

Caterina Maina

Caterina Maina is a photographer based in Rhode Island. She grew up in a household that curated a great appreciation of the outdoors and art in her. From an early age, she was often outside playing, listening to her father's stories of backpacking across the globe while admiring the photographs he took, and going to exhibits at the Rhode Island School of Design with her mother. In high school, Caterina's passion for photography continued to grow when she took a black and white photography class. Several years later, Caterina is now graduating from Massachusetts College of Art and Design with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in photography, and a minor in sustainability. During her college years, she made bodies of work like "Unravel" and "Who Will Be Left Behind When the Forests Burn and the Fields Flood". These series of beautiful landscapes and portraits confront the viewer with the impacts of climate change, and the way that the human race has shaped the environment. The photographs of "Unravel" are a more direct approach to the subject, while "Who Will Be Left Behind When the Forests Burn and the Fields Flood" creates an experience that the viewer can relate to, but it does not quite make sense, evoking the feelings of stress about our future on the planet that Caterina herself feels. In 2018, Caterina traveled to Cuba as a member of an Artist-in-Residency with Mass Art. With the drastic change in political relationships between the Obama and Trump administrations, she became interested in history between the United States and Cuba. The residency helped to open her eyes to another culture and viewpoint. She returned to Cuba in 2019, when she created the series "Con La Primavera", titled after the poem by José Martí. In this series, she focuses on the everyday lives of Cuban, and the beauty and humanity of the people. Caterina was recently awarded the Gertrude Kasebier Palmer/Tourlentes Prize, a grant from the MassArt Photography Department to return to Cuba this fall.





Interview with Caterina Maina

How did your interest in the environment begin? How would you describe your relationship with it?

My relationship to nature started at an early age. My father would often take my sisters and I hiking and camping. Living in Rhode Island, I was surrounded by beaches, marshes, and nature preserves and was only a few hours away from The White Mountains. Growing up, I was constantly outside climbing trees, exploring, and enjoying the outdoors. I was an active person, and I found comfort in nature. Though I had this connection to nature growing up, I never fully connected this relationship to activism and fighting for environmentalism. It wasn't until my freshman year at MassArt that I fully became involved and added the new Sustainability Minor to my degree. From then on, my passion for nature combined with a passion for protecting it and protecting our future on it.

How did your interest in photography and art in general begin?

I grew up in a pretty artistic household. My mother was an opera singer and was very involved with the art scene in Rhode Island - taking us to the RISD Museum on every free weekend and bringing us to events she helped with. My father on the other hand did not follow a career in art, but had a passion for photography, writing, and traveling. As a child, he would tell my sisters and I stories of his travels around Europe, how he backpacked through parts of Africa, and his trips to Peru and Bolivia. With him he had a Nikon F3 35mm camera and a Lubitel 6x6 in which he shot mostly color positive film. He also later got a Nikon N65, which ended up being the first camera I was given and since then I've been in love with photography. My father also surrounded our home with hundreds of National Geographic magazines that he had collected since he was a kid - he told my sisters and I about how he emailed NatGeo specifically to ask if they would send him a subscription to Italy (since they only had U.S. subscriptions at the time and were not distributing to Europe). Growing up with all those magazines, I became mesmerized by how photography could bring you to all parts of the world, and connect you with so many different kinds of people. I thought to myself, "that would be my tool to see the world."

My passion for photography continued when I took a black and white photography class at my highschool. That was the first time I ever used a darkroom and developed my own film and I fell in love with the process almost instinctively. I would often stay after school to develop extra rolls and make small prints of my images. I also had a passion for painting, a major I also considered, but the darkroom seemed to almost connect it all and photography allowed me to explore the world I know and don't know.

How do you want your photographs to affect people?

I would love my photographs to impact people in some way. A lot of my work is driven by contemporary political issues such as the climate crisis or the impact of the U.S. embargo on Cuba as well as personal issues such as the impact my upbringing has had on me and my connection to the land I grew up in. Overall, political or otherwise, I hope my images cause people to think about themselves and the world they live in. I look to start conversations and bring people together.

If you had your choice, how would you show your photographs? In a museum, gallery, magazine, online?

Though I can see a lot of my work ending up in book form, I would love to show my work in a gallery space or some contemporary museum. I love the physicality of art and having the ability of bringing people together. In these spaces, that is possible. A lot of my more recent work I see as very interactive and informative, so being able to showcase it in an actual space that people can explore would be amazing. It offers a wider ability to make a point with the work and be creative in its form.



What differentiates your series Who Will Be Left... and Unravel?

The project Unravel was almost like a first chapter to the following project Who Will Be Left When the Forests Burn and the Fields Flood. Unravel was my first try at photographing the impacts of climate change and the way we have shaped our environment. For that project I was influenced by photographers such as Ed Burtinsky and David T. Hansen, looking directly at the man made alterations of the landscape and how man made and nature coexist. It was definitely my more direct approach to this topic. The project Who Will Be Left When the Forests Burn and the Fields Flood, approaches this topic very differently. Here I was more focused on creating an experience for the viewer that they could relate to, one that didn't quite make sense but reflected how many of us were feeling. It was brought about by my need to express how I was feeling internally and the stresses I had about our future on this planet.

What draws you to using a 4x5? Why not digital?

I am drawn to the 4x5 camera because of how much of a process it is to make the image. It forces me to slow down and interact with my subject differently than when I use a digital camera. The way it takes in and portrays a scene is so wonderful and magical, which only intensifies the feelings I wish to convey in many of my images. The ability to really pick your focus and warp the frame is what draws me to using this camera. Though I do love the fast pace of digital for certain imagery.





Why did you go to Cuba? Will you return again?

I first traveled to Cuba through a two week Artist-in-Residency program that MassArt offered in 2018. I always wanted to study abroad, but did not have the money to stay a full semester somewhere. There were many programs offered, but this one stood out to me for some obvious reasons. Growing up in the United States there is a very particular view of Cuba, taught to us in our westernized history books. With Obama's recent opening of diplomatic relations, and then Trump's start to dismantle relations, I became interested in this history and wanted to see the situation from the Cuban perspective. That first trip really opened my eyes to another culture and viewpoint. This influenced me to then apply for a travel grant to return to Cuba alone the following year, this time for a month. I coordinated with an agency who set me up with an amazing local guide, Ron, who is also interested in photography and soon became a close friend. It was my first time ever traveling to another country alone so I was nervous. This second trip allowed me to photograph more than I ever did on my first trip and really interact with, and listen to, the Cuban community.

I knew when I finished my second trip I needed, and wanted, to go back at least one more time. Though I created a good amount of work and was satisfied with my time there, I knew I would need to go back, reconnect with those I met on my previous trip, and see what more I could do to make this project really impact people back in the U.S. And surprisingly enough, I was recently awarded the Gertrude Kasebier Palmer/Tourlentes Prize from the MassArt Photo Department to return!

What's your favorite photo that you've taken?

I think my favorite would have to be my photograph of the glowing, yellow/red rock at night on the water. This may not be my favorite photo, but it is definitely in the top, and one I am most proud of. This photograph was taken at a Haystack School of Arts in Deer Isle, Maine. I went there through a mini residency that MassArt has every fall towards the end of September. It was a gorgeous, clear night and the temperature wasn't too bad with the amount of layers I had on. Some friends of mine and I were planning on sleeping on the rocks that night, so I took this opportunity to make some night photographs. It was one of the first images I took of this nature (with the colorful gel lights). This image ended up being an hour and a half exposure, where I had two blenders, with red/orange gels covering them, pointed at the rock. As I let the exposure go, I would just watch the night sky - looking for shooting stars- and occasionally reposition the lights so they were not taken away by the tide. I'm not sure what I was exactly going for or expected from this image, but I am very happy with how it came out.

Who are you inspired by?

I am greatly inspired by my surroundings/upbringing, political issues, and natural history. A lot of my work looks to impact viewers and connect them to certain issues or experiences we are facing, as well as make personal feelings connect with larger audiences. These factors inspire me to create work in a way that can instigate conversations about topics and influence the thinking and ideology surrounding them. I am also inspired by many photographers such as Justine Kurland, Garret Grove, Greg Kahn and Mimi Plumb to name some. Looking at how other photographers work inspires me to push myself, work hard, and never give up.





What is it like when you go take photos? What do you do?

My process for picture making is different for every project I have made. With my family work, it was very much about traveling home and setting up time within family hangouts to create images (whether that be bringing my camera on walks to the beach or taking time during the day to photograph around the house). Other projects such as Unravel and Con La Primavera contained more walking around and happening upon images and Who Will Be Left When the Forests Burn and the Fields Flood were very constructed images that usually took some more planning, and bringing portable lights with me. Many times I am accompanied by friends or family when I photograph, which proves especially helpful when I am taking self portraits, but I also enjoy going out and photographing alone.

What do you see yourself doing after college? What's your dream job?

As of now I am moving back home and living in Providence for the next year or so. I don't have any immediate plans since a lot of the jobs and internships I applied to have been cancelled due to Covid-19. But after college I can really see myself working in a gallery or a contemporary museum of some sort. I would love to learn more about curating work and putting shows together. I had the opportunity to curate a show in the Student Life Gallery in the Fall of 2019 of work from the Cuba residency through MassArt and really enjoyed the creative process. This included a large amount of work of various mediums that reflected our time and experiences there as well as work we made during the trip. I enjoyed the experience of curating and designing the layout of the show so much and hope to soon find a job or internship in a related field.