



## The Picture Show

# Housing Projects And Empty Lots. How Chanell Stone Is Reframing Nature Photography

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Chanell Stone photographs places like overgrown lots and green spaces at public housing projects, often including herself in the frame. Above, "In search of a certain Eden," 2019, Brooklyn.

*Chanell Stone*

When most people think about traditional nature photography, black and white images of towering mountains and rushing rivers in the American West are often what comes to mind. It's a genre that was made popular by men like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, whose work in the early 1900s often positioned the natural world as something that is remote, wild and untouched.

But missing from this tradition is another kind of landscape — the natural beauty found within cities.



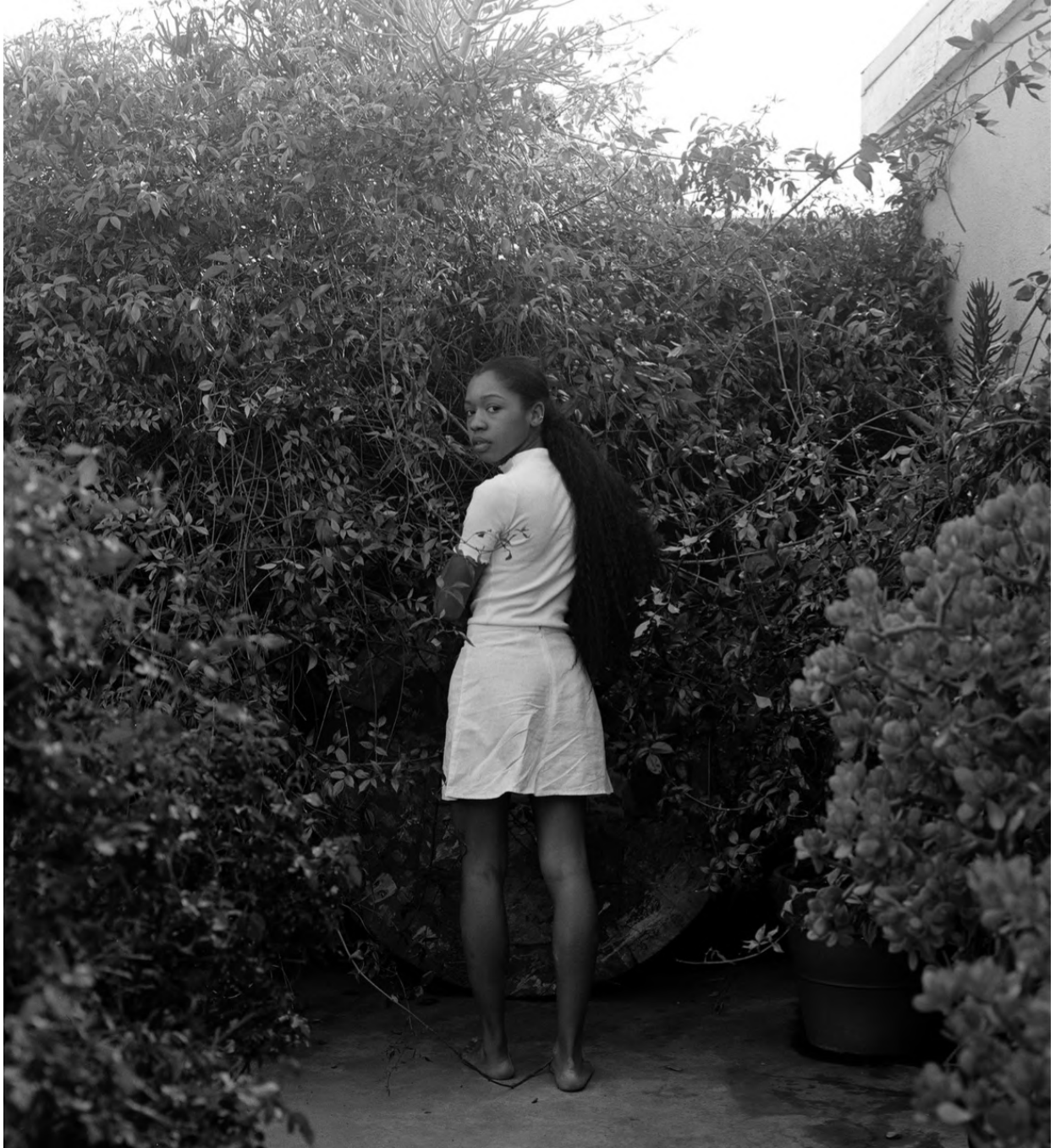
"For many Black people, rural nature, places like national parks, aren't very accessible," says Chanell Stone. Above, "Imperial Courts," 2018, Los Angeles.

*Chanell Stone*

It's in these settings that the California-based photographer Chanell Stone, 29, challenges this genre of photography. Working within predominantly Black neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Los Angeles and her home city of Oakland, Stone photographs locations like overgrown lots and green spaces at public housing projects, often including herself in the frame.

"For many Black people, rural nature, places like national parks, aren't very accessible," says Stone. "Sometimes it's the cost, but more often the issue is societal. As Black people, it feels like these rural spaces aren't for us. I want to turn that idea on its head."





"In the Overgrowth," 2019, Los Angeles.

*Chanell Stone*

The data seems to back this up. Black Americans account for less than 2% of national park visitors, according to a 2018 report published by the George Wright Society.

Rather than leave the city in search of natural beauty, Stone heads into it. "It's important to see the beauty in the most overlooked and mundane urban environments," she says. "Growing up in a low-income neighborhood, I saw how the

area was cast aside compared to other areas of Los Angeles. It made me think about why it was disregarded. But now these same places where I grew up are being gentrified. So apparently there was value there all along."



"Fig," 2019, Oakland.

*Chanell Stone*

Stone's work offers a new take on basic questions about nature photography — questions like where is nature located? Who is the genre for? Who gets to practice nature photography and what even counts as nature anyway?

Stone says the answers to these questions have almost always been seen through a very specific lens — one that is white, male and rooted in a narrative of westward expansion that largely erases Native communities from the landscape. When Stone photographs herself in the middle of a patch of plants at a public housing complex in Brooklyn, she makes these implicit biases clear for the viewer.

"Early landscape photography perpetuates a cultural amnesia. There is another kind of forgetting and erasure happening now with gentrification in these Black communities where I am making pictures. That is why I put myself in these places and photos," she says. "It is important to see a Black body in this space before gentrification erases the history and aesthetics of these neighborhoods. I want to reaffirm my presence, especially as a Black woman."



"It's important to see the beauty in the most overlooked and mundane urban environments," says Stone. Above, "Balcony Year," 2019, Oakland.

*Chanell Stone*

The images are all part of Stone's series, "Natura Negra," which she describes as an act of reclamation.

"Growing up, I only understood Black people's relationship to nature through slavery. My textbook had two pages of Black history: slavery, the Emancipation Proclamation, and MLK. That's it."

Stone says she wants to correct this reductionist history, and show that Black people have a relationship with the land beyond one of terror and oppression. In her own family's photography archive, for example, she found pictures of her grandparents on camping trips.



"Lorimer Court," 2019, Brooklyn.

*Chanell Stone*

In one photograph from the *Natura Negra* series, Stone poses in her grandmother's backyard, a space filled with aloe and other succulents suited for the Los Angeles sun. She is shirtless, staring directly at the camera. She explained that it is a place where she feels safe.

"I want Black people to be able to move within these spaces without worrying about their life being taken," she says.



In "Potted Earth," a 2019 portrait in Los Angeles, Stone poses in her grandmother's backyard.

*Chanell Stone*

That feeling of safety, she says, starts with reinforcing a sense of closeness to the land.

"I want Black people to understand our connections to nature, both urban and rural," says Stone. "I want to destroy the notion that it isn't for us."