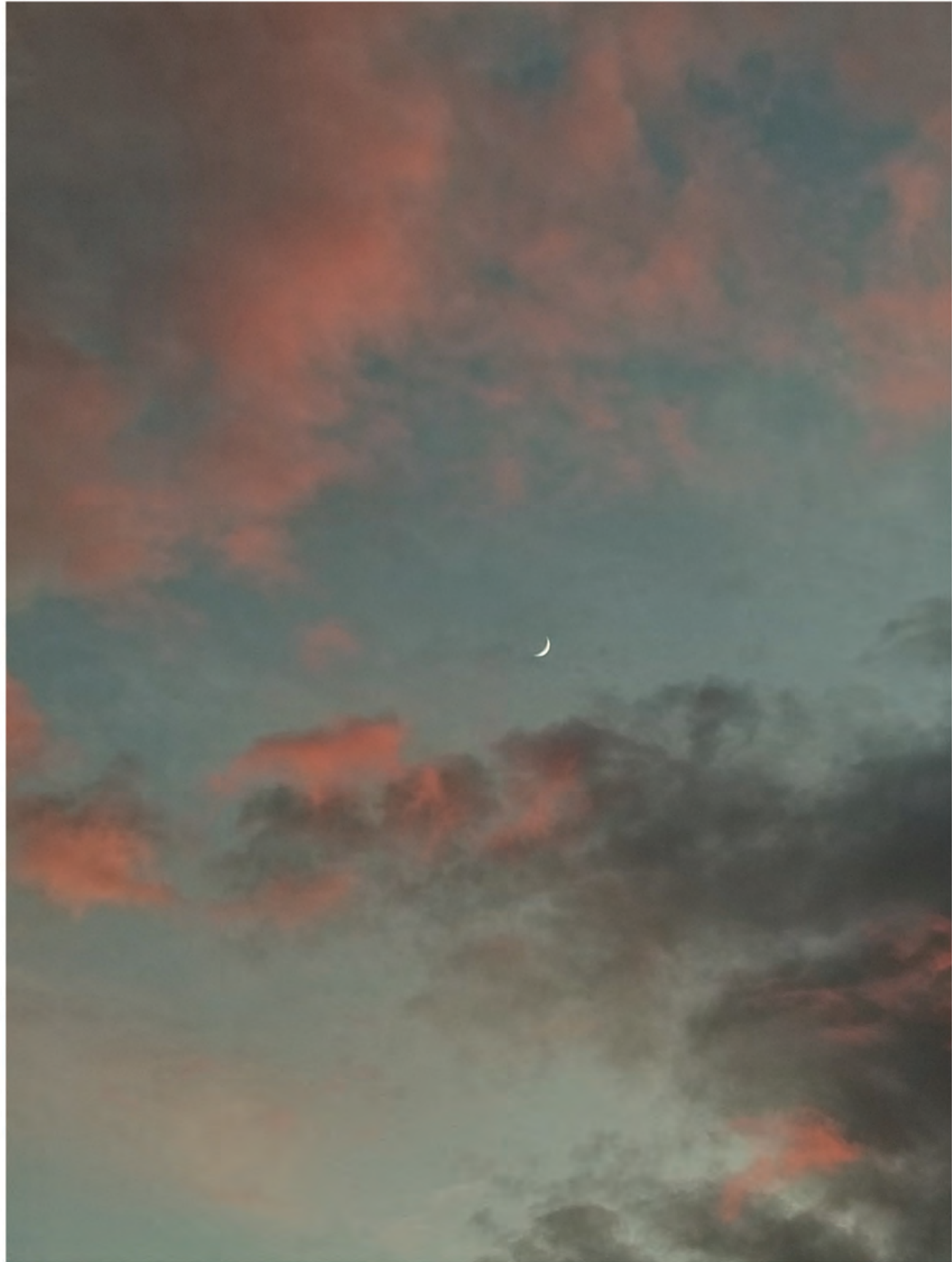


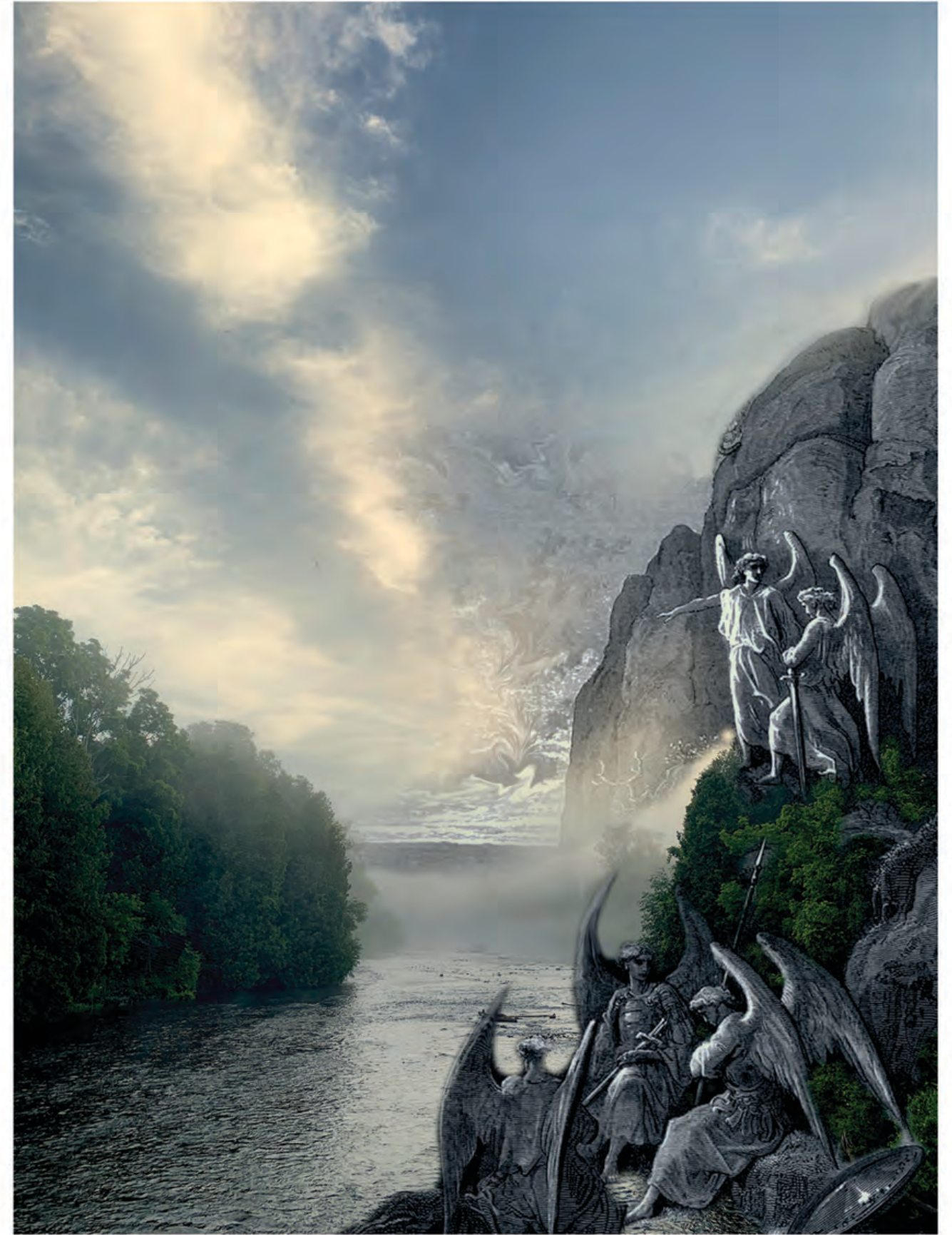












Credits

Alf Bogusky, Photography

Allan Harding MacKay, Collaborative Interventions

Susan Coolen, Design

and

Roger Boulet, Essay

Alf Bogusky is a retired public Art Gallery Director currently living in Guelph Ontario where he enjoys casual creative pursuits including photography.

Allan H. MacKay is a retired art museum professional presently maintaining an active artistic practice in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Susan Coolen is a photo-based contemporary visual artist currently in Kitchener, Ontario.

Roger H. Boulet was born and raised in Manitoba. He is a retired public Art Gallery Director, Curator, and Art Consultant, who has also taught art history. Since 1993, he has lived in his own "Arcadia," in Summerland, British Columbia.

