

# TAKING ON THE LANDSCAPE

## A View of Work by Joel Leivick

BY STEPHEN VINCENT



VIEW OF COLONNATA — 1987

*"Venturing further into the great hall, I climbed an iron ladder onto a block of stone. From this vantage point, 20 feet above the floor, I found my picture: two men at work squaring another block with an electric diamond-wire saw. One of the men, astride the block, stood between me and the lamp they were using. I set up my tripod, stepped under the dark-cloth, and saw the most sublime vision on the ground glass. The man on the block was silhouetted before the opal light from another chamber, embraced by a luminous halo."*

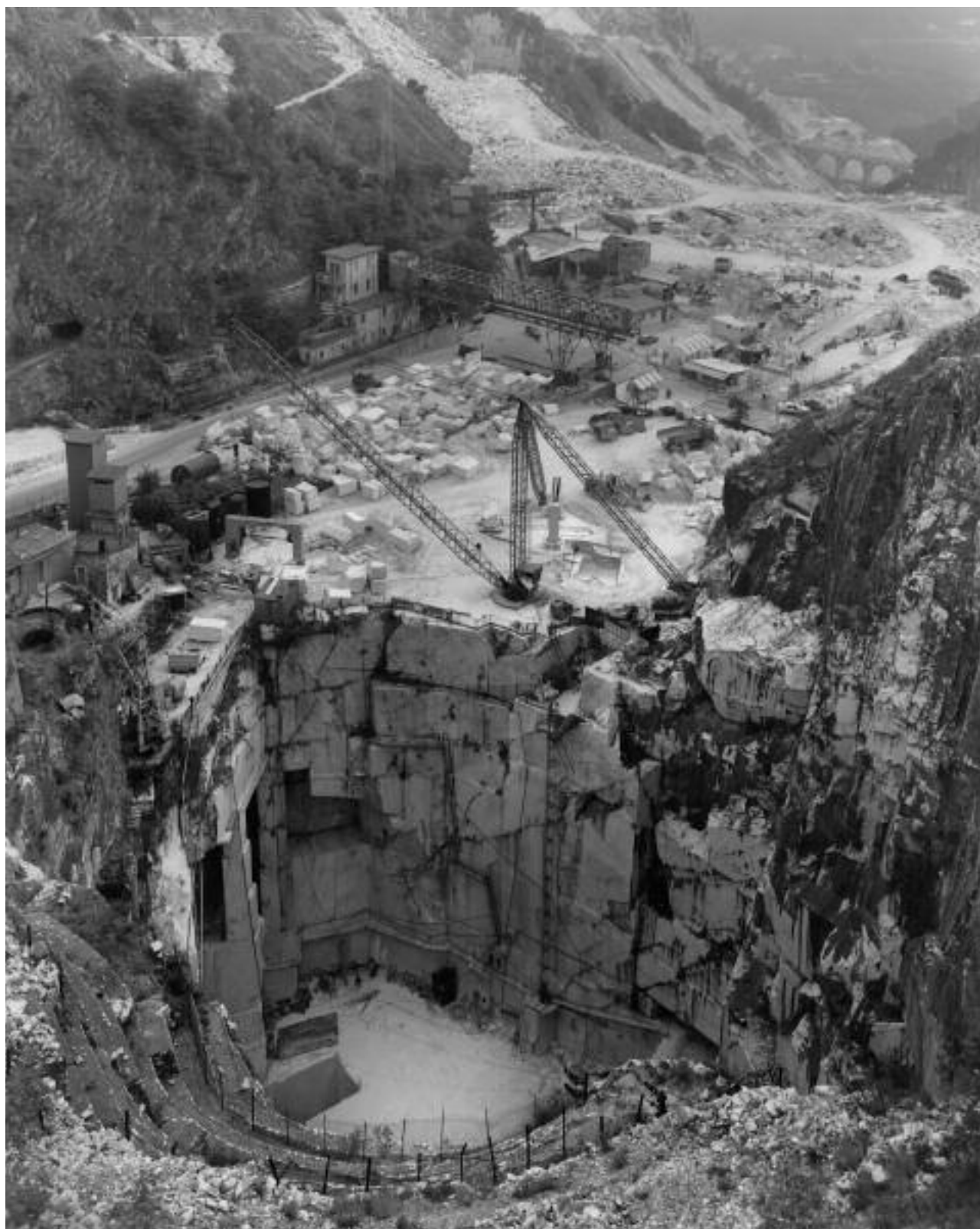
*"I could not pull myself away from the image in the camera, afraid I might lose it forever if I looked away. I focused as well as I could and inserted a film holder, figuring that the right exposure was equal to the length of time the men would stand still. They were intent on the flying saw blade, not moving much. I opened the lens and held my breath: the men were frozen. After a few seconds, when the man on the block began to move, I shut the lens. My supplication to the gods of photography had been answered, and I thanked them."*  
— Joel Leivick, *Carrara: The Marble Quarries of Tuscany*

Joel Leivick makes landscapes that explore and exalt their subjects with great lyricism. Since the 1980s, his longtime engagement has been with sites in Italy and along the northern California coast, combining architectural, human and natural shapes in large-format photographs. A jazz and blues guitarist by avocation, Leivick brings an improvisatory rhythm and sense of play to his visual compositions, weaving together a repetition and mirroring of related forms. As important as the rhythmic distribution of these forms is the contrast of their details, which deepens and broadens the photographs. To survey Leivick's entire oeuvre—which now extends over 25 years—one becomes increasingly aware that his attention to these details includes a constant attention to the condition of light, which can vary from an opulent presence to a deathlike absence. Put another way, the thread that binds the shifting views of his photographs is their attention to the creation, rise and dissolution of forms and structures, whether mineral, botanical, or built by human hands.



UNDERGROUND QUARRY WORKMEN — 1988





QUARRY PIT AT FANTISCRITTI—1988



QUARRY REMNANT—2002

Carrara, a quarry still active in the Tuscany province of Italy, provided the phenomenal white marble used for the construction of Imperial Rome, and later, by the builders and artists of the Italian Renaissance. These quarries also provided the sites for Leivick's early accomplished work in the 1980s. As a young, still relatively uninitiated photographer, he felt compelled to explore the origins of the legendary, opalescent white marble; almost unexpectedly, the quarries offered him the opportunity to make a kind of heroic quest—with an 8x10 camera and 30 pounds of equipment on his back—in which he was drawn through darkened passages into blinding white marble caves.

The Carrara photographs initiated and shaped an approach that connected Leivick's own work to that of the quarrymen he encountered. The way in which the 8x10 camera frames and squares the subject of the photograph mimics the process by which workers carefully frame and cut the marble into blocks. Before a cut, or a "shot" in the case of the view camera photographer, the eye will first carefully study, then set the details into a formal composition. Stonecutter and photographer must each learn to make

the tilt and width of their incision—or framing—as precisely as possible. In Leivick's Carrara images, the rectangle of the photograph, and the rectangles within the photographs, mirror the quarry's cuts and slants of marble.

In the quarries, both in Tuscany and Matera to the south, Leivick discovers his most primal themes—light and darkness, destruction and the birth of form. In these large mountainous landscapes, we see the practically Baroque, back-and-forth play between a devoured landscape and the creations of its architectural counterpart. This is put forth quite beautifully and dramatically in both "Quarry Pit at Frantiscriitti" (1988) and "View of Colonnata" (1987).

In the former, the eye dives down into the deep cylindrical-shaped pit of the marble mine. The angle, depth and light of the camera view dramatize the danger and precariousness of the work. Moreover, it reflects the depth of the gouge into the earth's surface. As Leivick has pointed out, these quarries are the equal of a man-made Grand Canyon, and the photographs confront the awesome magnitude of this extraction. The "View of Colonnata" gives us both the destruction and resurrection of the marble into the form of a city.





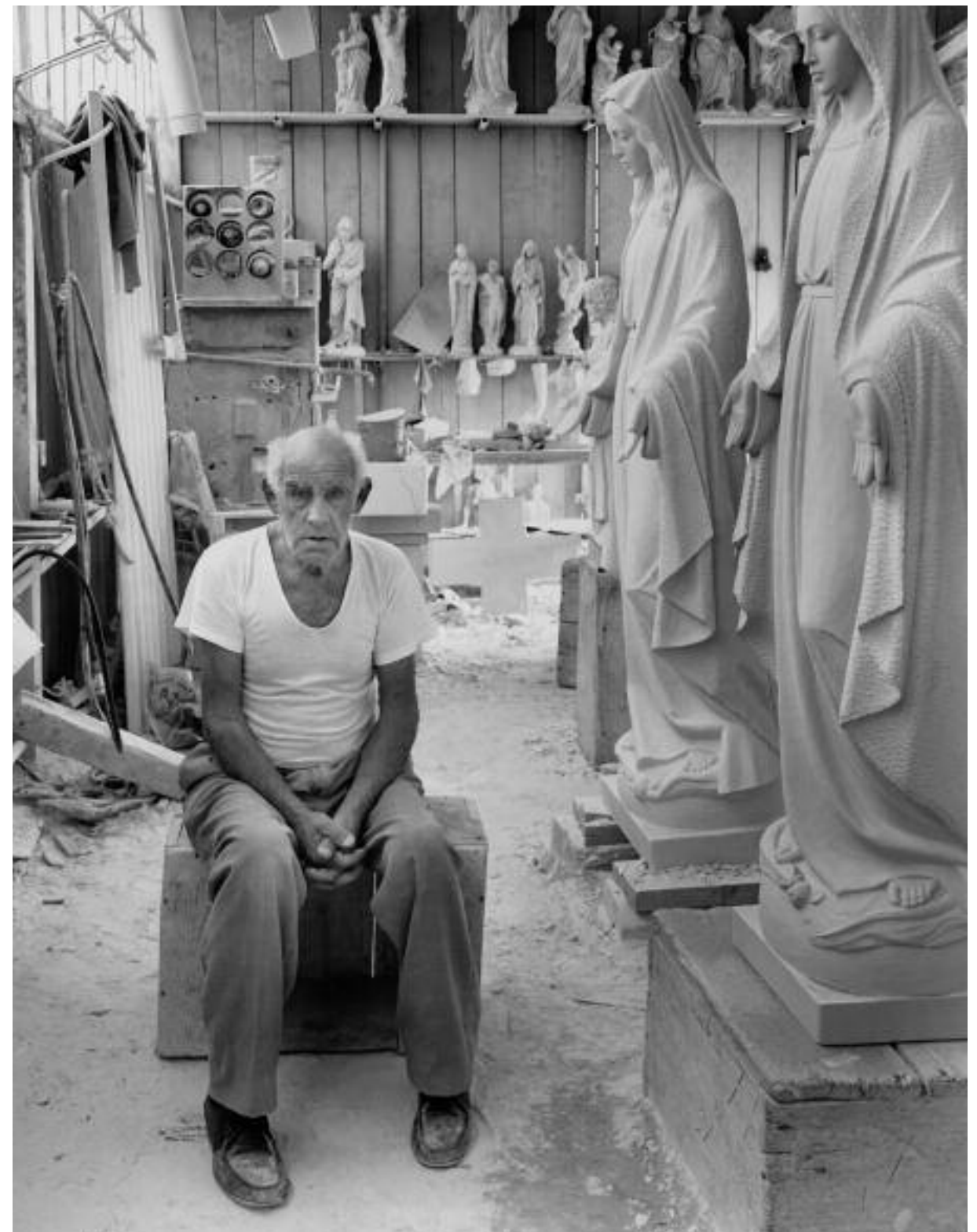
THE ALLEGORY OF LOVE — 1989

We see, rising above the left-hand side of a river below, a mountain in which the careful shapes left by the milling of the marble contrast with a precarious slide of scree. On the other bank, and further down the river, the photograph is framed and angled in such a way that it connects the mine's marble flanks with the lit-up forms of the town's marble church and local buildings.

**T**he quarry photographs illuminate Leivick's attention to documenting and making art out of this primal violation to the landscape. "Quarry Remnant" (2002) exemplifies this kind of attention—Leivick transforms what might appear as a site of neglect, or possibly, a symbol of depletion and conquest, into an object of art. It becomes a heroic sculpture in its own right! Conversely, in "Artisan" (1992), instead of directing the camera at the saintly, marble figures on the shelves, the sculptures provide a foil; the ripples in the t-shirt across the craftsman's stomach reveal a

tender, sculptural quality that far exceeds the conventional, ripples in the fabrics of the saints. Similarly, the humility of his folded, large, muscular hands, and the radiance of his white hair and face give him the religious quality of an actual Saint. Again, it is this turning of the tables that gives Leivick's work its allure.

Stepping further back to view the bigger picture, one can see that Leivick's early journey turns the tables on the conventional tour of the classic sites of Western civilization. Unlike the untold number of photographers who have made it their sole quest to artfully record Roman architecture and sculpture, Leivick goes to Carrara to investigate and celebrate the raw materials, the labor and the communities that surround these sites. In effect, he and his camera are just as interested in what remains and perseveres in these mountains as in what is removed or transformed. The more we look at the work, the more we sense how much the photographer is committed to staying, or even subverting, the ravages of time.



ARTISAN — 1992





VIEW INTO GIOIA QUARRY—1989



ABANDONED BARRACKS—1989



MATERA DUSK—2002

**A**lternatively and simultaneously, Leivick's photographic compositions may be read as a visual form of music. He says: "I work to find the rhythm within a given form and to find the right spot to place and focus the camera so that the resulting composition is an entity unto itself; one that conforms to its own logic." Though there is stillness about the physical site where the photographs are taken, the resulting pictures are full of movement. In the manner of a jazz composition, each framed view creates the formal structure in which the site's diversity of details and patterns become the improvised notes.

In the "View Into Gioia Quarry" (1989) for example, the mine's terraces and plateaus drop down in a rhythmic series of

steps, while at the same time, the spiral-shaped mine road seems to rise up like a melody line. Or, in a different but no less musical manner, "Matera Dusk" (2002) is a carefully orchestrated vision of harmonies and counter-harmonies, as layers of windows, arches and pitched roofs, rhythmically and diversely arrayed, move up and down the city's mountainside while minute flashes and full flushes of the setting sunlight illumine or shadow the facades. Embracing the entire view, we again confront a carefully drawn contrast between the wildness of the facing canyon walls and the formal composition of the city's buildings. In musical terms, the picture may be best taken as a luminous ode to the multi-layered relationship between culture and nature.





SPIDER WEB — 2006

Over the last 20 years, Leivick has pursued a variety of situations and works under the loose title of The Garden Project. In these photographs of landscapes in both Italy and Northern California, the often severe contrasts in the Carrara and Matera work become much more mediated and subject to a more tender regard. What was earlier depicted as a clash between primal nature and cultured forms becomes a more interwoven and imaginative accommodation. The portrayal of the practically imperial onslaught of the mines, their cavernous quarries and the detritus-covered mountainsides is replaced by a larger, often intimate investigation of landscapes, towns and oceansides. Inevitably, the work also becomes a visual meditation on the character of time and the physical record with which it shapes the present.

"Landscape 136" (1987) is a sumptuous photograph—the intersecting hillside slopes, the luminous, almost Pointillist evocation of the fertile fields, the parenthesis of the dark tree in the foreground and its pale counterpart in the background seem framed as an ode to 19th-century Impressionist painting, as well as a friendly bow to Carleton Watkins, particularly that photographer's fascination with valleys and trees in the Sierra and the northern coast of the frontier West.

"View from Pitigliano" (1987) is a remarkable interweaving of nature and formal human intervention in which the forest, architecture and garden appear to achieve a balance. The bridge's Roman arches, and an undefined arch beyond, play against and compliment the checkered surface of the circular garden table.



LANDSCAPE 136 — 1987



VIEW FROM PITIGLIANO — 1987





ALBION RIVER MOUTH—1980



VIEW OF CROCKETT—1983



MARINE RAILWAY—1983

Directly adjacent to this table, the elevated staked vines face the “wild” trees and forest beyond the garden’s protective wire fence. The cultivated world of the garden’s form and structure—in which nature is both nourished and contained—is juxtaposed against the unchecked wilderness outside the garden. In a musical sense, the picture is equivalent to a slow, summery melody in which the clash of nature and culture is at its most benign; at least for a moment, all visual elements inside and outside the garden are woven into a harmonious arrangement. The natural cycle at its apex is at rest; nothing appears ready to break or die.

No matter where his photographs take us, Leivick never leaves behind his attention to the character of light. The white, opalescent light that he found in the Carrara marble—whether deep inside the quarries or reflected off the local mountains and towns—manifests itself throughout the work of The Garden Project. In “Doorway” (2006) the thicket of foliage outside the window frame is flush with a white light that dwarfs the presence of the clay flowerpots as well as the relatively bland white portion of the window frame. Juxtaposed against a small number of hanging dark leaves, the picture evokes an abundant spirit and space at its luminous maximum.





GARDEN MIRROR — 2005

In “View of Crockett” (1983), the crystalline light possesses a luminosity that verges on the religious, recalling images from the Hudson River School and 17th-century Spanish and Flemish landscape painting. Taken from the city’s hill top, and pointed across the Carquinez Strait, the picture lights up both the town’s buildings and the white ship on the opposite shore in a manner similar to the track of light in the “View of Colonnata” taken from the mountain slopes of Carrara. Yet the formal structures in both photographs—the window frame in “Doorway” and the bridge and buildings in “View of Crockett”—quietly provide a firm counterweight that prevent either picture from sliding into a luminous form of bathos.

**P**art of Leivick’s engagement as an artist is to discover the way a photograph distinguishes and defines itself as different and/or similar to natural and other cultured forms. “Garden Mirror” (2005) creates a parable of the transaction between the camera and its subject. In the midst of the garden we see a pot, now in shards yet enfolded into the form of a broken spiral. The leaning mirror, settling into its own decline, acts as a kind of alternative lens, giving us a back view of the pot, while the photograph, as “the image of record,” contains both the broken pot and its reflection in the mirror. In its subtle way, the photograph expands our consideration of the ambiguities and interpretations of what initially appears to be “in plain sight.”



DOORWAY — 2006





LOST BOAT — 2009

**R**ecently, with the support of large studio walls, a large bed printer and Photoshop, Leivick has furthered his exploration of ways in which the available technology can be used to more fully explore notions about the space represented in his images. "Lost Boat" (2009), which measures 24x70 inches, is a composite of joined panels. Each panel, however, is shot from a slightly different perspective. Using a 4x5 camera, he has shifted

the plane of view for each shot to present a different angle of a decaying boat that lies surrounded and caught within a group of trees. Using a complex set of algorithms, a Photoshop program looks for common edges and shapes in the individual panels and stitches them together into one continuous image. The picture actually represents a fictional view of the space, not one that could be held together at once by the human eye.

**I**n an intriguing way, the multi-perspective picture is able to amplify and intensify the tree limbs as they have grown, invaded and begun the inevitable destruction of the ghostly remains of this improbable shipwreck. The single, barely upright plywood piece looks like it has taken a terrible, last blow! We are confronting a ship of death. The white light that has given abundance and/or definition to other photographs is almost entirely absent.

The subject is relieved, however, by the formal beauty of the consecutive interweaving of curving branches, the puzzle of wood and the boat's pieces, and the corrugated remains of its bow. In contrast to other photographs, the rhythm of the eye's attention is made quite still. Indeed, it's hard not to be anything but contemplatively intrigued by the subtle power and complication of the whole process of decay and loss.





TERRY HUNTING MUSHROOMS — 1982

If “Lost Boat” conjures the inevitable death of forms or human artifacts, “Terry Hunting Mushrooms” (1982) may be interpreted as a wintry resurrection. Formally, the picture is built around a spiral in which a sweater-wearing, blond, thick-haired woman appears to rise from within a cone of darkness on the forest floor below. The combination of her hair, her bare white hands, the weight of the soft colored basket and the lean of her step suggest not only the news that her mushroom harvest has been good, but a resurrection of light as well. The cone or “arcade” through which she will arise is a carefully framed series of splayed branches and tree trunks, including the large and robust rotted one in the foreground. Its age and the richly lit, sedate texture of its rippled, dead skin provide a counterpoint to the animated gesture of the young mushroom hunter. The way in which Leivick captures such a scene embraces both the beauty of disintegration and the rush and emergence of life in the same frame.

No doubt, a lifetime of looking closely and thoughtfully, as well as honing such considerable skills with camera and film, continue to be at the core of this accomplishment. In looking back over the various sites of Joel Leivick’s work, I am reminded of a conversation in which he offered the view: “A good photograph comes out and meets you halfway.” Most gratefully, his photographs clearly do that, and then some!

#### ■ BOOK INFORMATION

*Carrara: The Marble Quarries of Tuscany*  
Stanford University Press, 1999

#### ■ PRINT AND CONTACT INFORMATION

For print information and availability, please contact  
Scott Nichols Gallery, San Francisco, California  
[www.scottnicholsgallery.com](http://www.scottnicholsgallery.com)



In terms of photographic production, Joel Leivick describes himself as a one-man band. “I like applying my hand to the things I make,” he says. We are standing in his 1500-square-foot, 20-foot high ceiling studio situated up a hill on the far western edge of the Stanford University campus, where for 27 years he has taught both the practice and the history of photography. Until recently it was the studio of Nathan Oliveira, his Art Department colleague and well-known figurative painter. The large picture windows overlook a small meadow and forest. A redtail hawk circles the sky, and a squad of red-headed woodpeckers take turns pecking away on the building’s redwood siding. The walls provide room to display large panoramic works in progress.

The tables in the middle of the large room are a gathering of technology, including Apple computers, Epson scanner, lots of hard drives, and a large-format Epson printer. “I keep one foot in the digital and one in the analog,” he says. In fact—maybe because of the two guitars, amplifier and a music stand that occupy a corner—the equipment array conjures associations with a personal recording studio. Indeed, Leivick is an avid musician and has played guitar in the same jazz band for the past twenty years. While I was visiting, he tore through a version of John Coltrane’s “Giant Steps.”

When he is making photographs, Leivick likes to do

every aspect of it himself: shoot, develop, scan and print. These days, for film he prefers to use Kodak T-Max 100. Early in his career, until it became too cumbersome to carry, he worked with an 8x10; this has now been replaced by a 4x5 view camera. “I prefer it to a digital camera,” he says. “It gives me the flexibility to manipulate the plane of focus and perspective.” We walk over to his old 8x10 on a tripod in the corner. He shows how, with the accordion bellows extended, he can shift the angle of the ground lens to explore and fix the plane of the view of his subject. However, he concedes: “If you have an enormous amount of money, there are already digital cameras that can perform in a similar way to the view camera. Eventually they will be affordable.”

For the time being, however, he loves what the computer equipment and printer provide. First he digitally scans the view camera negatives. “At that point,” he says, “the image manipulation in Adobe Photoshop not only mimics what is possible in the darkroom, but it does so much more reliably, as well as providing freedom from exposure to chemicals. In terms of black-and-white digital printing, the resolution equals what is possible in the darkroom. The selection of archival papers is fantastic. I use Hahnemuhle, a cotton fiber paper.”

Looking out the window, he adds with a laugh, “I don’t miss all those hours in the darkroom, either.”