



CHRISTOPHER BROWN - PHOTOGRAPHS

*Fine prints of the Western American landscape*



AFTER THE FLOOD: PATH of DESTRUCTION and RENEWAL

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE EARTH in PHOTOGRAPHS & WORDS

from the Anne U. White Trail, 4-Mile Canyon Creek, Boulder County Open Space

What kind of place was the Anne U. White trail before this flood? It was a kind, gentle, inviting place. The friendly trail wandered up the canyon bottom, crossing the creek back and forth, with huge stepping-stones in the creek at the wider crossings, thoughtfully chosen for their trustworthiness. Some had a special quality that conveyed artfulness in their selection. At other places, the stream—that appeared in and out from under the earth where it mostly resided, more out in the spring and early summer and in during the fall and winter—was narrow enough to hop over in short but satisfying leaps. Climbing up the hills on either side of the creek huge stone steps—deeply imbedded in the hill—helped us ascend the short rise, inviting us to venture further up into the canyon. Midway up the canyon a small sandstone bench (still there) suggested that a short, quiet sit overlooking the stream below might be a pleasant change of pace into a more contemplative mood.

Some trips up the canyon were powered by the urge to run or walk briskly to the end of the trail and back, for aerobic satisfaction. Other times, curiosity about what was around the next corner dominated one's attention. For newcomers, rumors of pools and waterfalls lured one on, with the desire to discover if there be a there there at the end of the trail. And then there were those times when dawdling was the order of the day, moseying each step of the way in order to not miss a thing, like reading a poem where each word is savored before moving on to the next.

The canyon was largely green and lush, a riparian zone fed by the quiet, mostly underground stream. Aspen and willows filled the canyon bottom, with mixed conifers along the dense north facing slopes of the canyon, and open Ponderosa forests on the south facing side. Mostly green and shady in the summer, it was a pleasant place to be. Occasional rock outcroppings covered with orange lichen provided visual variety along the trail. A half-dozen tall granite cliffs, with small moss-covered ledges that turned bright green after a rain, suggested an oriental landscape.

On my first trip up the canyon several weeks after the flood it was a changed place. It was so different I felt like I had landed on a lost and secret continent. The quiet serenity had been replaced with an aura of extraordinary energy. Something powerful and chaotic had passed through here, and the canyon walls still reverberated with the intensity of violent forces. The visual experience of the canyon was full of new shapes and colors and textures that vibrated through my body. It was a powerful, mesmerizing experience.

The soft green floor of the canyon had become a sea of hard, white granite cobbles, gravels and sand. The water had undercut the roots of the trees so that they were left strewn about the canyon floor, individually and in tangled heaps. In some places the bare



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trunks, completely stripped of their branches, were lying around in huge piles like jackstraws.

The canyon was scoured down to bedrock, and the small, shy stream was completely exposed throughout its length, and water was also flowing down several small side canyons that had always been dry. As the water poured over newly arranged cobbles, boulders and ledges it filled the entire canyon with the sound of water. It had become Music Canyon, and as Loren Eiseley said: "If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water."

It was a dramatic scene, striking for its abrupt and total transformation. What was previously there was gone, and one could say it was destroyed, but it was merely replaced by a new canyon, with a different appearance and personality. An almost nondescript place had been transformed into a strong, distinctive landscape. Just as the making of art is the recombining of existing elements into new things, the evolution of the landscape is a rearranging of the same elements into new forms. The canyon was dramatically rearranged, and not only did the canyon look different, the power and energy of the flood was palpable. The faint echoes of what had certainly been a loud event still reverberated off the canyon walls, and the visual stimulation of the new landscape captivated me.

I was witnessing a major transformation of this landscape, and I felt privileged to see it spread out before me. What was a common occurrence in the history of the earth, was a rare one in one man's lifetime. Even though what was there before was gone, the flood was a creative event, and the new landscape that emerged was indeed beautiful.

Being a photographer, I felt compelled to document this scene, and share it with those who could not see it firsthand. The photographs and texts in this exhibition document what I have seen and felt during my frequent explorations of the canyon over the past year since the flood. It has been a privilege to be able to visit the canyon alone, to feel it's essence, and to photograph it. I thank Boulder County Open Space for giving me permission to go there, and the Boulder Arts Commission for a small Spark grant to help with framing costs.

This Project is dedicated to Anne White who gave Boulder this Open Space land, and Gilbert White, who gave Boulder flood awareness.