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'River of No Return' exhibit looks at life in Idaho's Sawtooth Valley

By Elda Silva
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"Judy Tracking Radio-Collared Wolves from Her Yard, Summer Range, H-Hook Ranch, Custer County, Idaho," 2004 PHOTO COURTESY LAURA MCPHEE



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HIGHLIGHTS

International photo fest Fotoseptiembre USA officially runs Sept. 1-30, though exhibitions frequently start at the end of August and continue into early October. For a full listing of events at venues around San Antonio and the Hill Country, go to www.fotoseptiembre.usa.com.

Here are some highlights:

- "Luther Smith: A Photographic Survey," an exhibit of works by the photographer known for his images of the American South. The show is part of the South

When [Laura McPhee](#) sets up her vintage Deardorff 8-by-10-inch viewfinder camera — an unwieldy thing with a wood body and bellows — people frequently come up to her.

"Mainly men come up to me and say, 'You know they do make digital cameras now that are much smaller and more convenient,' and they offer to loan them to me and make my life easier," the photographer said with a laugh.

"But I actually think that camera still definitely exceeds what other cameras can do in terms of the level of detail that you can get from the pictures. You can see every blade of grass. It's more than the eye can see, really."

Over a five-year period, McPhee lugged her Deardorff through Idaho's remote Sawtooth Valley, capturing images of the sprawling landscape and its inhabitants, human and otherwise. "River of No Return," an exhibit of

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ENTERTAINMENT

South. The show is part of the South Central Regional Society for Photographic Education Conference. Aug. 31-Sept. 30, UTSA Art Gallery, 6900 N. Loop 1604 W., 210-458-4402.

- Chuck Ramirez, "Minimally Baroque," an exhibit of images including large-scale photographic portraits by the artist, who died last year, Sept. 1-Nov. 5, Blue Star Contemporary Art Center, 116 Blue Star, 210-227-6960.
- Daniel Lee, "Animal Instinct," a survey of work by Lee, who uses digital technology to create human-animal hybrids, Sept. 1-Feb. 19, San Antonio Museum of Art, 200 W. Jones Ave., 210-978-8100.
- Chang Chaotang, "Introspectives: Photographs of Taiwan," one of a host of exhibits by Taiwanese artists curated by festival director Michael Mehl, Sept. 3-Oct. 24, Instituto Cultural de México, HemisFair Park, 210-227-0123.
- Elise Boullaran, Nathalie Daoust, Dita Kubin, Malin Vulcano, "LookShe," images by four female artists looking at themselves as women, Sept. 3-Oct. 24, Instituto Cultural de México.

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24 6-foot-by-8-foot color photographs, opens Thursday at the [Southwest School of Art](#) as part of Fotoseptiembre USA 2011.

The San Antonio incarnation of the exhibit is an abbreviated version of the show that debuted at the [Boston Museum of Fine Arts](#), where it broke attendance records. Years later, McPhee still gets emails from people who saw the inaugural exhibition.

"Generally they say just how much it moved them," McPhee said by phone from Clayton, Idaho, a town with a population of about 24 that she is using as a base for her current project. "So something about it really speaks to people."

A professor of photography at the [Massachusetts College of Art and Design](#) and a former Guggenheim and Fulbright fellow, McPhee began working on "River of No Return" in 2003 after she was offered a residency by the [Alturas Foundation](#), a family foundation that supports museum exhibitions, public installations, and underwrites university-based symposia.

McPhee, a New Jersey native who has worked all over the world, initially was hesitant about taking on the American West.

"I've spent a lot of time over the last 15 years in Calcutta, and I have lived in India and Sri Lanka and places all over the globe, but I was still uncertain about the West," she said. "There's such a long tradition in photography of Western photographs that it's daunting to try to make pictures that are equal to what other people have done before or that have a place within that oeuvre."

Under the terms of the residency, McPhee was to travel to Central Idaho four times during the course of a year and "ideally take photographs" of the valley bisected by the Salmon River, nicknamed the River of No Return because of its swift current.

Before embarking on the project, she did research, reading books about the American West, such as "A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West: The Reminiscences of [Mary Hallock Foote](#)."

She also drew inspiration from her family history, particularly the story of her great-grandmother, who left her home — and husband — in Ohio around 1912 and traveled west, where she became an itinerant schoolteacher with her young daughters in tow.

"I just started reading a lot and thinking about both the past and what it looks like now," she said. Central Idaho "is one of the two emptiest areas of human population in the Lower 48, which being from New Jersey, which probably has one of the densest populations, it took a while to understand all the environmental issues that are here."

Along with offering a picture-window size view of life in the Sawtooth Valley, McPhee chronicled the story of the once plentiful sockeye salmon — now all but gone from the waters of the Salmon River — and the reintroduction of wolves into the area.

By the time McPhee was done, she had visited the Sawtooth Valley nine times over five years, immersing herself for weeks at a time.

Her images are compiled in a book with the same title as the exhibition. Published by [Yale University Press](#), it unfolds like a narrative. A young woman named Mattie, who was 12 when McPhee began photographing her, serves as a protagonist of sorts.

"I think it's something that I've been engaged with in my work — the idea of visual storytelling," she said. "I mean, it takes the words, too. The titles are really important, but to put something together that if you do pay attention to it, you start to understand a story."



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“River of No Return” continues through Nov. 20 at the Southwest School of Art, Russell Hill Rogers Gallery, Navarro Campus. 210-224-1848; www.swschool.org.

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