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Article published Dec 15, 2011

Romancing the stones — photo exhibit honors Earth

By Nancy Sheehan TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

In 1965, when Ron Rosenstock was just getting started as a photographer, he would write to Ansel Adams when he had questions. Later, when MIT hired Minor White to start a creative photography program, Rosenstock was one of his first students. Those masters helped prepare Rosenstock, of Holden, for 40 years of teaching photography at Clark University and many well-received exhibitions of images made with traditional methods.

Rosenstock now leads photo tours around the world. The students who sign on for them, while hardly the illustrious likes of Adams or White, have been, nevertheless, also among his teachers. “They started showing up with digital cameras,” Rosenstock said. “And I was supposed to be the master and help them, so I had to learn.”

Not surprisingly, he learned well. These days, he uses a high-end digital camera instead of the classic but cumbersome view camera he started out with. Images made with both methods can be seen in a new show of Rosenstock’s photos at Worcester Art Museum.

Titled “Hymn to the Earth,” it presents black and white photographs, primarily landscapes, spanning 40 years and includes images made near his second home in County Mayo, Ireland, and on his frequent sojourns to other international locales, including Morocco.

“Ron has great skill, aesthetically and technically,” said David Acton, the museum’s curator of prints, drawings and photographs. “He’s known around the world, and it’s a chance for us to show the work of a local artist who’s been creating work of high quality for decades.”

What in particular does Rosenstock bring to the art of photography?

“He’s great in using the camera in the field and working in the darkroom and also, nowadays, with the advent of computer processing, he’s able to bring that early knowledge to this new way of looking and printing,” Acton said. “It gives his work a depth that appeals to people who know photography.”

Rosenstock’s landscapes evince a softly mystical quality. His subjects often are the ancient stones and venerable trees of Ireland, coastal Maine and other places where nature still can be experienced in a relatively pristine state. The trees and rocks seem almost alive, as if imbued with a consciousness that, while out of phase with the busyness of ours, nevertheless moves forward at its own inexorable pace.

“I’ve always been fascinated by the whole creation that you see all around us all the time: the trees, the stones, water — the natural world before we kind of messed it up,” he said. “There actually still is so much of that out there, and I just go all over the world finding it.”

Rosenstock Opening /Third Thursday after Hours

When: 5:30 to 8 tonight **Where:** Renaissance Court, Worcester Art Museum **How much:** Free for members; \$14 nonmembers. Music by Songs for Ceilidh. Valet parking will be available for \$5.

When he does find it, the experience can be an intensely emotional one. Around 1969, Rosenstock met renowned American photographer Paul Caponigro, who had just returned from a year of photographing the ancient stones of Ireland.

“I saw his photograph of Poul nabrone Dolmen and honestly I broke out into a sweat, I was in a trance-like state,” Rosenstock said. “The stone called to me. I had to meet it in person. Two years later I did. It was like joining with the unknown, knowing the unknowable. That probably doesn’t make much sense, but it happened that way.”

It’s a passion likely sensed by Adams and perhaps one reason the landscape master took the time to write long, detailed letters to Rosenstock about technical problems he encountered as a student photographer.

“Back in the 1960s I didn’t know anyone else who could help me with my 8x10 view camera,” Rosenstock said. “I started with an 8x10 because I was so moved by the work of Edward Weston. For years I had black fingernails because I used the same pyro developing formula that Edward Weston used. I remember writing to Ansel about that, and he told me he used a Kodak commercial developer (HC 110). I tested it and it worked great, no more black fingernails!”

“Hymn to the Earth” runs through March 18.

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