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Spillways and Sideways

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Senior Project Artist’s Statement  
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Spillways and Sideways:  
A Visual Account of What Was Left Behind by the Storm

Hurricane Irene arrived in New York on August 28, 2011. The greater metropolitan area and much of the Hudson Valley was spared any major damage and within hours the storm had become yet another over-hyped natural disaster. While most people were storing away their AA batteries and emergency radios, small pockets of riverside towns in the Catskills were evacuated to higher ground as the Hudson’s small tributaries flooded their banks.

The damage that Hurricane Irene caused was mostly invisible and quickly forgotten. My attempt to document the development of the Town of Shokan in the wake of disaster began as an exploration into disaster photography, harkening back to the days of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. I undertook wide area of study at Bard, hopping back and forth between documentary photography, human rights, history and literature. At the beginning, this endeavor seemed to be the perfect way for me to meld my passions for straight photography and cultural studies. I intended to become a part of the community, to study its history and emerge on the other side with a collection of critical photographs exploring the aesthetic attraction of disaster. In some ways, this is what these photographs represent, but in the eight months that I spent photographing the hamlets of Phoenicia, Shokan and Lexington, I found myself veering away from the critical photojournalistic style. My knowledge of the area and its inhabitants came less from academic study and more from casual observation, from entering abandoned houses and watching the slow process of a small town getting back to
The drive to Phoenicia from Bard takes about 45 minutes. Past the strip malls and warehouses in Kingston you enter a little world nestled between water and mountains. The presence of water is everywhere, on the right there’s a small pond, leading in to the Esopus River, then on the left there’s a steep bank right past the railroad tracks that holds in the water of the Ashokan Reservoir, which provides New York City with its water. The reservoir was the largest of its day – one of the behemoth engineering projects of the early 20th century – and emerges out of the woods as a kind of otherworldly temple, shielded off from the public by warning signs and wire fences that can be easily scaled even with a camera bag and tripod. The reservoir became a kind of specter for this project, inseparably intertwined with yet physically and legally detached from the small, isolated towns along the Esopus. While the communities gathered together to help repair their damaged homes and businesses, their representatives fought with the New York City Department of Environmental Protection over whether or not the attempts by the DEP to protect the reservoir’s water quality by draining excess water into the Esopus River exasperated the flood damage. While not a central part of this project, the issue of water rights and resource management cannot be forgotten when viewing these photographs.

Further along Route 28, the land drops sharply on either side of the road, sloping down into Phoenicia. It’s a small hamlet with three churches and two general stores. Tourists travel from miles around to camp out along the banks of the Esopus and to tube down its tranquil waters. Just a short drive through the mountains and you’re in Hunter, famous for its family-friendly and affordable skiing. Between the Hurricane and the mild winter, the attraction of snow and water in the Hudson Valley was severely decreased this year, and offered a visitor
such as myself a glimpse at the town as it exists in the down season.

For me, the excitement for this project came out of the discovering. While the floods swept houses off of their foundations and covered nearly every surface and road with fine silt, the damage of Irene revealed just as much as it buried. My archeology professor, Christopher Lindner, once told our class that regions that have been flooded have unique archeological footprints. There are no chronological layers to what you dig up, just a mess of artifacts that have been mixed up and swept downstream. This displacement of time that occurs when floods wash away any chronological sense of history is visually fascinating. In the end, the hurricane became just another marker of time, enhancing the importance of preexisting wear and highlighting the fragility of the present as it sinks into the past.