

Secret Spaces: Emptiness Reveals Essence of an Artist

Written by Jeannette Ross

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Why photograph a collection of empty spaces? What is there to see in a room devoid of furnishings, wall art, or other decoration?

"It's hard to express," admitted the photographer Xiomáro (see-oh-MAH-ro), whose work now hangs in the Burlingham House Visitor Center at Weir Farm. He was commissioned by the national historic site to photograph the interiors of the Weir House, Weir Studio and Young Studio, all of which were emptied in the process of being renovated.

Seventeen photos of a collection of nearly 150 hang in the visitor center gallery and Xiomáro will give a free talk based on the exhibition Sunday, Feb. 4, from 2 to 3.

It may be argued the emptiness of the rooms enhances their artistic potential as Xiomáro concentrated in large part on details, and also on echoing Impressionistic master J. Alden Weir's style. Weir Farm was the painter's home from 1882 until his death in 1919. Young Studio was the province of Mahonri Young, a prominent sculptor and husband to Weir's daughter Dorothy, also an artist. The couple succeeded Weir in living on the farm.

"Even though the house is vacant, there's still so much of Weir's personality ... on the walls, the doors, textures," Xiomáro said. "This doorknob ... is the same doorknob the founder of American Impressionism touched."

One photo, looking through a window of antique panes of glass at the red house, is very painterly in style. "The sun was strong," Xiomáro said. "It gives a dappling effect. Perhaps," he went on, reflecting on how Weir must have gazed upon that same view, "that in and of itself was an inspiration to him."



The photographer Xiomáro, below, has documented the empty rooms of the main house and studios at Weir Farm, which has mounted an exhibition of some of the photos. The buildings are undergoing renovation, and once that is completed, they will be returned to historical context complete with furnishings. Above is one of the photos from the series.

The photographer named the collection Weir Was Here: Secret Rooms, Doors and Windows.



Xiomáro lived as an artist-in-residence at Weir Farm in March 2011, and during his rambles on the property he came across the three buildings that have been closed to the public during the renovation process. During an open studio event with members of the site's board of trustees, he mentioned he would like to get a look inside the buildings, and he was given a tour. He snapped a few photos, one thing led to another, and he was invited to shoot in earnest.

He visited once a week every week last summer to work on the project. "I logged 1,000 miles coming from Long Island," where he lives, he said.

In approaching the assignment, the question was whether to make it strictly a documentation of the spaces or something more artistic?

"My thought was to do something in the middle," he said. To that end, he put a lot of thought into composition and lighting as he shot. He was sensitive to color and detail. In all, Xiomáro took more than 1,000 pictures.

A congenial and loquacious man, Xiomáro will speak in general terms on Sunday, and then do what he enjoys most — invite questions from his audience.

"Some are technical questions. Some are historical questions," he said of what he has been asked at previous talks. "Some ask about the mental process" in pursuing his assignment.

"Many times people will give a comment or make an observation about my work that I don't see right away," he said. That is something he welcomes.

He said one person told him, "even though the rooms are empty, the photos give a sense of space, a spiritual quality.

"Those are things I'm trying to do, but not always sure I've succeeded."

The park rangers at Weir Farm would agree that he has. "He's provided an artistic aspect" to the documentation," said ranger Cassie C. Werne. "It was like seeing the interiors in a whole new way. They took my breath away."

The collection may be viewed online at xiomaro.com. The photos are available for sale, but he also sends a free souvenir photo to visitors to his website.

Xiomáro will also give talks on March 4, April 1 and May 6, also from 2 to 3. The gallery is small and last month there was a full house, so registration is required. Call 203-834-1896, ext. 12.

A big fan of Weir Farm, Xiomáro has been working to heighten the site's visibility. He sent some photos to Sen. Joseph Lieberman's attention, and within the next few weeks, a similar collection will be mounted in the senator's conference room, which has been renamed The Weir Room. They will stay on display throughout the senator's term.

"I want people to know where they were taken," Xiomáro said of the photos. "I want the photos to be goodwill ambassadors for the park."

Xiomáro's experience at Weir Farm has led to a similar assignment at Sagamore Hill National Historic Site in Oyster Bay, N.Y., the home of Theodore Roosevelt, which will soon undergo renovations. That site has not been empty since the former president moved in, Xiomáro said.