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# the South

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# Savannah Contemporaries

## Kirt Witte

The millions of tourists that visit Savannah every year are sure to go home and either deliver rolls and rolls of film to their local drug store film lab, or dump hundreds of digital photos onto their computer to be printed at a much anticipated later date. Some may even leave Savannah with a professional photograph of what they've seen: the Talmadge Bridge, The Mercer House, a shot of River Street. These folks feel satisfied with the Savannah they have captured and brought home to their corner of the world.

However, artist Kirt Witte believes there is more to photographing Savannah than what can be seen through the window of a trolley tour. Lately, Witte has embarked on a journey to find and reveal what he calls, "The Other Savannah." Witte's photographs include some of the usual sights to see in Savannah, but from unusual perspectives, such as the way the Tybee Lighthouse casts its shadow as viewed from atop the structure, or a shot of the sunlight dancing on its massive lens. Of his inspiration to begin this project he says, "I think it was just the beauty of Savannah. The architecture, the squares, the wildlife, the trees, and finally the beach. Being a landlocked Dallasite [Texas] for most of my life, these were all things I was unfamiliar with. Dallas is just big and flat with no trees and far, far from the ocean."

Another incident also got Witte thinking: "I was taking a walk down Tattnell Street with my wife and we both looked up on the side of this 150-plus-year-old oak tree and saw a woman's shoe nailed to the side of it. We both looked at each other and said 'Only in Savannah' at the same time! I challenge anyone to find it!" It's images like these that impress upon Witte the importance of preserving what he sees as the secretive life of Savannah. People don't

### "The Tybee Lighthouse Shadow"

This was not shot in a helicopter. Witte actually hung out on the rail with a wide angle lens to get this unique view of the Tybee Lighthouse. To Witte, this photo visually represents the entire Other Savannah project. "Pay attention to the details, otherwise you will miss a lot about Savannah."

**Manger Rooftop View**  
Atop the Manger building in downtown Savannah, Witte strives to be different and obtain non-typical views of typical Savannah.



take time to notice the entire world living right below the facades of our city. His goal is to show visitors and Savannahians, "what they do not realize right in front of them, or what Savannah looks like from a unique point of view."

The uniqueness of Witte's viewpoint can be attributed to several aspects. He says "[I] strive very hard to be different than everyone else out there. I started out looking at those same 20 postcard shots of Savannah and said to myself that is what I'm not going to do! Maybe I shoot a 360-degree panorama, maybe I shoot it with a wide angle lens down low, or maybe I shoot it from an airplane. It doesn't matter. I just have to try to be the most unique that I can." This commitment to distinctiveness and his clean, crisp composition give his photographs an authenticity, and a stark attention to detail that makes them come off the page. "I would say that I am a detail-oriented travel photographer. I am now four years into my Savannah vacation! Not really, but I like to think so. It gives me a fresh perspective on things when I shoot," he says.

Witte pays close attention to the way lighting shapes his subjects. This is used to stunning effect in his newest photos of the Jepson Center, in which he explores the aesthetic qualities of the building sans art. The bare space accentuates the natural lighting and the

illusionary quality of the lines and curves in the building's glass and wood structures. His series of marsh shots focus on the chameleon-like light and shadows of the sun on the marsh grass, and creates the feeling that you are looking over his shoulder as he is taking the picture. Digital advances in photography have allowed Witte to accomplish some of this clarity. He says, "As a consequence of my 3D and

**...freedom to shoot just about anything and anywhere I want. It is very liberating artistically to know that I can 'fix it in post' if I want to. Therefore, I shoot things that other photographers might shy away from."**

graphics skills I have developed over the years, I now have a lot of freedom to shoot just about anything and anywhere I want. It's very liberating artistically to know that I can 'fix it in post' if I want to. Therefore, I shoot things that other photographers might shy away from." However, he's quick to say that he does little to doctor what nature, or Savannah's subjects, give him. "The ironic thing about my technical abilities is that when it comes to working on my images on the computer, I'm a minimalist. I rarely manipulate my images and when I do, it's something very minor like a dust spot or a power line removal."

Surrounded by a large crowd of critics, fans, art students and teachers an artist like Witte

takes a major risk striking out to accomplish something like revealing the other side of a city. His challenge is two-fold: producing photographs that are original in some way while at the same time swimming through the sea of sameness in a town steeped in hundreds of years of tradition. He laughs, "I came from the real world, so to speak, and I still don't know much about fine art. I have come to know it

and appreciate more than ever, but at the same time, I will never consider myself a fine artist. [My colleagues] think I am too mainstream and my work is too typical. So it kinda makes me laugh because I try so hard to be different." His years working in graphic design and 3-D

animation, including as a professor at SCAD, have taught him a few things about who he is as an artist. "One person whom I admire as a fine artist," he says, "said that my work is kind of that 'National Geographic stuff'.... I think it was intended as a shot, but since shooting for National Geographic Magazine has been one of my life's longest goals, I took it as a major compliment."

Not surprisingly, Witte cites Ansel Adams as an influence on his work, and similarities can be drawn between the two. Both have an eye for capturing just the right image with impeccable timing. Witte's ability to balance the focus somewhere between the foreground and the background harkens back to Adams' photo



**Witte's Self Portrait**

In the Jepson Center where he camped out for nine days "just shooting." See more of Witte's Jepson shots on p. 66.

series of Yosemite National Park in the '40s and '50s. Witte's choice to tell the whole story of a moment, the shadows and the clouds, even the way things change as they are viewed from different angles, pay tribute to Adams' attention to all the details.

His decisions about what details to include in his collection of pictures of a city as colorful as Savannah can be a challenge. Witte says his selection process includes things that catch his eye, or are visually interesting to him in some way. However, of narrowing down the candidates he says, "As this project developed, I came up with an ongoing list of things to be shot, but the list never ended. As I would shoot things, I would then find something else wonderful to photograph and add that to my 'mental list' of locations. Finally, I realized I would never finish this project at that rate, so I put them all on paper and said 'This is it'."

Yet another challenge to the project is the diversity of Savannah itself. Years of photographic study may only capture a percent of the walks of life that call this city home. As a result, Witte's upcoming book of these photos, "The Other Savannah," due out this fall, will include interviews with Savannahians in order to include the human side of the city in the project. "I am not visually interested in many parts of Savannah, and therefore don't plan on shooting those areas. However, that being said, I want a good cross section of people to tell the true story of her [Savannah's] people. I will be interviewing everyone from lawyers, to artists, to hot dog vendors, to shrimp boat captains. I have set no limits on potential people to interview," Witte says. He hopes this tactic will help to round out the book, again setting it apart from the other portrayals of the city as being one-sided, flat, or static, three adjectives omitted from his artistic vocabulary.

You can get a sneak-peek of the Jepson Center for the Arts at the Telfair Museum, by visiting Witte's website. The site also has his other collections of photos, including his new panoramic shots. Look for Witte's upcoming first book, "The Other Savannah" featuring his photography and interviews of Savannahians coming out this fall. He is also planning an exhibition to coincide with the release of the book.

See Witte indefinitely at: Alvida Art Gallery, 912.355.5656. 7303 Abercorn St., [www.theothersavannah.com](http://www.theothersavannah.com)