

As photographer and curator, Douglas McCulloh keeps Inland images coming

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By **MARK MUCKENFUSS**
The Press-Enterprise

As cliché as it sounds, in Douglas McCulloh's world, every picture tells a story.

There is the struggling divorced mother who lost her antique business and her home and is reduced to pounding in baseboards to feed her kids.

There is the woman who brought her kids to a construction site to steal material so they could build their own fort.

Or the man showing off -- not quite -- the stitches holding the lids shut on an eye he lost in a fight days earlier.

All of them are on Dream Street.

Not only is that the title of McCulloh's new exhibit at the Riverside Art Museum, but a book by the same name is scheduled for release May 15. Both tell the story of the birth of a neighborhood in south Bloomington, from the grading of a former farm field to the building of the homes and the establishment of a new community.

Story continues below



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McCulloh, 49, of Riverside, has had numerous exhibits in local venues. He is well-known beyond the confines of the Inland Empire, having mounted solo shows in museums across the country, in Europe and in Mexico City.

In addition to "Dream Street," he is also the curator of a new exhibit at the California Museum of Photography, "Sight Unseen," which is the first museum exhibit of work by blind photographers.

McCulloh says the Dream Street project came about largely by chance, which is the way he likes it.

Eight years ago, he attended a fundraiser for Survive Food Bank, he says. Among the silent auction items at the event was the opportunity to name a street in San Bernardino County. McCulloh was intrigued, but the bidding soon got beyond his comfort range. Unbeknownst to him, his wife and friends continued to bid on his behalf and he ended up with the prize.

Eventually, he settled on Dream Street as the name he wanted. A developer picked the name as the main thoroughfare for a housing development at the corner of Cedar and Slover avenues, just south of Interstate 10.

McCulloh visited the site before ground was even broken. Within the first hour of his being there, he said, the man who had lost his eye came hobbling down the street. The photographer had the first image for his project and his first story. He points to the sky in the background of the photo. Hovering near the image of the man, whose hand is covering the damaged eye, is a small ring of cloud.

"There's like a cloud in the shape of an eye floating in the sky," he says. "I thought,

'How often do you see that?' "

Story continues below



Stan Lim / The Press-Enterprise
Photographer Douglas McCulloh won the right to name a residential San Bernardino County street as it was being developed, and he documented the process. The collection of photographs, "Dream Street," is showing at the Riverside Art Museum.

The project turned out to be full of such coincidences, he says, possibly because he never had a preconceived notion of what he was looking for.

"I had no idea what it was going to be," he says.

He just tried to be there as often as he could.

"I was there for the first graded furrows, the first concrete poured for the slab of the first model home," he says. "The first pickup truck load of stuff being unloaded into the first house being moved into, I helped carry stuff in."

Photos in the exhibit document it all. There are images of workers perched atop the open-framed walls, a drywaller on stilts patching seams in a closet, a man whose head appears through a hole in the floor.

"That's the toilet hole," says McCulloh, "and his name is John."

In between the stories is a revelation of how piecework has replaced what were traditionally union jobs with an hourly wage, how that shift has lowered the cost and quality of construction and what it has meant for those working in the building trade.

People building homes can't afford to buy them, one worker relates.

While the exhibit is complete, McCulloh says the story of Dream Street is not. He's not sure how much further he will follow it. But it's hard to let go, he says.

"I'm addicted at this point," he says. "It's like a slot machine, and every time I pull the handle, something's going to happen. It's always interesting."

One might think that element of chance would be even more prevalent in the "Sight Unseen" exhibit. But McCulloh says the images there are more planned out than one might think.

"Blind photographers are the ground zero, the heart of photography," he says. "They're building these images in their heads purely as a mental construct. They bring a version of that into the world for us to experience."

But it's a version they can never see. On the other hand, the original remains unseen.

"It's in the mind of the photographer," he says.

And, in a way, that remains a dream in itself.

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Exhibits

Riverside Art Museum

Address: 3425 Mission Inn Ave., Riverside

What: "Dream Street"

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Saturday through June 13

Cost: \$5 general, \$2 students and seniors, children under 12 free

Info: 951-684-7111, www.riversideartmuseum.org

UCR/California Museum of Photography

Address: 3824 Main St., Riverside

What: "Sight Unseen"

When: 12-5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday through Aug. 29

Cost: \$3 general, free for seniors, students and children under 14

Info: 951-827-4787, www.cmp.ucr.edu
