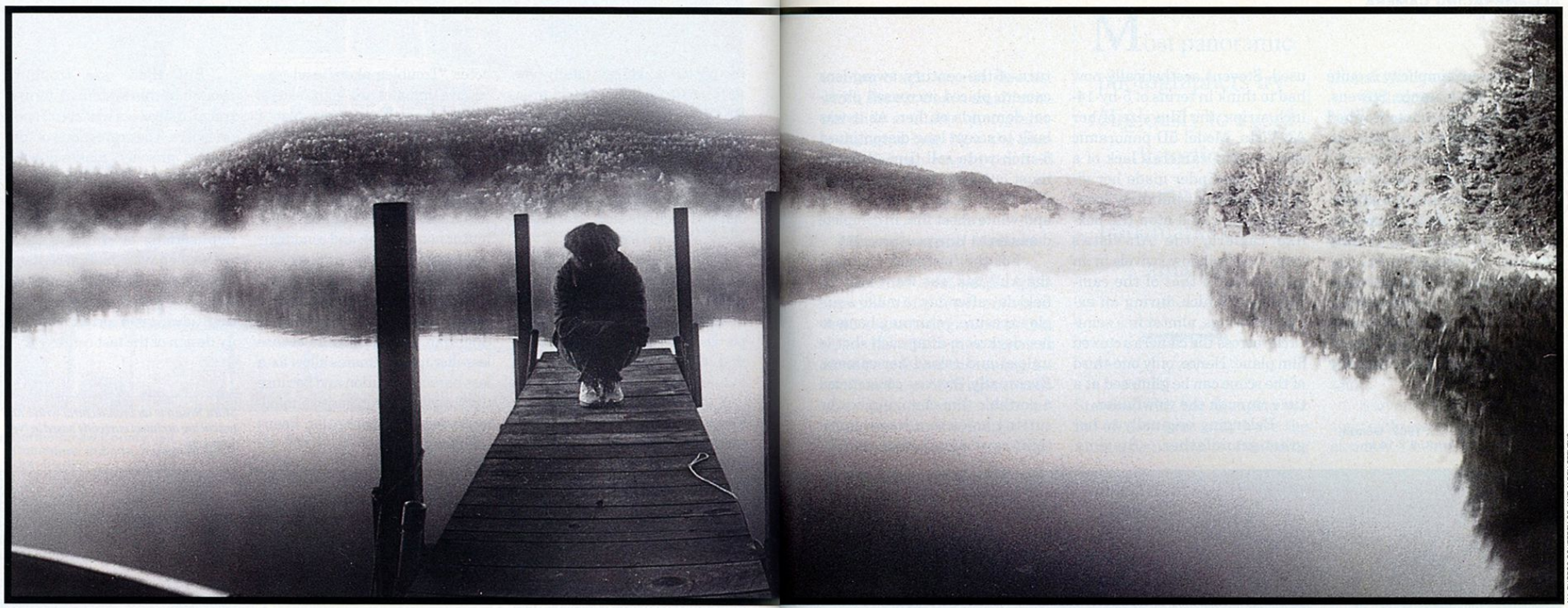


ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF JANE ALDEN STEVENS

All-Embracing Camera

BY LARRY R. THALL

Overcoming panoramic photography's usual limitations, Jane Alden Stevens' insightful portraits capture the magic of the moment in grand scale.

Developing a distinctive, instantly recognizable style is a requisite goal for artists working in any medium. Panoramic photographers, however, arguably have the most difficult time fulfilling this universal creative aspiration. Created with cameras typically featuring horizontal angles of views ranging from 140 to 360 degrees, panoramic photographs tend to bombard viewers with visual minutiae, while their monumental vistas—usually of majestic landscapes, city skylines, or mass gatherings of people—tend to limit the latitude for creative composition on the part of the photographer.

The great geographical expanse covered by the camera's lens can even place restrictions on the type and time of day a photographer shoots. Scenes that alternate repeatedly between bright sunlight and deep shadow—as is often the case in early morning and late afternoon—are extremely difficult to print well. So, many panoramas are made either on overcast days or around midday.

These obstacles notwithstanding, Cincinnati photographer Jane Alden Stevens has overcome the mechanical and aesthetic limitations of her panoramic instrument to create a style uniquely her own. Ironically, Stevens has chosen a quite-limited scope for her all-embracing 160-degree camera. Instead of working in the medium's traditional grand scale, Stevens concentrates on making psychologically oriented portraits of one or two persons at a time, posed in commonplace rural settings.

■ **Jane Alden Stevens (b. 1952), *October*, 1987. Gelatin silver contact print, 5 x 14 in.**

At first glance, many of Stevens' images—such as a girl leaning against the side of a house or two children sleeping in a hammock—appear visually and technically simple, almost mimicking snapshots. However,

their apparent simplicity is quite deceiving. For instance, Stevens, thirty-nine, who photographed for many years with traditional-format cameras, had to completely reorient her mind's-eye view of the world to the atavistic proportions of an instrument manufactured approximately fifty years before her birth.

Instead of mentally composing the universe in rectangles or squares proportionate to the popular 35mm or 6-by-6-centimeter formats she formerly used, Stevens aesthetically now had to think in terms of 5-by-14-inch strips, the film size of her AL-Vista, Model 5D panoramic camera. The camera's lack of a proper viewfinder made her visual adjustment infinitely more difficult. Located atop the box-like camera, the AL-Vista's viewfinder window swivels in an arc similar to that of the camera's lens, which during an exposure swings, almost in a semicircle, across the camera's curved film plane. Hence, only one-third of the scene can be glimpsed at a time through the viewfinder.

Belonging originally to her great-grandfather, Stevens' turn-of-the-century, swing-lens camera placed increased physical demands on her. As it was built to accept long-discontinued 5-inch-wide roll film, Stevens must cut 5-by-14-inch strips of film from 11-by-14-inch black-and-white sheet film in complete darkness.

For the first year she used the AL-Vista, she went into the field day after day to make a single exposure, returning home to her darkroom after each shot to unload and reload her camera. Eventually, Stevens constructed a portable film-changing box by cutting holes in a large, light-tight cardboard carton and attaching black, elastic sleeves, which she cut from a small, commercially available qhotographic changing bag. Now the photographer can stay in the field for extended periods.

■ *Lloyd and Judy #1*, 1987. Gelatin silver contact print, 5 x 14 in.

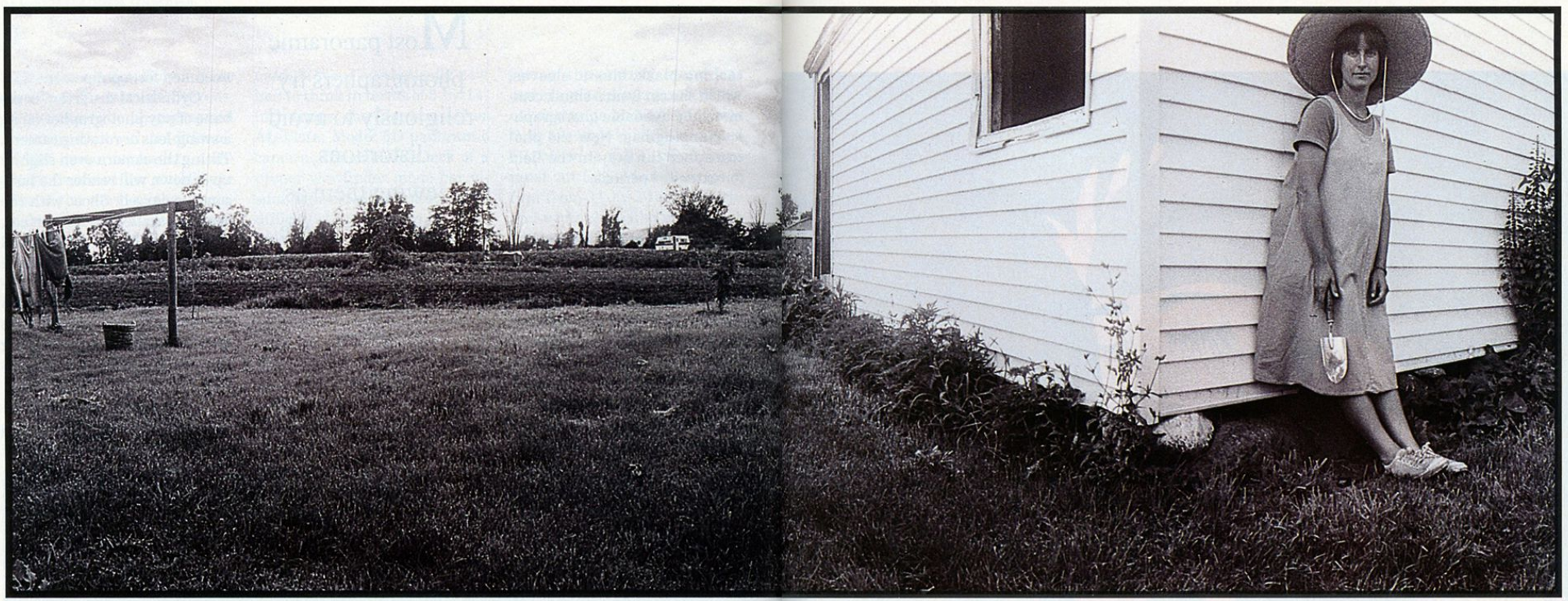
Misunderstood Method

Because most people (photographers included) are unaccustomed to seeing cameras that rotate (as 360-degree cameras do) or have lenses that swing, it's common for pedestrians to mistake panoramic cameras for surveying instruments, meteorological devices, and so forth. Stevens, with her changing box in tow, however, may have the unique distinction of often being mistaken for a puppeteer.

> Most panoramic photographers try religiously to avoid distortions, viewing them as trademarks of the amateur.

Cylindrical distortion is the bane of any photographer using a swing-lens or rotating camera. Tilting the camera even slightly up or down will render the horizon line curved. Shoot with the camera parallel to a flat surface, such as a wall, and the wall will appear to balloon at its center and taper near its ends. Not surprisingly, most panoramic photographers try religiously to avoid these distortions, viewing them as trademarks of the amateur.

Stevens, however, deliberately embraces these aberrations at times. For instance, by point-



■ ***Trowel and Washline*, 1986. Gelatin silver contact print, 5 x 14 in.**

ing her camera down at a young girl dozing by the side of a stream, she allows the distorted curve of the landscape to complement the arch of the sleeper's back.

In another shot, a girl lies on a towel by the side of a swimming pool, her body slightly curved toward the top of the frame. Cylindrical distortion has caused the pavement under the girl to curve toward the bottom of the picture, however, thus creating visual tension within an otherwise banal composition. Yet Stevens' photographic puissance lies not so much in the technical mastery of recalcitrant equipment as in her unique vision—her ability to weave a sense of mystery into her scroll-like images.

Stevens received her undergraduate degree in European studies and spent seven years living on the Continent. The discomfort caused by Europe's extreme population density led the photographer to seek the relative freedom of working in the rural areas of America's Adirondack region. "In the mountains, life moves at a different and very serene rhythm," she says.

However, she doesn't glamorize her bucolic settings. Like Sherlock Holmes, Stevens senses that all may not be well beneath the halcyon veneer of summer days in the country. In one photograph, a girl in a swimsuit catches the afternoon sun while leaning against the rough wood slats of a summer cottage. Around the corner of the house, however, a male figure stands motionless in the shadows, clutching a gleaming short-handled scythe in his hand. Is a homicide about to occur?

A second image depicts a nude male figure floating face-down in the lake, while a second man pulls himself up onto the pier. Is the man in the water dead? And if so, did his comrade kill him, or is he only going for help?

Uneasy Subjects

These kinds of sinister overtones, however, are the exceptions rather than the rule in Stevens' panoramas. Still, there is a marked uneasiness to many of her subjects. It's clear the presence of her camera has been acknowledged, but their facial expressions and body language suggest they have something to hide. What could it be?

What was the woman with the trowel in her hand digging for, or perhaps burying, under the side of the house? What does the girl lurking on the shadowy staircase want from the young woman up on the landing? The viewer scans the great width of the images for clues to these, and other, mysteries. If any are present, though, none is offered explicitly—one must exhibit a Holmesian talent for inference.

Although Stevens confesses to a lack of knowledge vis-à-vis the history of panoramic photography, her development of a very distinctive aesthetic places her in select company, including the renowned Czechoslovakian photographer Josef Sudek. He too often rejected grand vistas, preferring to create more intimate panoramic scenes of city parks and the Czech countryside.

In her work, Stevens proves that all-embracing panoramic cameras, traditionally employed to capture as much visual information as possible, can be creatively engaged to pose enigmatic questions. Stevens is an associate professor of fine arts at the University of Cincinnati. Her photographs are represented in the collections of several museums, including the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House.■

Larry R. Thall is a photography writer for the **Chicago Tribune** *and former managing editor of* **Photomethods** *magazine.*