



# The Silo Project: Timothy Hursley

# WORDS Christian Kerr

...is it in the designer's intent, or is it something more natural, more innate, that qualifies it as artistic? Take, for example, something as common to the Southern landscape as a silo....

to document that sight.

This silo of such intense interest stands near Greensboro, Alabama, in the heart of Hale County, the sprawling workshop of Auburn University's Rural Studio. The Rural Studio works to create efficient and attractive architecture in the severely underserved Black Belt region of West Alabama, and Timothy Hursley has worked with the Studio as both a commissioned photographer and an independent promoter for over twenty years. Hailing from Detroit, Hursley moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1980 to start his own architectural photography studio. He was instantly drawn to the South's abundant vernacular architecture, the structures created from local materials for the fundamental needs of the community. As his body of work grew, so did the quality of his résumé. He began being commissioned to photograph buildings by such household names as I.M. Pei and Frank Gehry, the latter of whom would influence his interest in a defunct relic of Alabama's agricultural past.

glimpsed something strange jutting from the flat, green landscape of the Black Belt's back roads. He pulled over, asked and received permission from the object's owner, and began shooting. What he captured was a crimped and twisted steel silo, beaten bent by time but refusing to fall completely. His modern art sensibilities told him the object was undoubtedly sculpture; reminding him of early Gehry architecture in its unnatural curves, and Philip Guston's late paintings of cigarette butts in its grotesqueness. He would go home and arrange photographs of four different angles of the silo in a tetraptych that spoke to him of the object's artistic possibilities. It became an almost mythical structure to him, like "something out of H.G. Wells's War of the Worlds," he's quoted as saying.

wouldn't allow it. He contacted the property owner, Iowana Harris, and purchased the silo from her for \$2000. He says that fellow Rural Studio photographer William Christenberry would take old street and traffic signs as souvenirs.

In October of 2011, Hursley decided to experiment with observing the silo in its environment by setting up a surveillance camera to photograph the scene every thirty seconds. With the help of the Rural Studio and the Harris family, the team positioned the camera, dug trenches for power lines, placed a system of LED lights to capture the sight by night, and set up a computer in a nearby trailer to download the camera's continuous stream of images. The resulting photos are hauntingly beautiful. An edit of six months' of images compressed into a five-minute video posted by the Oxford American demonstrates the product of Hursley's vision. The Silo Cam, as Hursley calls it, shows the silo as a work of art constantly being shaped by its sculptor, Nature. As an electrical storm illuminates the darkness, the silo flashes like a bowing ghost of a South far-removed from what it is today, but as the downpour turns to drizzle and the blackness turns to the grey of dawn, the silo still stands, defiant to the infinite forces of Nature that

has noted that its angle has gotten more acute, and that it is, in fact, steadily coming closer to its fall. So, after nearly two years of documentation, what plans are in store for the silo? Hursley himself isn't even sure. He calls his work with the object "Project Unfolding," because, like the Nature's unending work on the structure, it is a work constantly in progress. The success and positive responses from the art community have pushed Hursley to set up two other surveillance cameras on similar industrial objects. The Silo Cam is currently down due to technical problems with the power lines, but Hursley is interested in changing the angle of the camera to see what effect that would have on the photographs. Ultimately, he would love to see the silo removed from its rural context and placed in a city center, the juxtaposition of a defunct agrarian relic against the steel and glass of the urban landscape forcing the viewer to see it as sculpture, and Hursley is confident people will see it as such. All he needs now is a patron.

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