

D e  
O p  
U o  
B s  
L r  
E e



At first glance, it seems there's a rift between Tim Hursley's professional and personal work. For nearly four decades, the renowned architectural photographer has developed a portfolio of clients with names like Warhol, Gehry and Safdie, while his personal work, in contrast, has taken him into brothels and funeral homes. But spend time with him, and you understand it's all the same

**BY JORDAN P. HICKEY**  
**PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM HURSLEY AND PORTRAIT BY JOHN DAVID PITTMAN**

# It was an **incongruous** thing.

The colors didn't match.

The sky was natural.

The sand was natural.

The grass rose through the sand in sparse, green-tufted patches and it led to the water, which was a reflection of the sky. The sky was gray and ominous, and the water was jade. Everything natural jelled in a frame around the object that filled the center of the photograph and which was, decidedly, quite unnatural in the setting where it had been placed. It was a curtain.

The cloth was a deep, rippled red. The frame, which allowed the curtain to stand freely, bulged slightly upward from the shoreline, with the center nearing the horizon, like two F holes on a violin joined together, almost symmetrical but not quite. It looked like the sort of stage that might play host to a company of poorly constructed marionettes, puppets tottering unsteadily from the far reaches of the inner curtains. But it was not a stage for puppets, nor anything of the sort. Instead, the reality of where the curtains



had been sourced made it clash all the more with its surroundings:

The vista was of the shores of Lake Michigan.

The curtain had come from a funeral home.

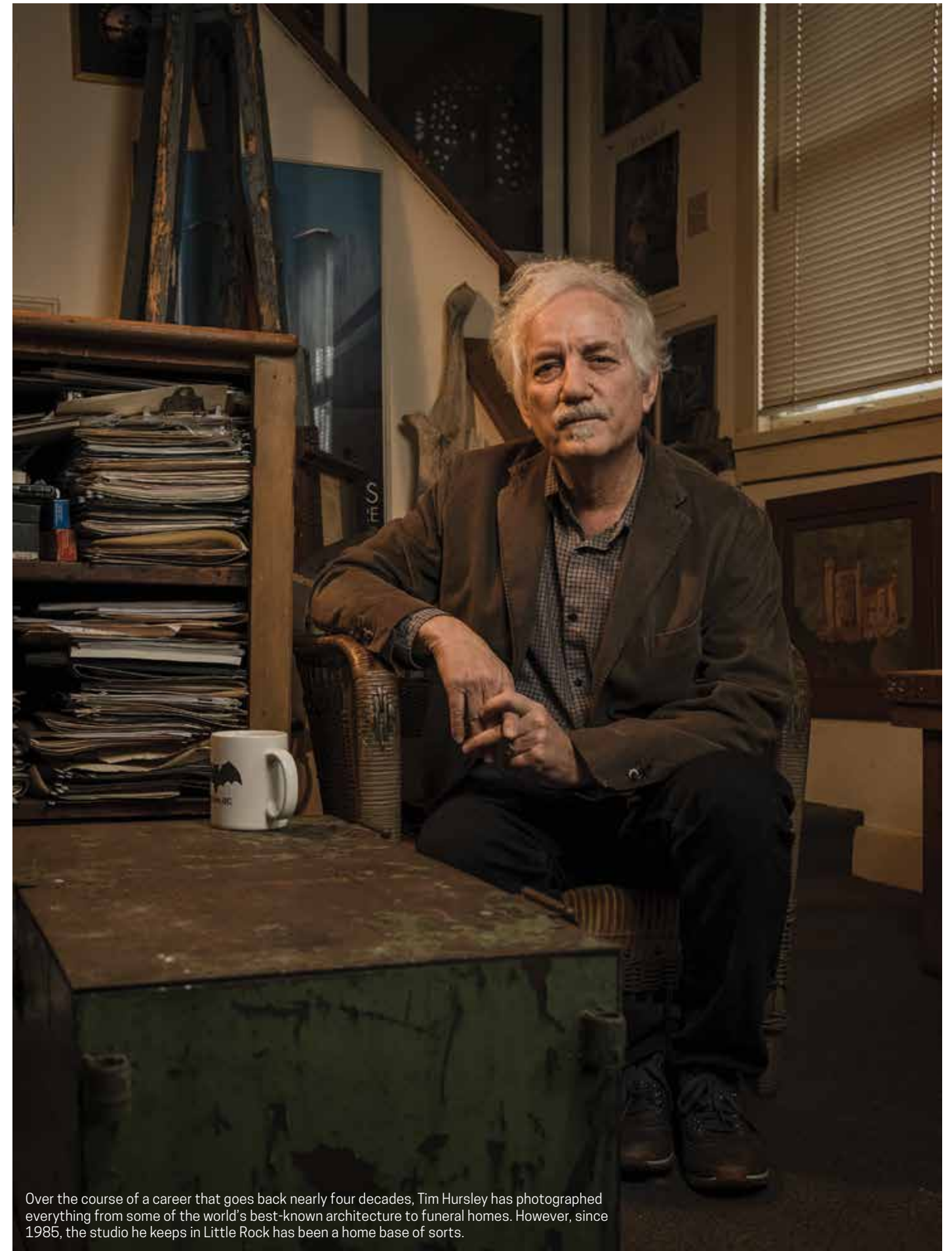
It was an odd activity for a family vacation.

The photographer, Tim Hursley, his brothers and his sisters, his wife and one of his adult sons were all somewhere out of frame. Two sisters and his other adult son were behind the curtain, holding it steady so the wind wouldn't take it. Undoubtedly, there was more than a few degrees of incongruity with respect to the setting and the curtain, but there was also something about it all that seemed to speak to who the photographer was. He was a man whose interests, professional and personal, straddle a line that appears, at face value, to represent a considerable divide, but which, in reality, are not so far apart.

He was someone whose studio perhaps sums up that dichotomy best.

Walking into that studio, a two-story building not far from the Arkansas School for the Deaf, you find antique-store ephemera, folk art and drift wood, taxidermied animals, old neon signs once used to advertise funeral homes. At every turn, there's another curiosity, another reason to stop and gawk. (How many places in the world, after all, can claim to have a stuffed two-headed calf?) But a closer look reveals something even more compelling: If you look in the right places, the finer details of the place begin to describe the arc his career has taken over the course of three

Renowned architectural photographer Tim Hursley has been photographing Southern funeral homes since two hearses in downtown Helena caught his eye in 2011.

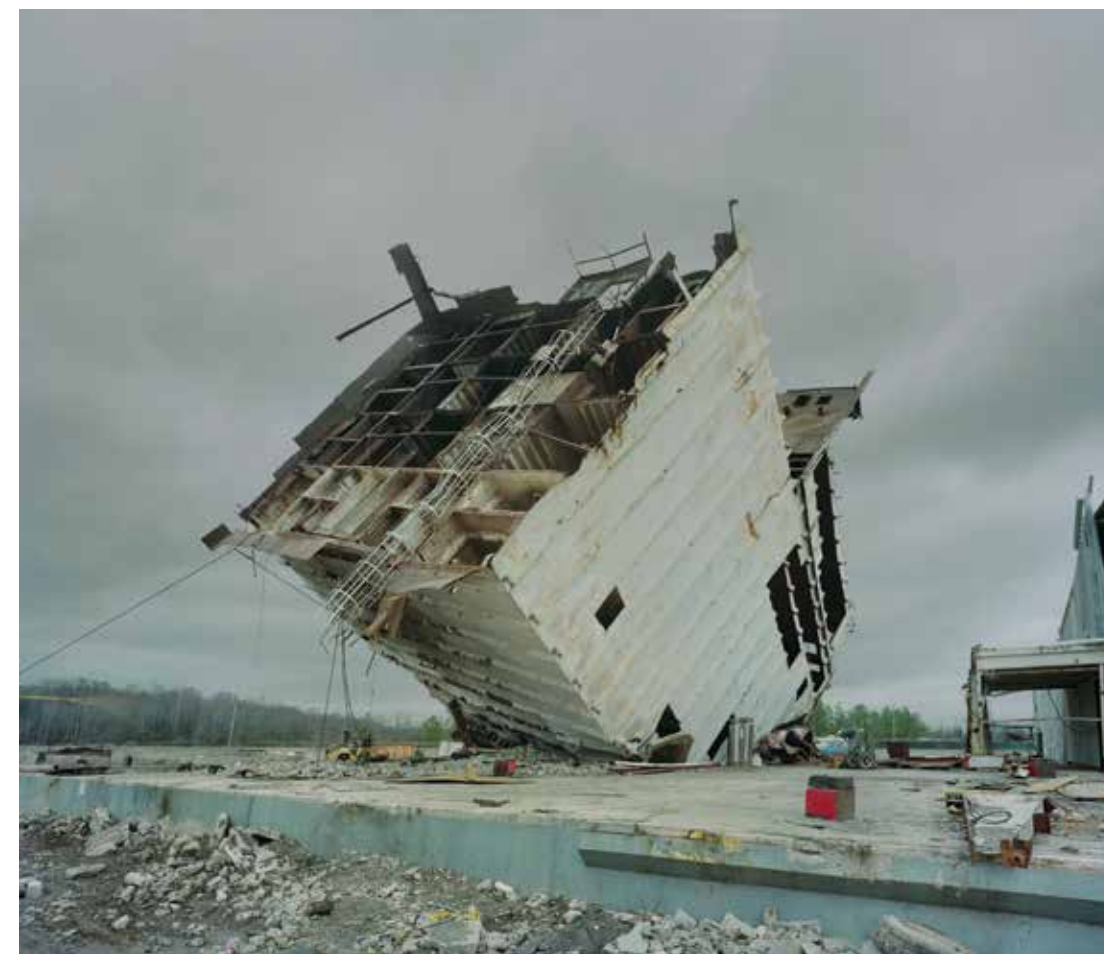


Over the course of a career that goes back nearly four decades, Tim Hursley has photographed everything from some of the world's best-known architecture to funeral homes. However, since 1985, the studio he keeps in Little Rock has been a home base of sorts.

Left: Moshe Safdie's Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Right: John Portman's Renaissance Center in Detroit. Opposite page: A toppled dog-food factory in North Little Rock.



If you look in the right places, the finer details of the place begin to describe the arc his career has taken over the course of three decades.



decades since he'd taken up residence there.

Those poster-sized photographs of New York's Museum of Modern Art? That was him. The black-and-white photograph of Andy Warhol positioned on a bookshelf beside the Mr. Cool sign? Him. The books about the Rural Studio and the brothels of Nevada? Also him. Even the most curious of the taxidermy—the aforementioned two-headed calf and a glass-enclosed diorama with stuffed squirrels—make their own contributions to the story: They appear in a photograph that won Tim the 58th Annual Delta Exhibition's Grand Prize in 2016 and which led to his first solo show since

1990.

Most telling, however, are his archives. Behind a door at the end of a narrow corridor, a former darkroom is climate-controlled and filled with black file cabinets whose handwritten labels show names like Gehry and Safdie. These are the negatives from the nearly 30 years Tim has spent crisscrossing the globe, photographing some of the world's best-known architecture. The Guggenheim in Bilbao. Andy Warhol's studio, The Factory, in New York. The Clinton Presidential Center here in Little Rock.

No doubt, there's a great deal to be learned about a person from their work, from the spaces they occupy, but

sometimes it takes spending time with someone to get an adequate look behind the curtain.

## The Oprah Winfrey Network

was playing in the embalming lab. Two empty stainless-steel gurneys filled the majority of the tiled fluorescent-lit room. It smelled like baby wipes, which, as it turns out, is also what embalming fluid smells like. The muffled hum of a ventilation system played behind the dialogue, which injected into the otherwise silent space an odd artifice of tension and drama.

"And you knew he did the same thing to us," the television declared, "my resentment is so strong ..."

The camera clicked.

Tim Hursley, glasses on the bridge of his nose, wearing an orange hat embroidered with the word "SILO," the letter "I" replaced with a crumpled silo that looked like a half-inflated windsock, was standing at the back of the room, looking at the image that the wide eye of his camera had just captured. Tubes snaked in and out of cabinets. Tweezers and scissors and brushes and mascara and lipstick cluttered an expandable makeup box on a counter beside a small rectangular tub of translucent rose-tinted liquid. Along the back wall, two posters

with two identically positioned, yellow-complexioned figures—each with their right hands raised in salutation—outlined different aspects of the human circulatory system. And to Tim's left, just outside the frame, was Avery Alexander, the owner of the lab, who was very much alive, though visibly skeptical about Tim's project.

"So, I got that one," Tim said, "but I want to do one of just the one—would you call it a gurney?"

"Mhm," Avery said.

"If we push this one back, I'm just going to step in here and get a closer-up of that one."

"I want you to lie on the ground," the television continued as Tim and Avery navigated the gurney out of the frame and started to discuss the placement of a bucket. Undeterred by the lack of attention, the television continued to speak over them. "I want you to put your belly to the Earth."

Now it has to be said that it was a strange thing to find oneself in a place where we all end up but never see. And it was even stranger still to watch as one of the world's foremost architectural photographers approached the interior of the embalming lab with the interest and scrutiny as he might have a new multipurpose high-rise near the Ben Franklin Bridge or the newly constructed Asia Culture Center in Gwangju, South Korea. But here he was, Tim Hursley, standing

in the lab of the Pine Bluff Mortuary, taking photographs of a place that, just a few minutes before, had been occupied by the deceased.

There wasn't anything especially compelling about the place, neither from the inside nor the outside. It was a small brick building across the street from a train yard and a delapidated cottonseed oil mill. Two white hearses languished out back, leafy weeds creeping along the tread of their wheels from the white gravel drive. A chapel across the way, which had once been a meeting place for a plumbers' union, had a main room filled with stacks of chairs and three alcoves, with dimmable multicolored lights. A small showroom in the back was lined with coffins braced to the walls, along with a bicycle and a large photo of Avery's mother.

Like virtually all of the funeral homes Tim had photographed for the series, he'd come across this one purely by chance. When we'd left Little Rock for Pine Bluff that morning, there had been no fixed schedule, no overarching plan for how the day would go. There were a few places he knew of, a few owners he'd reached out to. Once there, he'd ask if they knew of anyone else in town, and could they put in a word for him? Aside from needing to meet two key qualifiers—that the place in question was a funeral home and the owner had allowed him inside—the threshold for giving a place a shot was fairly low.



Right: These photos represent but a fraction of the million-plus images Tim made of the silo.

Not every visit had been successful. Far from it. Of the 40-plus funeral homes he'd shot since starting the series in 2011—when he'd found two white hearses on a desolate stretch of downtown Helena—relatively few had yielded results worth showing. Some had, though. And there's a reason for this: Tim approaches his work, personal and commissioned, all the same—with an openness, clear eyes and curiosity, an awareness that structure, everything, courses with a sense of rhythm, and that light hits a funeral home with the same amount of deference as it does a multimillion-dollar skyscraper arrowing into the sky.

Or, say, a silo.

**Both series depict environments that, while at very different ends of very different spectrums, represent some of the most intimate actions a person can experience in life—and after.**

## Every 12 seconds

for a year and a half, there was a new frame. Dark. Light. Day. Night. Birds. Storms. For just about a million frames, the surveillance camera mounted on a two-by-four documented the simple rural setting before its lens in all seasons. At center, though, it was constant: an old grain silo, bent over at the waist, crippled a few decades before

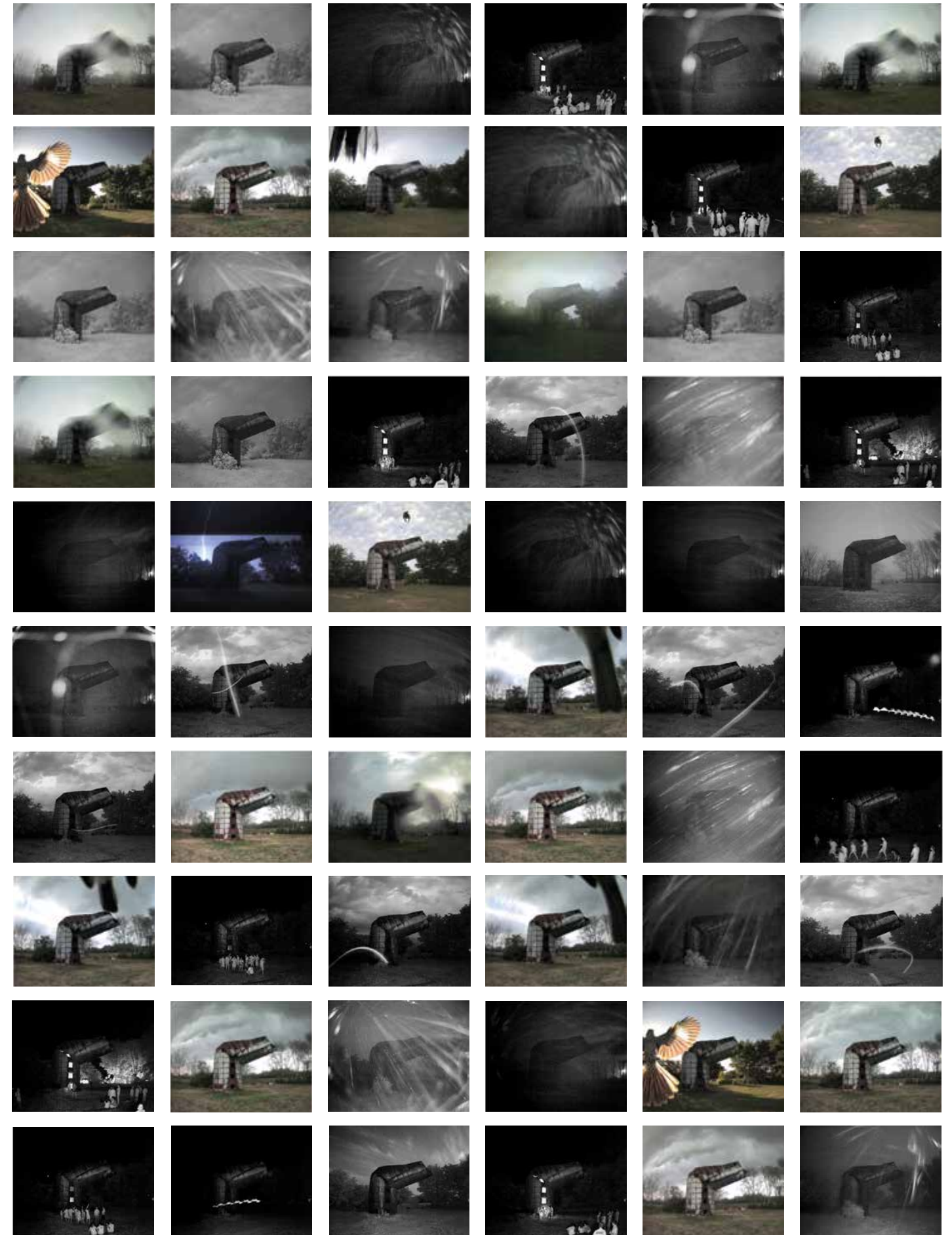
when a tornado tore through Hale County in rural Alabama and left the silo's steel ribs mangled, which is exactly how Tim Hursley had found it in 2006.

On a cloudy day in early spring, he'd been driving on Alabama Highway 14, somewhere between Marion and Greensboro. He'd been doing work for the Rural Studio, an architecture program that, since 1990, has provided innovative, student-designed structures for low-income residents. Since meeting the founder, Mississippi architect Samuel Mockbee, in 1994, Tim had documented the project and had eventually released a book. Even after Mockbee's death in 2001, Tim continued to make visits to the studio, three to four times a year, often exploring the area by driving back roads.

On that day in 2006, he'd seen the silo from the road. In a video produced by the *Oxford American's* SoLost series about the silo seven years later, he recalls thinking that it was “completely sculptural and reminded me of what could be an early Frank Gehry project.”

For four years after coming across the silo, Tim regularly drove by the site. In 2010, when it was at risk of being torn down for scrap, he bought it from the owner and worked out a deal where he'd rent the land the silo was on. Not long after, he installed the camera so that he could get shots of it without actually having to be there. The frequency, he told me later, wasn't necessarily about the volume of photographs—it had never been his goal to accumulate a million of them. It was more about resting easy that, with a photo being taken every 12 seconds, there was less a chance something would be missed. For someone simply glancing over the frames, the silo in those photos seems unchanged, photo to photo. But if you've seen an object like the silo confronted with so many different environments, climates, external stimuli, as Tim has, there must be a difference from one frame to the next.

“The serial nature of it, I think, is what makes it so interesting,” said David Houston, executive director of the Bo Bartlett Center at Columbus State University, in the *Oxford American* video. “What's different about those million frames? Well, think of the casual snap-shooter, and think of the photographers we admire: What makes them great? Obsession. What's the obsession? It's returning to a few ideas, or a few places, and getting underneath the surface and mining the depths of those places. And that's exactly what Tim has done here.”





Pine Bluff  
Mortuary

ONE  
WAY

Pine Bluff Mortuary in Pine Bluff.



Left: "Train Ride," photographed at a funeral home in Vicksburg, Miss., was featured in the 58th Annual Delta Exhibition in 2016. Opposite: A scene from the PK Miller Mortuary in Pine Bluff.

## "Funeral homes near me,"

Tim said.

"OK, check it out," Siri responded. We were sitting in his Ford Explorer with the door semiajar, facing the train tracks that run across the street from the Pine Bluff Mortuary, a balled up McDonald's bag from that morning's breakfast balled up on the dash. Thanks to an introduction he'd coaxed from Avery, we were going to be heading to Henson-Holcombe Mortuary.

"Starting route to Henson-Holcomb Mortuary," Siri said. "Head north on South Indiana Street, then turn left onto East Fifth Avenue. In 2.9 miles, turn left onto South Blake Street."

"Ding ... ding ... ding," intoned Tim's Ford Explorer, reminding him the door was still open.

Two minutes later, as we were driving through downtown Pine Bluff, I asked him about the difference between taking photos of the MoMA and funeral homes. I'd barely finished asking the question when a stretch of downtown caught his eye.

"We'll come back through here, but let's take a quick step out," Tim said. "Well, I mean, when I'm shooting a good building, I'm kinda looking for ..."

He trailed off.

Siri interrupted: "Turn right onto West Fourth Avenue, then turn right onto South Ninth Street."

He stopped the car in front of an empty lot in the middle of downtown and leaned over the wheel to look out the passenger window.

"It's an elevator-door thing—that's crazy," he said.

Sure enough, rising sheer from the lot, some three or four stories

into the air, was what appeared to be the remnants of an old elevator shaft. It was all bones, picked clean. Iron beams rusted red. It looked like a line drawing, the sketch of a structure with only a few boxes filled in, with the rest open, filled with sky and the abandoned building just behind. Much like the silo, it was sculptural.

"The light's nice," Tim said, getting out of the car. "It's only going to get flatter."

As he started to walk through the massive concrete arch, the letters F-O-X written in barely legible block caps, the last vestige of what had once been the facade of the Fox Brothers Hardware Store, Tim paused and looked over the fading urban landscape. There was a seamlessness to it, a gradual shifting of patterns. There was, in a sense, some sadness, too.

Tim is a quiet man who is even quieter when he's working. He approaches his work seriously, and when he's taking in a place, his attitude and demeanor approach something verging on a trancelike state, eyes occupying some otherworldly plane, imagined or not. On the ground, there were remnants of a floor, tiles of different colors—red and beige checks, yellow and beige checks, white tile bleached bone white—that had been left almost intact. It was difficult to say whether the divisions between the alternating patterns marked off where walls once stood or whether they were representative of varying strata exposed by erosion's ongoing natural excavation. There were no people, but there were traces of people everywhere.

"Turn right on West Pine Avenue," Siri said as Tim walked around a pile of broken bricks taller than him that had been mounded in the center. "Proceed to route," Siri said as he returned to his car for his camera.

## For many

years during the '80s and '90s and early aughts, Tim visited the brothels of Nevada and made photographs. To look at, the rooms feel settled, the hard edges and spurs broken down and softened under the lights, though there are some small bits of personality to be found: dolls, postcard-sized photographs of birds on the corners of a mirror, lace shawls left on the door, egg timers outside the door, posters of Marilyn Monroe, shag carpet, red-lit rooms, Yahtzee. There are no people, though it does not take much imagination to put them there. In these images, what's left is an impression—a footprint. People have left enough of themselves there to make their presence linger, even after they're gone.

It's interesting to think about how those photos compare with others that he's taken, especially with those he's taken of the funeral homes. Because while there's a sense of preservation in all of Tim's work—after all, in the broadest sense, everything from a dilapidated silo to recently constructed multimillion-dollar structures is fleeting—the two series have a particularly interesting relationship. Both series depict environments that, while at very different ends of very different spectrums, represent some of the most intimate actions a person can experience in life—and after.

In each, many people have passed through, and the imprints they've left are no less fleeting. But whereas the brothels have



**In these images, what's left is an impression—a footprint. People have left enough of themselves there to make their presence linger, even after they're gone.**

been a layover of sorts, the funeral homes have a gravitas that accompanies the realization that the footprints people leave are of a different nature. After that point, not even the footprints are left.

In Tim's photograph of the Henson-Holcomb Mortuary, there were no people. In the chapel, standing lights with red glass covers painted the space—the white walls, the white ceiling—in shades of rose. At the front, facing the 10 or so rows of tightly assembled pews, was a large portrait of Jesus. In that photograph, like so many of the others he's taken, one can't help but wonder: What would the people do if they were there? But the truth is, they are there. Oftentimes, they're just outside the frame.

Not long before he took that photo, Tim was talking with the mortuary's owners. As was the case with most every place we visited that day, the explanation was met with some incredulity. Irene Holcomb, who owned the funeral home with her husband, had been doing a word search when we first arrived—there weren't any services that day—and had followed us into the chapel. From where she stood, some six rows back, she wondered aloud why someone would be interested in spending his time on such a curious project.

"If you don't get out and look around, like us, going out and looking at funeral homes ..." Tim started to say.

She stifled a laugh.

"... We wouldn't have seen this."

"It's amazing what's intriguing and interesting to people," Irene said.

"Well, you look around," Tim said, his voice pitching a little higher, a little unsteady, "and you go and try to make a photograph. This is the only photograph we'll make here. We might not be in

Story continued on page 94



Arkansas Life  
**TOP**  
AGENTS  
2018

Know **real estate, mortgage or insurance agents** who deserve recognition?

Nominate your **favorites** in  
*Arkansas Life's*  
**Top Agents Contest.**

**CAST YOUR VOTE:**  
**arkansaslife.com/agents**

Look for the results in the May issue of *Arkansas Life*.  
The entry deadline is Wednesday, Feb. 21, 2018.

Story continued from page 63

many other places in Pine Bluff. It's unique to me that you made this kind of churchlike."

She laughed.

"That was his intention when he did that," said Lloyd, Irene's husband, of his uncle, who'd built the funeral home from the ground up.

"To make it churchlike?" his wife asked.

"Uh-huh."

"All chapels look churchlike to me," she said. "Most of 'em."

There was a moment of rather uncomfortable silence before Tim said, "That's a familiar looking picture of Jesus."

"That picture's been there 50 years," Lloyd said. "Hanging on that wall 50 years."

Silence again took hold. There was no television to fill the gaps. Irene returned to the front office. Lloyd watched as Tim tried to capture this place that he'd worked for nearly 50 years. As Tim worked on getting the shot he liked at the front of the chapel, only the lens of his camera visible behind the large curtain, I asked Lloyd about his life and how he'd gotten into that line of work.

"When I was young, I wouldn't go near a hearse or a funeral home," he told me. "When I decided to come to school up here, my mother told me, you got an uncle up there in Pine Bluff. Get with him, and maybe he can find you a part-time job. I say, well, what does he do? She said, he manages a funeral home in Pine Bluff." Eventually, Lloyd said, one thing led to another, and he found himself in the business.

He was a tall man, affable and well-dressed with a good sense of humor. He showed me a copy of "The Dead Beat," a regional newsletter for funeral-service workers that bills itself as "The Caregiver's Soapbox." He said that he enjoyed reading it but always started with the "Chuckles" section. He then recounted one of his favorite jokes from that month's issue. (The punch line: "Which virgin was mother of Jesus? The virgin Mary or the King James virgin?") He later showed us his collection of miniature hearses, which he often keeps under lock and key so the children of patrons don't play with them.

"I don't think people know what funeral homes really look like," Tim said from across the room, where he's setting up the shot. "So, this could be a book, and it'd show them what they look like."

"You're right," Lloyd said. "Most people, when you're talking to them, they don't want to go in a funeral home." Having set up a joke he'd told me a few minutes before, he then said: "And sometimes, people coming in to pay their insurance and stuff—have a seat. *No, I don't wanna sit down. If I stay too*

*long and get comfortable, you might wanna take me in the back."*

A few hours later, Tim was deep in the grass. The tall, tall grass bowed stiffly at the knee and, once the photographer had passed, slowly regained some of its lost height. It never rose all the way, though, in the way that something broken never feels quite the same after it's been mended. Locusts were buzzing in the grass. The pulpy, boiled-greens smell from Pine Bluff's paper mill was heavy on the air. It was 93 degrees.

Upon reaching a point where he could set up the camera, apparently oblivious to the heat, Tim threw a dark cloak over himself and the camera. A few dragonflies whirled overhead in drunken loops. In a creek that lay just on the other side of the fence where Tim had positioned his camera, a snapping turtle the size of a toddler performed the breaststroke in its watery shadows. But none of that was of interest to him.

"You're seeing that I want to get that shot, huh?" he'd told me a few minutes before wading off into the grass.

If you were to follow the line of Tim's camera, this is what you'd see: Across the ravine, there was a low brick building. It was the embalmer's lab where we'd been earlier in the day. Had you walked along the side, you would have gotten a faceful of baby wipes as the scent wafted through the vents. Beyond the building, there was an old mill that processed cottonseed oil, a long, silver, rust-bitten building running parallel to the railroad tracks, large industrial buildings that gave the appearance of having been abandoned long before. To the right of the small brick building, there were two long white cars, a hearse and a limousine. They were older looking. Weeds sprouted up and choked their wheels. On the concrete patio, there was a McDonald's cup Tim had set down and never retrieved.

A silver pickup truck started making its way along the gravel drive.

"Avery!" he called out over the ravine. "Don't hide your hearse!"

Avery, apparently seeing the older man waving his arms, backed out and parked on the other side of the building. When Tim came back to the car, his hair was sweaty, plastered to his forehead below the orange bill of his silo hat. As he took down the tripod, he said, "I like moodier light, but if there's no hearse there, there's no photograph." ♦

To see more of Tim's work, visit [timothyhursley.com](http://timothyhursley.com), or on Instagram @timhursley.

## New buildings are nice. But it's what's inside that counts.

At Elmcroft, we're wholeheartedly committed to ensuring our residents have a safe, warm and caring place to live – a place where they can enjoy life and be themselves.

Sherwood  
**501.222.7149**

Maumelle  
**501.712.4164**



Assisted Living | Memory Care | [elmcroft.com](http://elmcroft.com)



Yes, recovery may take 12 steps...

### But The BridgeWay has always been the first.

As the first psychiatric hospital in the state of Arkansas, The BridgeWay has helped thousands of Arkansans recover from addictions. From legal to illegal substances, we have treated them all.

Under the care of a certified addictionologist, The BridgeWay was the first to offer multiple individualized treatment options:

- Abstinence-based treatment
- Medication-assisted outpatient treatment with Suboxone
- Individualized goal-based recovery

Whether you need inpatient care or outpatient treatment, The BridgeWay has always been the first place to call. We provide evidence-based services that treat addictions for adults, ages 18 and older, within a structured setting:

- Pet-assisted therapy
- Art therapy
- Yoga
- Nutritional guidance
- Computer access
- Visitation
- Medical detoxification
- Intensive Outpatient Treatment
- Support by AA and Al-Anon

**Let The BridgeWay be your first call.**  
**1-800-245-0011**

Our assessment and referral staff is available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Assessments are provided at no charge and are always confidential.

The BridgeWay is an in-network provider for Medicaid, up to 21 years of age, and all other insurance companies in Arkansas including Medicare and Tricare.

