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This Jesse James a Photographer, Not an Outlaw

Dave Rasdal

IOWA CITY — When Jesse James Sinclair shoots from the hip, it's with a camera, not a gun.



He fires a 4-by-5 view camera on a tripod, his trigger a cable shutter release.

He captures images on the large sheets of film, using his fingers to print works of art.

“The aesthetics of the Midwest is what my photography is all about,” says Jesse, 22, who will earn his bachelor of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa in May.

For his latest project he roamed Interstate 80 from the Mississippi River to Des Moines, shooting one

abandoned roadside attraction after another.



There's an old Stuckey's, now with an orange roof, not far from Oxford. The abandoned Maverick's Diner at the West Liberty interchange has seen better days. A billboard south of Brooklyn is plastered with road signs that would confuse a motorist — or a posse.



Born in Des Moines and growing up in Indianola, Jesse James admits he lived up to his namesake, given after his mother had a rather difficult pregnancy in the summer of '88.

“I was already a problem child before I was born,” he laughs. “I was kind of a rowdy kid.”



But, as he entered high school, Jesse hung up the toy six-shooters for a new digital camera.

“After that I'd take my camera places and catch what I can,” Jesse says. “It's pretty much riding shotgun wherever I go.”

That included two years studying photography at Coe College in Cedar Rapids and an internship last summer with the Cedar Rapids Kernels to photograph everything from action on the field to kids mugging with mascot, Mr. Shucks.

At 6-foot-3, Jesse grew up pitching a baseball. But, unlike his brother, Taylor Sinclair, who pitches in the minor leagues for the Arizona Diamondbacks, Jesse wasn't going to make a living at it.

Photography, he says, presented new challenges and opportunity, especially when wielding a traditional large format camera and processing its film in this digital age.

His abandoned roadside attractions, on display at M.C. Ginsberg in Iowa City, continued his education.

“The abandonment is what drew me to them first,” he says. “And then the level of deterioration. Some are just starting to go and some have been going for a long time.”

These objects of roadside art represent, he says, “The emptiness and the loneliness and the lost stories of days gone by.”

They are photographs that spark memories, that evoke a changing world, that show nature winning its shootout with man.

Like Jesse James of old, he wants to be on the run, continuing this project along I-80 west of Des Moines, moving on to portraits of truckers who travel the Interstate, hitting a bull’s-eye with his art so he can forever pursue his passion.

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Jesse James Sinclair’s photographs:

- His “Space Available” exhibition is at M.C. Ginsberg, 110 East Washington Street, Iowa City, through March 31 and will be featured in the Gallery Walk from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. March 4.
- His bachelor of fine arts and honors program show opens March 21 at the Blank Honors Center, University of Iowa, with a reception March 25.
- Online at jessejamessinclair.com

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