

# Storytelling in Rockport: The Expanding Universe of Maine Media Workshops + College

Emily Sheffer first came to the Maine Media Workshops + College (MMW+C) in Rockport, Maine, as a high school student, attending the two-week Young Artists program in 2008–2009. The Connecticut native had known she wanted to study photography from an early age, so taking classes in digital photography with Jay Gould and Jan Rosenbaum was a dream come true.

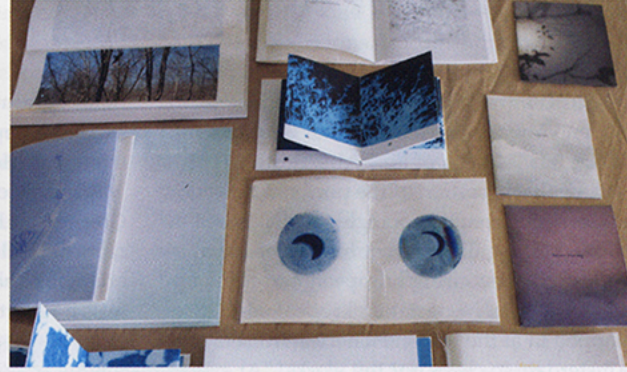
After earning a BFA in photography from MassArt, Sheffer returned to Rockport in 2015 to take Andrea Modica's Intimate Portraits, a class, she recalls, that challenged her "photographic comfort zone." And this October, she once again headed north from her home in Cambridge, MA, to take a turn as the school's book artist-in-residence.

Sheffer was an inspired choice: She founded the Dust Collective, which produces handmade photographically illustrated books by contemporary artists. She designs and publishes several titles each year and takes them to art book fairs in the spring and fall.

For her one-month residency, Sheffer made photographic studies of algae, inspired by the cyanotypes of pioneer photographer Anna Atkins (1799–1871). Using that simple technique—a photogram process using coated paper—she printed images of seaweed, in part, to observe "changes to landscape, space and place over the long-term."

The school's Book Arts and Design program began in 2008 when Charles Altschul, a student of graphic design and aficionado of letterpress printing, was president. His successor, Meg Weston, kept the momentum going when she took the reins in 2012. That year, a book arts studio was built, and shortly thereafter the residency program was established.

Weston notes that the school is expanding on many fronts. In addition to gaining fiber optic connectivity (through a public/private partnership with the Town of Rockport), adding several new buildings and more than doubling the campus size (from 10.5 to 25 acres), MMW+C now offers two certificate programs, in visual



storytelling and collaborative filmmaking, and a three-year mentor-driven, low-residency media arts MFA.

In filmmaking, Weston notes, students tend to be early to mid-career professionals who want to advance their careers, while in photography, the demographic skews towards older students pursuing photography "as inspiration and a creative outlet, but not necessarily as a career."

A couple of years ago, the school started a writing program called the Writers Harbor—"a natural fit," says Weston, "because storytelling is at the core of what we do." As part of the program, this past summer, they hosted several nationally known poets, including Richard Blanco, who read at President Obama's first inauguration.

Weston took a poetry intensive with Blanco and has been working on a chapbook. As part of her welcome at the start of each session, she often shares a poem

with students—something by Mary Oliver, W. S. Merwin, Rumi. A favorite is William Stafford's *The Way It Is* with its image of a thread that each person follows. The thread doesn't change whatever the circumstances and is hard for others to see. "You don't ever let go of that thread," the poet states at the end of the poem.

Weston's personal artistic thread has been volcanoes. Whenever possible, she travels to geologically active areas of the earth, often Iceland or Hawaii, camera in hand. "I avoid the

Above: Emily Sheffer in the Book Arts studio at Maine Media Workshops and a selection of Dust Collective titles. Courtesy of the artist.

Below: Thorne Dining Pavilion, the heart of the Maine Media Workshops campus. Photo: Andrew Todd.

explosive pyroclastic flows," she notes, "and seek out eruptions that are basalt, effusive and more approachable."

Back in Maine, Weston leads an institution that is, in her words, "a dynamic, constantly changing place" because it must keep pace with "technological changes in how we employ media to tell stories." Sheffer, for one, appreciates the fact that the MMW+C continues to support alternative and analog photographic processes even as it explores the latest digital technology. "Fewer and fewer art schools are able to provide those services today," she notes. The school's support and generosity have been crucial to her growth as an artist, every step of the way.

*[As we were going to press, Maine Media Workshops + College announced that Michael Mansfield has been named its new president, to begin in January 2020. Meg Weston announced her retirement last February. Mansfield has been executive director of the Ogunquit Museum of American Art since 2016.]*

Carl Little wrote the foreword to the catalogue for the Barbara Morris Goodbody Collection exhibition at the Maine Museum of Photographic Arts this past fall.

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