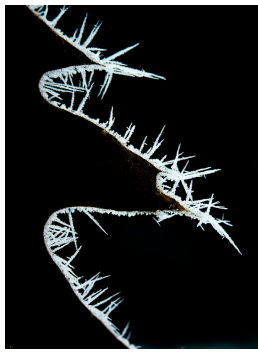


**Inside the Artist -  
John Snell  
February 2016**



John Snell, a nature photographer living in Montpelier, was interviewed over holiday tea, about his influences and inspirations for his work, now on exhibition in three places around central Vermont. He will also be a speaker at an author/artist talk with Nicole Grubman on Saturday January 30 in Waterbury Center, which will be followed by a guided back roads walk. Below are excerpts from that conversation:

**How did you get started in this artistic endeavor?**

I had a very old camera when I was a kid and I enjoyed playing around with it. Then when I was in college at Michigan State, I traded in my motorcycle for a Nikon Camera and three lenses. So that really launched me.

**Was it for a college class?**

No. Just on my own.

**What kind of photography grabbed you at the beginning?**

It was always nature photography. At that time I lived in the woods, very much away from everything and that's pretty much what I did, every day. I never studied photography but I've taken two workshops and both of them made a big difference. One was Dewitt Jones, a fabulous Rutland photographer, and a very spiritual guy who uses photography as a way to interact with people. This was back in the day of film, and I was complaining about the cost of film and he said, "You know, just don't even worry about it." But a 10-roll film day back then, 360 exposures was close to \$100. And now I do that without even blinking. The biggest problem with digital now is you do 360 photographs and 355 of them need to be in the trash. I find taking fewer photographs and really just concentrating a useful exercise sometimes. But I also really love digital where you can blast away.

The other was out in the Seattle area from John Shaw who is a really respected nature photographer, and man! What a guy, just a brilliant, brilliant guy. From him I learned a lot of things that still serve me well-- mainly really looking at the edges of the photograph. We tend to go right to the middle of things, but without the edges being where they need to be it's not a great photo.

**What inspires you to go out every day?**

If I didn't go out(side) every day, I'd be dead. I've been thinking that I should build a platform out back and live there for a while. I just love being out there under the sky and the wind....

**Is that the only criteria for your work, being that it takes you outside?**

There still are periods that I enjoy doing abstractions of built work, buildings, people, like that...but it's always of less interest for me to do that work. There are exceptions. There was one picture that I did at the Tate Modern of people in shadow that is just stunning. I don't really ever tire of looking at that...but generally it's just outside.



**Do you give yourself assignments?**

Not until recently. I'm now meeting fairly regularly with 6 other photographers. They're different, very different kinds of work, but the intention of working together was that we would be completely honest in our critique. And that's hard to do in both directions, I think. It's been about 2 years that we've been meeting about every 6 weeks. And we give each other assignments even though it isn't something I would normally do myself.



For me an assignment would be: When the temperature and conditions are perfect I would know where I need to go to find what I'm looking for that day.

**What might you be looking for?**

New ice. Weeks ago we had that for about 2 days and I was in ecstasy. It was silly. I came back with 400-500 exposures and some of them are just to die for. Anticipating what it's going to be...if I wake up and there's hoar frost on everything, well, I'm out the door and gone. (laughter)

**I get a sense from your photography that it's a bit of a meditation for you.**

Oh absolutely.

**Of those 500 shots, what might you pull from that?**

There's a lot of crap. There are probably only about 10 that are worth saving. It's interesting how I can become attached to

something that is really just junk. It happens. I can look back 2 or 3 years later as see how it served me to get where I am today, but still it's a junk photo. I am someone who is technically not a very good photographer. Honestly, I could care less about all the camera jargon-- how big is your lens, blah blah stuff. And sometimes to my detriment (and I do realize it is a limitation that I have) but I'm just not willing to do what it takes to get on the technical side. I think where I've grown to produce work that I think is pretty exceptional is the overall look of the image. That comes with just seeing lots of different things.

### **Are there any photographers that you go to see their work?**

I will take a look at just about anyone's work. John Shaw is probably one of the current photographer's that I respect most, but there are plenty of them (I would see).

### **Are there any artists or art forms outside of photography that you are influenced by?**

My wife, Liz, is a huge inspiration that constantly challenges me in great ways. She's always "how about this," and "what about that?" And it makes a difference.

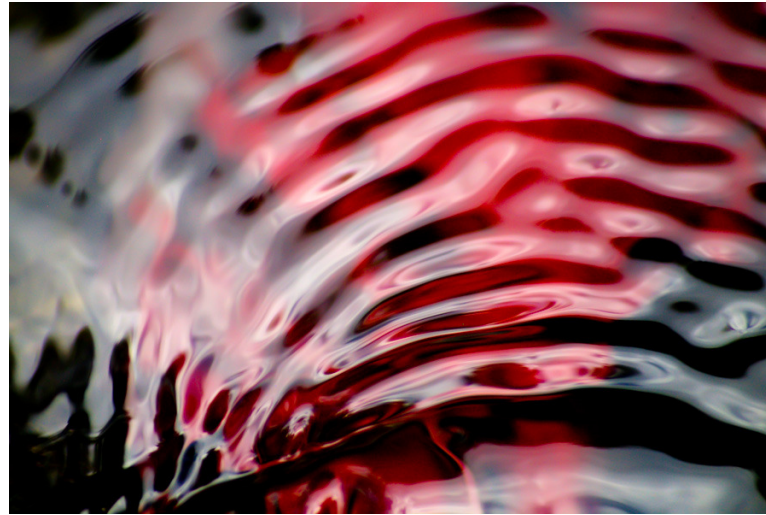
When I look back, I grew up in a family where we had a lot of Chinese art in the house. My Mom & Dad were both born in China and lived there until they were 18 or 20. I grew up with 200 year old scrolls hanging on the wall, and now I can see that as a source of a lot of what I really love-- balance, composition and a lot of how I see. I can find that inherent beauty that others may just walk by. I grew up in rural Michigan where, again, I was outside every day playing in the woods and the swamps and there was a lake. So that was what life was for me. My mother loved gardening and flowers and it was a big part of what life was.

Other artists are from literature. Writers who really revel in the marvel of nature overlay completely with what I see. That is a constant inspiration for me.

### **Do you think of that poetry or writing when you are out with your camera?**

Yes, sometimes I do. And it's interesting that it's both poetry and writing for me. Bernd Heinrich was a biology professor at

Michigan State and this guy is literally a down-in-the-dirt writer. There's no rhyming poetry in his work--he's a scientist--but he also knows that miraculous side of life. It's the balance of those two that I really love.



### **Tell us about activities you enjoy outside of photography.**

Well, I love work. I taught people to use thermal imaging equipment for heat detection. It's a fabulous technology. I was in a position to show people just this much (of that technology) to be successful. Without that, they would muddle around for a year or two and give up, basically. I was lucky enough to hook up with a couple of people and build a company of 75 employees. We taught all over the world. It was mainly for the maintenance of industrial equipment, which was also something that I loved from childhood. I was infatuated with industrial America, so I enjoyed getting into all these places. I could walk in there with this camera and within a half an hour save a company over a million dollars. Just like that.

I also do a lot of work around the city (Montpelier)-I'm on a couple of different committees...

### **You have a show coming opening up in Waterbury this month.**

Yes, "The Wonder of It All," January 16 – March 6 at the White Meeting House on Main Street in Waterbury.

### **What are you looking to communicate with this show?**

It's pretty interesting to be in this space. I grew up in a church, I don't go to church any more, but church was pretty important. At one point in my life I actually considered becoming a minister. That didn't last too long, but I've always admired real church people, activist churches.

It's a beautiful church. I've seen two shows in there now-- Betsy Fram's and Kelley Taft's work--which I absolutely loved. I'm really appreciative of that space. What I'm looking for is: if I were sitting in a pew, what would I want to see and how I would I want it to move me. If the only thing people take away from this is learning to see something out there, that's really where we need to be, I think. I'm not saying that I'm right about what I've seen, but if this could be used as a road map to look at reality, then I've been successful.

### **Is there anywhere else we can see your work?**

At the Savoy Theater... I realized there that when I put two photographs up, people invariably say they like one of them better, so I now put them up in triples. It was really fun to find three that work well together. I think it was very successful because they act as a whole instead of "I like this one or that one better".

I just hung work in the hallway to the cardiac unit at UVM Medical Center. I don't hope you go there unless you really want to go see it. I actually was there on a gurney once and I really appreciate it's there. I hope it brings healing to anyone in there.