Art Maker: Dominique Thiebaut, photographer

By day, Dominique Thiebaut teaches computer science at Smith College. In the evening — and in the morning, too, or whenever and wherever he can find a good image — Thiebaut is a busy landscape photographer, roaming the area for good settings, especially ones that offer changing light.

The native of France currently has an exhibit of his work up at Amherst Town Hall, running through Feb. 28. “Noho Skies: Landscapes and Light of the Pioneer Valley” offers images from all four seasons, from the Holyoke Range shrouded in fog to birds sitting atop Northampton City Hall, waiting for the sun to rise.

Hampshire Life: Talk about the work you’re currently doing. What does it involve, and what are you trying to achieve?
Dominique Thiebaut: I am working on a series on the Seven Sisters, our Holyoke Range. I am always in awe at how different the hills look, fully illuminated on a fall day, barely waking up from a foggy morning, or when the conditions are just right and I can capture the moon rising right above the Summit House, for example.

HL: What do you draw inspiration from? Do you ever have any “Eureka!” moments?

DT: The inspiration is just looking at the landscape and feeling happy to be witnessing a moment of beauty. If I can capture it with my camera (a pocket Nikon S7000, which I always carry), it’s even better! I don’t mind shooting the same landscape over and over, under different conditions. I like waiting for the fleeting moment when the light, the colors, the drama are at their best.

HL: Have you ever had a “mistake” — a project that seemed to be going south — turn into a wonderful discovery instead?

DT: Once I took a different camera to the Tri-County Fair to shoot the horse pull, an event I really enjoy watching, and I ended up with blurry photos of the horses moving the cement blocks. I was disappointed at first. But after a couple days, I found the blurriness enhanced the drama of the scene, and these are some of my favorite shots of horse pulls I have taken these past few years.

HL: Name two artists you admire or who have influenced your work. What about their art appeals to you?

DT: Interestingly, two painters come to mind. One is Claude Monet, for the relentless effort with which he worked on over 30 paintings of the same landscape (the cathedral in Rouen, not far from where I grew up) at different times of the day, always looking for the best light.

The other painter is J. M. W. Turner. I cannot get enough of his skies, and in particular the pale yellow shade in some of his sunsets. Both are true inspirations, in different ways.

HL: What’s the most recent exhibition/concert/book reading/other event by another artist or group that you’ve attended and enjoyed?

DT: The Ansel Adams exhibit currently at the MFA in Boston. I enjoyed reading how he captured one of his most famous photographs, Moonrise, and how he struggled to capture the town under the moon just a few seconds before the sun set.

HL: If you weren’t an artist, what do you think you’d be?

DT: I’ve always done some form of art since I was a kid: exploring silk painting, pottery, stone sculpture, drawing, watercolor painting, or photography. I play with computers for a living, and I like the process of drawing or painting on a tablet. I foresee myself spending more time mixing digital photography and digital media in the future.
HL: What's your go-to snack while you're working?
DT: A baguette from Northampton’s Woodstar Cafe, around 4 p.m. Slice it into “tartines,” some butter, some jam, and a cup of coffee: voila! Instant happiness.

HL: What do you do when you’re stuck?
DT: Cooking is a good way to reserve some time for something creative. I also enjoy taking walks in downtown Northampton, on the Smith College campus, by Paradise Pond, along the Mill river, or along the Connecticut River, in Hadley.

— Steve Pfarrer

There will be an artist’s reception for Thiebaut and his exhibit at Amherst Town Hall on Thursday, Feb. 7 from 5-8 p.m.
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