

# **Tidying Nature: Everyman's Quest in the Photography of**

**Robert ParkeHarrison**

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Photographer Robert ParkeHarrison stars in his own pieces as a balding, shuffling mortal given the colossal task of reining in nature. This Everyman marches through a host of sepia landscapes, armed only with a ladder and a few daVincian contraptions, and tries his best to take charge of impossibly vast terrains. These tasks all seem too big for him, but the viewer, who relates to his human need to make nature manageable, understands why he takes this mending, this tidying, upon himself. In almost all ParkeHarrison's pieces, Everyman is trying not only to manage nature, but also to fix some part of it. In nearly all his works, ParkeHarrison comments on the damage humans have inflicted on the earth, and on what a massive task it will be to repair what we have destroyed.

Everyman is nothing if not creative. In each photograph, he finds a more bizarre, inventive way of tending to the earth. He kneels over a fissure in the Earth's surface, patiently stitching it back together with a needle taller than he is, or attempts to clean a polluted cloud with a rag and bucket. Most modern photographers would rely on digital editing to assemble these whimsical settings; ParkeHarrison, however, prefers traditional methods. He borrows images from a variety of sources, and then, cutting and pasting paper negatives, collages them with his own photographs to construct a single cohesive

image (Flagan, par. 2). To remove flaws and blemishes, he washes this assembled piece in several layers of monochromatic paint, accounting for the brown or bluish tints to many of his pieces (Flagan, par. 2). Even after this process, small irregularities remain, giving his images the air of antique, decaying photographs. Far from detracting from the pictures, this impression of age lends a certain haunting nostalgia to his pieces; today's viewer, caught up in an age of greed and fast-paced technology, thinks wistfully of the days when one human could innocently set out to mend the world.

ParkeHarrison once said of his work, "I want there to be a combination of the past juxtaposed with the modern" (Twin Palms). He accomplishes this by tinting very modern subject matter with the sepia finish we associate with more wholesome, simple times. He embraces this kind of old-fashioned innocence in several of his pieces, placing an almost childlike trust in Everyman's ability to restore what we have destroyed in nature.

*Passage*, one of these more optimistic works, depicts Everyman building a wooden bridge across an expanse of water, using only a small hammer to nail the planks together. It is an absurdly difficult task, but Everyman, in true form, makes do. The section of finished bridge fills the lower right side of the frame, revealing his progress. A small, barely visible point of land hovers in the upper left-hand corner, suggesting that Everyman's persistence will soon pay off. To further convince the viewer of Everyman's imminent triumph, ParkeHarrison guides the viewer's eye along one line from the bridge to the strip of earth, suggesting that the bridge will inevitably lead to land. In this work, ParkeHarrison places a great deal of confidence in human resolve and potential. Though Everyman is not directly repairing nature in this piece, his successful bridge-building represents humans' ability to meet seemingly impossible challenges. ParkeHarrison

celebrates this human capacity to overcome insurmountable tasks in several other works, such as *Clearing*, which depicts Everyman sweeping thousands of tons of rubbish into a pile with a garden rake, and *Navigator*, in which Everyman climbs above the clouds with a hand-made wooden ladder.

Though a faith in human determination runs through several of ParkeHarrison's pieces, it does not extend to all. In some works, such as *Breathing Machine* and *Guardian*, he takes a grimmer view of the human condition. In *Breathing Machine*, Everyman lies face-up in a pool of dingy, polluted water, his head almost entirely submerged. Noxious smoke billows from the distant outline of an industrial plant. No one could survive long in this poisonous environment, but Everyman, always resourceful, has built an elaborate breathing device, which he holds on his stomach and operates with a wooden crank. A tube extends from his mouth to a glass box containing a single oak leaf. One of ParkeHarrison's most frightening images, *Breathing Machine* presents a scenario in which we have replaced all fertile life with smog-spewing factories. To survive in this hostile world, Everyman must cling to the one piece of nature that remains: a single leaf. This photograph treats humans' relationship with nature differently than works like *Clearing*, *Passage* and *Mending the Earth*; while in those images ParkeHarrison celebrates a human capacity to repair the damaged earth, in *Breathing Machine* he reminds us of our complete dependence on nature. We may have resolve and potential, but without nature we will die.

In some cases, ParkeHarrison even questions this potential. In one photo, he depicts a brown, barren expanse of tree stumps and dry branches. The landscape is not entirely dead; two slender stems shoot up from a stump, reaching high enough to spread a

small arc of tangled branches over the other stumps. It is atop this spindly growth that Everyman perches, poised to protect this last remnant of life in this otherwise barren environment. Rather than seeming noble, his fierce loyalty to the frail tree seems pathetic, for it is only a matter of time before this feeble growth will join the dead branches layering the ground. One feels terribly sorry for Everyman, knowing his cause to be useless. In this piece, ParkeHarrison seems to despair over humans' attempts to protect nature, implying that Everyman has come too late to make a real change. Yet if one observes Everyman's outstretched arms and joined feet, the Crucifixion may come to mind. If this allusion was intentional, it suggests that Everyman's gifts to the environment have not been in vain; perhaps some good may come of his sacrifices.

A respect for Everyman's labors lies at the core of each of ParkeHarrison's photographs. Though ParkeHarrison often despairs at the futility of Everyman's efforts, his images never suggest that Everyman should stop trying. Even in his bleakest, most discouraging pieces, ParkeHarrison seems to commend Everyman's tenacity. This tenacity, in fact, links him to Everyman; after viewing the photographs, one comes away not only appreciating Everyman's resolve, but also admiring the artist's dedication. ParkeHarrison's willingness to meticulously construct each setting and image mirrors Everyman's firm determination to mend nature. The images themselves often present bleak scenarios, but ParkeHarrison's steady devotion to his craft shines through each work. Ultimately, we respect ParkeHarrison for his labors, hoping some of his resolve will rub off on us as we embark on one of our most daunting missions: mending the Earth.

**Works Cited**

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