

PHOTOGRAPHERS OF THE SALTON SEA:  
GERD LUDWIG AND JEFF FROST

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The Salton Sea is a region in Southern California that has captivated photographers for decades. The Salton Sea was formed in 1905 when water diverted from the Colorado River in Southern California burst its banks, filling in a low lying area in the Imperial Valley. The water stayed, and towns sprung up on the Salton Sea's shores. Floods in the 1980s devastated those towns, destroying the local economy of tourism and water sports. As time went on, irrigation runoff and rising salinity levels also killed off the abundant sport fishing in the Salton Sea, since there is no natural outlet. Ensuing algae blooms led to massive die offs of tilapia fish inhabiting the Salton Sea, creating a wasteland of dead fish and abandoned buildings amidst a backdrop of desert scenery.

Two photographers who have extensively photographed the Salton Sea stand out as examples. First is Gerd Ludwig, a photographer for National Geographic Magazine and noted environmental photographer. Second is Jeff Frost, an art photographer and experimental artist. Ludwig and Frost take distinctive approaches to photographing the Salton Sea, both in framing their work through their individual photographic styles. Ludwig takes a classic documentary approach, photographing the people, places, and moments of a region to give the viewer a broad overview of an area. This approach is consistent with the National Geographic Magazine style of story telling. Frost's work contrasts Ludwig's photography since it is abstract and experimental. Frost's photography is done at night and utilizes artificial lighting to complement the ambient light to achieve his desired look. These still frames are

combined into time lapse videos with audio added, creating an artistic, rather than documentary, statement.

Ludwig and Frost were interviewed in person in Southern California on separate occasions. The “so what” aspect or importance of Ludwig and Frost’s work lies in the environmental repercussions to the Southern California area that the Salton Sea poses. As the Salton Sea continues to shrink air quality will decrease in the area, and desert winds could blow toxic soil from the newly exposed lakebed to the Los Angeles basin, threatening health and quality of life. Historically dried out lakebeds have caused dust storms impacting human quality of life and health, as evidence by both Owens Lake in central California and the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan. The Salton Sea is moving down that path, and Ludwig’s documentation of the Salton Sea educates viewers on the subject, and gives a visual record as it changes. Frost creates art out of an environmental issue, which may also lead to awareness of the area for the general public.

Based in Los Angeles, Ludwig’s Salton Sea piece was published in *National Geographic Magazine* in 2005. Ludwig has photographed environmental issues involving the hand of man for decades. Ludwig has worked extensively in documenting the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl since the nuclear power plant melted in 1986. A recent project, *The Long Shadow Of Chernobyl*, was published on the iPad and principally financed with funds from a \$25,000 Kickstarter grant. Ludwig first became interested in the Salton Sea after *Men’s Health* magazine pitched a photo

essay on the *Salton Sea* to him. “I had no idea what the Salton Sea was” before the *Men’s Health* assignment. “After these five days (on assignment) I was hooked” on the Salton Sea. The Salton Sea lined up with the theme of Ludwig’s environmental work, prompting him to keep working.

Like other photographers in the area, Ludwig says that “In retrospect I have to admit that “ruin porn” is always somewhat attractive to photographers, and the Salton Sea is a lot of ruin porn, lets face it.”<sup>1</sup> “Ruin porn” is a phrase used by some photographers to describe photography of abandoned and broken down buildings and places, with the textures of rotting and decayed materials producing a distinct look to images. There are photographers who specialize in only photographing ruins. Both the abandoned buildings and broken down towns attracted Ludwig, and Frost as well.

Ludwig says of his approach to photographing the Salton Sea that “I did approach it, shooting for *Men’s Journal* at the time, and for German *Geo*, and for *National Geographic* from a very traditional documentary aspect.” Ludwig’s visual approach was set up similarly to stories he shot in the past where “a sense of place was very important... the strangeness of the place plays a role.” Similar stories Ludwig has photographed are his *Tasmania: Daily Life* essay and his *Chernobyl: Exclusion Zone* piece.<sup>2</sup> Like many *National Geographic* stories, the photographer

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<sup>1</sup> Gerd Ludwig interview

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gerdludwig.com/>

needs to capture the essence of the place, and this often takes a broad overview. A broad overview includes landscape setting shots, detail images, environmental portraits, and moments of cultural events that define a place. Ludwig was aware of this need from the beginning and shot the project accordingly. For example, the images on Ludwig's web portfolio of the Salton Sea include senior citizens at winter RV resorts, farm workers, youths socializing in bars at night, sunsets, and overview shots.<sup>3</sup>

“Basically the whole work that I did there encompassed both the lay of the land, the subjects, what the Salton Sea is dealing with, and the people that the sea attracts. And the use of the water was very important as well... it was an all encompassing story, really.”

For the shot of farm workers, Ludwig had to scout locations and fields where people might be working, and then photograph at sunrise to get the light he wanted.<sup>4</sup> When he first got to the Salton Sea, Ludwig took stock of the situation to inform his visual approach to the project. “You look at all these aspects, and you ask the questions,” and once a location is found, “I come repeatedly until I have the perfect shot with the morning light, the right light.”

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<sup>3</sup> [www.gerdludwig.com](http://www.gerdludwig.com)

<sup>4</sup> Gerd Ludwig interview



*Farm workers in a field at dawn near the Salton Sea.<sup>5</sup>*

After reviewing his results with *National Geographic* photo editors, Ludwig also “tried to broaden the coverage” to show the greater region of the Imperial and Coachella Valleys. Perhaps one of the most interesting insights Ludwig had on the Salton Sea was his stated motivation to show the emotions he felt when creating his images.

“I try take images to show I was touched personally by a situation. My mantra is “a great photograph touches the soul and broadens the mind.” It is these two aspects that need to come together, the emotional and the way of expanding your horizon.”

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<sup>5</sup> Gerd Ludwig, Salton Sea Photo

Since Ludwig had a consistent approach and vision in his mind of the end product, he was able to hone in on the images he wanted to make. Ludwig says, “Having been there (the Salton Sea) for an extended period of time you know the places to visit and what time of the day.” Visiting for this extended period of time, Ludwig estimates that “in total I’d say I probably spent about 5 months shooting it.”

Despite his experience and approach, Ludwig still faced difficulties in photographing people, and his experience and structured approach allowed him to adapt to the challenges.

“I actually found that there are not a lot of places where you would wander around and do street shooting, you know, [but] you couldn’t do much of street shooting. You had to really pinpoint your locations.”

Photographing a specific location required advanced planning and scouting, consistent with many other projects Ludwig had shot. There were not people milling about in the desert, so Ludwig found towns like Bombay Beach and the Fountain of Youth Spa where he could meet people and engage beforehand, and continued to follow up afterwards.

“Research is really essential. I find research is really important today to journalism and documentary photography. You don’t know ahead of time. You might walk by pictures that might be of great significance, but you don’t see them, because you don’t understand... I don’t believe in the fresh eye, because the fresh eye is just an excuse for being uninformed.”

“The heat was challenging. I’ve been shooting there at 120-plus degrees (Fahrenheit), I was out there all day.” This type of heat is taxing on the mind and body, and is an added element to the difficulty of photographing at the Salton Sea combined with the remote location. Despite these challenges, Ludwig was able to produce a cover story for National Geographic, and create a substantive body of work he still adds to on occasion.

While Ludwig wanted to document environmental issues in a journalistic fashion, Frost’s angle was mainly artistic. Jeff Frost is a photographer and artist based in Anaheim and Yucca Valley in Southern California. Frost’s work is primarily art oriented and conceptual, comprised of still images taken at night, and composited into video for time lapses. His recent project, *Modern Ruin*, includes much footage from the Salton Sea, especially the south end near Red Hill Marina.





*The three trees Jeff Frost photographed at Red Hill Marina. Vimeo screen grab.*<sup>6</sup>

A rural Utah native, Frost has a strong interest in remote places and abandoned areas stemming from his childhood in Monticello, Utah. He credits this background with his initial interest in the Salton Sea. “I grew up camping and hiking and all that stuff... I sort of instinctively went out there. I’ve always like shooting abandoned buildings.”<sup>7</sup> Once Frost initially visited the Salton Sea, he was “hooked,” repeating the trip various times while using the area to develop his photographic style of time lapse shooting. Similarly, Ludwig was hooked after photographing for

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<sup>6</sup> Jeff Frost, *Modern Ruin: Black Home*, *Vimeo*

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Frost interview

*Men's Journal* on an assignment that was pitched to him. Neither of them sought the Salton Sea out on their own, but after being introduced to the region were compelled to return to photograph.

While Frost visited the Salton Sea many times to photograph, as an artist he did so without journalistic intent, using the experience and feeling of place around the Salton Sea to direct his work there. Frost said "When I would go out there I wouldn't necessarily have a mission" while photographing at the Salton Sea, but it "sort of turned into something" when he compiled the time lapses into *Modern Ruin*. In contrast to Gerd Ludwig's work, Frost discovered the Salton Sea and then continued to create his work in response to the experiences he had there rather than advanced planning. Frost expanded on his approach to photographing the Salton Sea by saying, "it was really an organic process on how all that came to be. It wasn't like some sort of plan." As a seasoned documentary photographer Ludwig's approach was more structured than Frost's.

Like Ludwig, Frost shares a similar attraction to the Salton Sea that many photographers have expressed. "It's such a rich area for the aesthetic sensibilities that appeal to me." For example, there are three well-known abandoned trees<sup>8</sup> that are featured in *Flawed Symmetry of Prediction* and show up extensively in a Google search for "Salton Sea." Ludwig did not include photographs of the three trees in his

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<sup>8</sup> Frost, *Modern Ruin*

final edit, but some of his published photos were taken near the site of the three trees.

Rather than have his final work published in an international magazine or a portfolio website Frost's work was published on Vimeo for anyone to see. Frost recently raised over \$25,000 for his next project, *Warpaint For Trees*, which he is beginning this winter. The positive reception and attention *Modern Ruin* received allowed Frost to garner support for his next project. Overall Frost's artistic work clearly contrast's Ludwig's journalistic approach, with Frost using the visual uniqueness of the area to look at the Salton Sea in an abstract way.

From Gerd Ludwig's traditional long form photographic work published in *National Geographic* to Jeff Frost's experimental art published online, two approaches are used to photograph the same story. The locales are similar, and in some cases identical, but the final product, publication, and goals of each photographer are different. In both cases, Ludwig's work and Frost's work contribute to an understanding of the Salton Sea and the surrounding region.

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