



Dallas skyline against Trinity River has been photographer's focus for decades

By RANDY LEE LOFTIS / The Dallas Morning News
rloftis@dallasnews.com

Published 14 September 2010 02:31 AM

Photographer Bill Brown responds with camera, tripod and eye.

And sometimes the unexpected happens - like a fish jumping out of the water in the middle of the city.

"I was experiencing something that really very few people have experienced," Brown said. "I was like, 'I hope some of that ripple is in my image.' "

Brown, 55, has photographed the Dallas skyline against the Trinity River in every decade since the 1970s. He has recorded on film - no digital - its pinnacles and edges against summer flood and winter snow.

He's caught Dallas during a cattle drive replicated for conventioners and during the skyscraper boom of the 1980s, skeletons incomplete against the clouds.

Last week's flooding brought him back to the Trinity bottoms.

"I'm always seeing something that is new and beautiful," Brown said. "I love the architecture" - especially the angular gradations of the [Hyatt Regency](#) hotel, its glass a fluid mirror.

"That building's always really attracted me to the skyline. I don't get tired of it."

Brown has no sponsor, backer or buyer for his quest to portray the skyline and the river. He is a freelance professional retoucher, enhancing others' commercial photos, but a committed amateur when the shots are his own.

"I'm a very avid enthusiast," he said. "I'm an artist first. That's what drives virtually anything I do."

He learned by emulating techniques of photographers he worked with: tripod, Kodachrome 64 film, the best possible cameras and lenses.

"When I was younger, my artistic sense carried me beyond my knowledge," he said. "I would move to places that I visually liked without really understanding why I liked them.

"The evolution was me as a photographer."

The result is a portfolio of perhaps 2,000 photographs of downtown Dallas, with only a few made into prints and just one - capturing the Texas longhorn cattle drive during the 1984 [Republican National Convention](#) - on display at his home.

Brown's subjects are not strictly environmental. "I've never traveled the Trinity," he said. "I've never done the canoe trip or anything like that" - yet the effect is to connect people with flowing water.

The vision was born out of youthful idealism and a self-imposed challenge. Brown learned that a well-known photograph of the Trinity reflecting the skyline actually was done with a mirror. That struck the young artist as cheating.

"One of the next times it flooded, I was like, 'I'm just going to get out there with my camera and I'm going to get this shot myself. I'm going to see what I can get with the real water,'" he said.

"That's how it started. It just became this trip back on a regular basis to keep photographing the skyline."

Brown honed the vision over decades as he drove north toward downtown from his home in [Cedar Hill](#), stopping often to shoot this new angle or that. A wide-angle lens let him frame downtown between a railroad trestle and a distant bridge. Time-exposures brought revelations such as satellites streaking slowly across the night.

"I just love when you start seeing on the film what you can't see with your natural eye," he said.

Other projects intervened. One that Brown called "Drive Time" records - with a point-and-shoot - the windshield images of his daily commute. Another, documenting the demolition of Reunion Arena, begins with the facility standing. It ends, serendipitously, as the last load of dirt fills a Dumpster on empty ground.

"The sun was hitting it, the dust was kicking up; I was, 'Oh, this is perfect,' " he said. "If I had come any other day or any other time, I would have missed it."

That last picture has the grassy ground of the old arena site in the foreground and the just-erected white arch of the new Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge in the distance. If Brown can find the money, he wants to document the bridge.

A move to North Richland Hills last year ended his daily view of the skyline's best angles from the south. It didn't end the evolution of his art, challenged afresh by the loan of a friend's Contax camera and Zeiss lenses.

The world-class gear can capture any shot, he said.

"I just have to find it."