

All Aboard: The People and Places of Rail Travel
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This summer, I spent five weeks traveling across the United States by Amtrak, shooting eighty rolls of film. My original vision for the project was expansive: I intended to record not only photographs, but also video and audio. Even before the journey began, however, practical constraints reshaped the work. Packing forced a decision—I could carry only film, cameras, and my personal items. That choice set the stage for a project rooted in still photography alone.

I departed from the Brunswick Amtrak station with a backpack, a duffel bag, and a tripod, seeking to examine the social, historical, and cultural significance of rail travel. Over thirty-seven days, I traversed thirty states and rode twelve different Amtrak lines. By the end, I had produced approximately 1,500 images. What I quickly realized, however, was that this undertaking was as much about process as it was about subject matter. The project proved to be physically, mentally, and emotionally demanding, testing the limits of endurance and adaptability.

The act of photographing on trains revealed its own set of challenges. Lighting shifted constantly inside the cars, the movement of the tracks made it difficult to hold the camera steady, and even the tripod would constantly tip over. Exterior views added another layer of difficulty, with weather, time of day, and rapidly changing landscapes affecting every exposure. I often had to leave my exposures to chance and trust my intuition as a photographer when capturing landscapes from the train window.

Only when I returned to Maine to process the film did I recognize that the train journey was not an endpoint but the beginning of a much longer exploration. What began as a study of American rail travel transformed into an investigation of my own artistic practice. The rhythms of life on the rails—sleeping on trains, navigating delays, troubleshooting equipment, subsisting on café-car meals, and adjusting to unfamiliar environments—shaped the work as profoundly as the photographs themselves.

This first stage of the project is less about conclusions than about beginnings. The images serve as a starting point for a broader inquiry into the train as a space of transition. At the same time, the process became a way of testing how I create under conditions of uncertainty and constraint. Ultimately, this body of work reflects not only the story of American rail travel but also the development of my own voice as an new artist.

Faculty mentor: Michael Kolster

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