

AURORA



Striving for imperfection

By Jeff Richardson

Above: Charles Mason stands with his 8-by-10 camera and VW Syncro Westfalia Vanagon at Creamer's Field in Fairbanks in August 2022. UAF photo by Eric Engman.

After spending a lifetime developing his skills behind a camera, Charles Mason found himself longing for big mistakes.

The 63-year-old professor at UAF's Department of Communication and Journalism has led his students through a shifting photographic landscape since his teaching career began in 1990. He started with an emphasis on film in his classes until digital cameras gradually became the dominant technology at the turn of the century. Now even cell phones feature image stabilization, automatic exposures and perfectly aligned pixels. It's never been easier to take a technically fantastic photo.

Mason doesn't think that's an entirely good thing.

"The thing that bugs me is it's so perfect," he said. "It's really hard to screw up in an interesting way."

That reality led directly to his recent fascination with collodion photography, an archaic process associated with the muted tones and grim faces of Civil War-era pictures. It's also a technique that frequently flirts with failure. Invisible specks of dirt or moisture can sabotage a photo.





At top left, a stream flows down a slope east of Eielson Visitors Center in Denali National Park, and, at top right, a footbridge links two shores near Kantishna in Denali. The images were taken in 2018 during a residency Mason held at Denali. Photos by Charles Mason. Bottom: Stand-up paddleboarders pause by the Yukon River in Whitehorse at the Yukon 1000 race start in July 2022. Photo by Charles Mason.

Local environmental conditions add mysterious variables, giving each image its own subtle characteristics, including hints of color. Gauging photo lighting requires intuition because the exposure process is sensitive to invisible ultraviolet rays.

Mason loves those big helpings of uncertainty, raving about the grungy borders and puzzling imperfections that blend technical photography with art.

“If you plan it, then it becomes contrived,” Mason said of those photographic glitches. “If

you just let it happen, it's the gods helping you out."

Mason's first deep dive into collodion happened in 2018, when he was selected for the artist-in-residence program at Denali National Park and Preserve. Artists in the program had previously focused on painting, writing, sculpture or other artistic disciplines. Mason pushed hard for photography to join that roster, stressing the potential of collodion to capture the park in a new way.

"I wrote this grand proposal, and they accepted me," he said. "And then I was like, 'Oh crap, what did I get myself into?'"

Mason hadn't taken collodion on the road before and was unsure how he'd wrangle the chemicals, glass plates and equipment needed to make a photograph in the remote Alaska wilderness. A makeshift darkroom was assembled in the back of a Volkswagen camper van. Between those technical challenges and Denali's frequent bouts of lousy weather, Mason entered his 10-day residency with a modest goal — he'd be thrilled with three good images.



Mason photographs the East Fork of the Toklat River in 2018 during his residency at Denali National Park. Photo by Lisa Pullen.

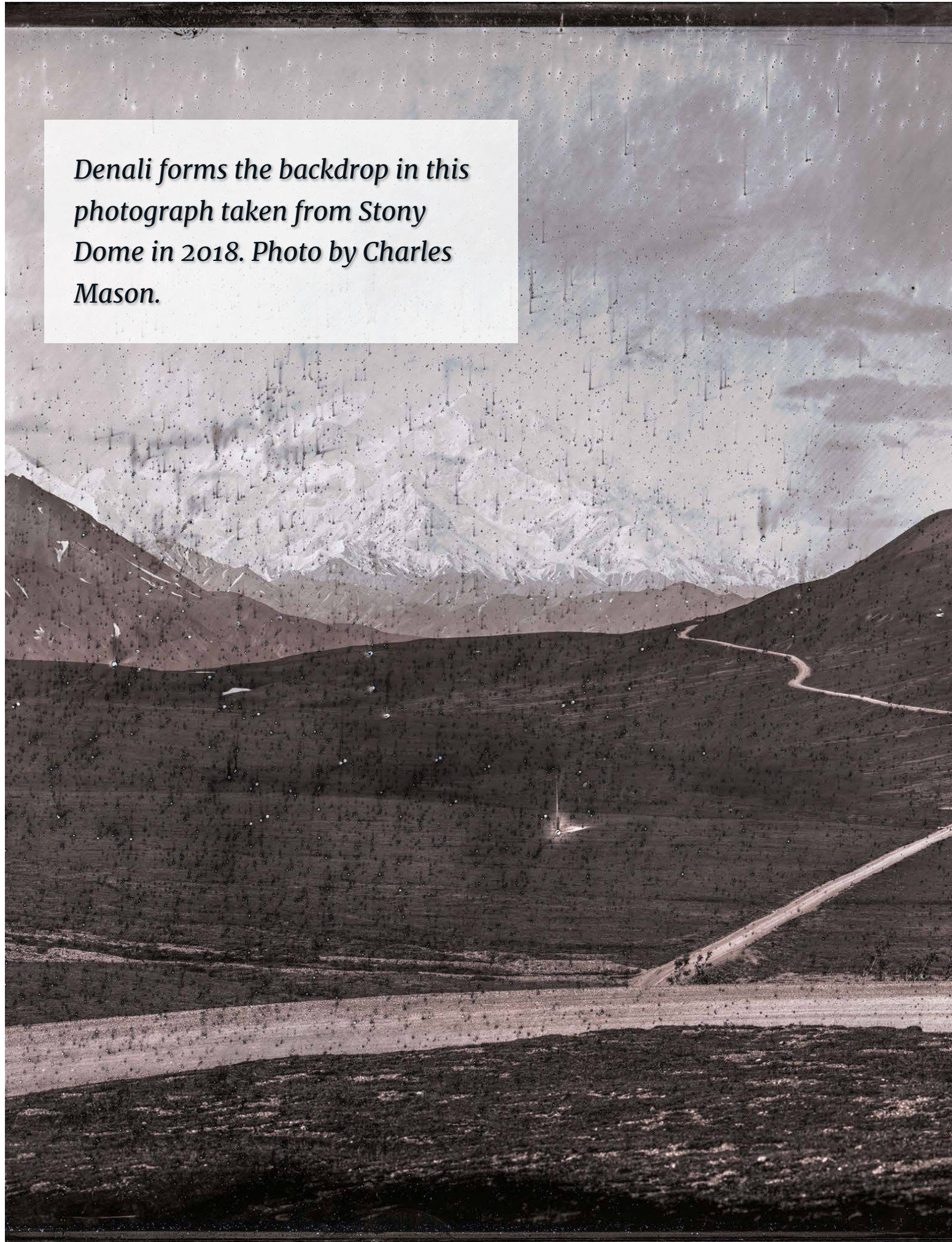
Despite that pessimism, his visit coincided with crystal-clear weather and a stunning view of Denali. If there was going to be a great photo of the big mountain, Mason would have an opportunity to get it.

Mason knew such opportunities don't come along often in Denali park. "And I just totally screwed it up," he said with a chuckle.

Mason pulled out a large print in his office at the Bunnell Building, rapping his knuckles on the desktop as he viewed his signature photo from the residency. Denali is barely visible, obscured by a swirling, cloudy “maelstrom of junk” in the foreground. Mason jokingly calls it “Death to Ansel,” a counterpoint to the iconic, unblemished photo that Ansel Adams took of the mountain in 1947.

Another picture from the trip looks like Denali is getting peppered by meteors. Mason figures that effect was unintentionally created when a passing tour bus covered his photo plate with road dust.

Denali forms the backdrop in this photograph taken from Stony Dome in 2018. Photo by Charles Mason.



The photos, both wildly flawed, are among Mason's favorites. His visit ended with more than two dozen photos, most of which include such quirks, that he deemed worthy of an exhibit. That collection, "[Denali through Collodion](#)," premiered at the Anchorage Museum in May 2021.

"I love this stuff," Mason said. "I love that I don't know what I'm going to get."

'A shot of adrenaline'

The modern process for creating a collodion photograph is largely the same technique that Frederick Scott Archer invented in 1851. It takes advantage of the unique properties of collodion, a clear liquid created by dissolving cellulose nitrate into ether and alcohol. Nineteenth-century doctors originally used it for dressing wounds, thanks to its defining characteristic: Collodion will stick to anything.

That detail also makes it an effective medium for photography. When collodion is poured onto a sheet of glass or metal, it leaves a thin, sticky film behind. After being salted with bromides or iodides and put in a bath of silver nitrate, the plate becomes sensitive to light. If the plate is exposed before it dries, an image will form on its surface several seconds to a few minutes later.

Once rinsed, that plate can serve as a photo negative for reproducible images, a huge step forward from the daguerreotype-style photographs that it replaced.



Mason holds a wet plate negative of an image taken at Marmot Rock during his Denali residency. Photo by Charles Mason.

In all, the process takes about 10 minutes from start to finish. That was warp speed in the 1800s, but it's a significant departure for Mason.

His [online portfolio](#) is filled with offbeat, in-the-moment pictures of dogs, dinosaur sculptures and eccentric characters. That ability to capture amusing, spontaneous scenes as they develop isn't as easily represented in the relatively glacial process required to create a collodion photograph.

Richard Murphy, a former Anchorage Daily News photo editor who twice served as the visiting Snedden chair at UAF's journalism department, said he admires Mason's ability to pivot to a

more deliberate artistic style decades after starting his career in photojournalism.

“Charles has a very sharp eye, and not much passes him by,” Murphy said. “He can see wonderful juxtapositions of things out there in the real world, and he has a wonderful visual sense of humor. Those things aren’t necessarily represented in his collodion work.”

Mason, who fidgets with nervous energy as he discusses collodion, said that departure in style has invigorated him. Making collodion photographs requires a fresh perspective after decades of working with film and digital technologies.

“This is like someone giving me a shot of adrenaline, I don’t want to call it the end, but late in my career,” Mason said. “I just feel like I’m on a whole new path. Collodion is very much part of my future. I anticipate doing it the rest of my life.”

In love with photography

Mason’s embrace of collodion is just the latest chapter in his long fascination with photography, which began when he got his first

camera as a 10-year-old kid in Lexington, Virginia.

It wasn't long before he was working as a stringer for his hometown paper, collecting a few dollars for each published picture. After college, an internship at the Roanoke Times halted any plans to use his new degree in natural science and mathematics.

Mason and his then-wife ended up in Fairbanks after making cold calls to newspapers throughout the West to see if they had any photography positions open. His first offer came from Kent Sturgis, the managing editor at the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. After initially turning down a job to work in distant Alaska, he took Sturgis' advice: "Give it a year. If you don't like it, you can leave."

His two stints at the News-Miner, separated by a year at graduate school in Illinois, changed his life. Most notably, that work included a 1988 trip to Barrow, now called Utqiagvik, where media had begun to pay attention to three gray whales that were stranded in pack ice. Mason's photos of their plight were used in publications around the world, earning him the prestigious Oskar Barnack Award in 1989.

"My cred went way up," Mason said. "It was a big deal. It sort of raised the posture a bit."

The award led to a job teaching photography at UAF, a role he has filled for the past 33 years. His emphasis has slowly shifted from journalism to art, due to changing job markets, but his enthusiasm and knowledge continues to shape a new generation of photographers.

“He’s invisible and present at the same time, which is a great gift”

“Charles as a professor, I think, has had a great deal of influence,” Murphy said. “There have been some wonderful photographers who have come through the UAF program. He has created a pretty talented and devoted bunch of kids through the years.”

JR Ancheta '15, a former student who now works as the chief storyteller at UAF’s Geophysical Institute, said Mason’s love of photography, interest in new techniques and unobtrusive style were infectious. After initially resisting the call of collodion, he now travels with his own bellows camera and supplies.

“He’s invisible and present at the same time, which is a great gift,” Ancheta said. “He’s able to see the moment and capture it.”



Mason poses with his VW Syncro Westfalia Vanagon as seen through the viewfinder of his 8-by-10 camera at Creamer's Field in August 2022. UAF photo by Eric Engman.

Mason plans to teach for a few more years before wrapping up his career at UAF, but he won't be idle in his retirement. He remarried in 2021 and plans to relocate to Anchorage to be with his wife, Lisa Pullen, and do more traveling. He'd like to work on a few photography books, including at least one that focuses on collodion. The "Denali through Collodion" exhibit could go on the road to other museums.

He'll continue to have a camera in his hands, as he has since he was a kid.

“I love photography — I have my whole life since I was 10,” Mason said. “I feel like I’m one of those lucky people who never had a job.”



Denali stretches across two frames in this diptych of images taken during Mason's residency in 2018. He jokingly dubbed it "Death to Ansel," a counterpoint to Ansel Adams' famous photograph of Denali. Photo by Charles Mason.





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