



Amateur photographer from Lincoln takes home international award



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DENTON -- Despite forcing himself out of bed at 5 a.m. or so, David McCleery didn't have much of a plan for when he arrived at the Spring Creek Prairie Audubon Center on Thursday morning.

This trip was mostly a reconnaissance mission, he said as he carried a Hasselblad 501-cm camera mounted to a tripod over his shoulder and walked along the trail.

"I don't hunt, so, in a sense, it's a way to do that," he said.

McCleery is the store director at Russ's Market at 1550 S. Coddington Ave., and has been working for the grocery in some capacity or another over the past 40 years.

He started to get into photography only 2 1/2 years ago.

"Really, I'm just trying to do photos that please myself," he said.

And if others enjoy them, he said, even better.

Earlier this month, he received an email that confirmed that a panel of judges with ties to National Geographic, Time, the New York Times and a host of other international publications, were fond of his work. McCleery submitted a photo in the amateur landscape photography competition of the Paris-based Prix de la Photographie (Px3). The email told him he had won, and invited him to fly to France for the awards ceremony.

He didn't bother to look up the cost of a last-minute flight, but was nonetheless excited to have won.

McCleery shot the winning photo, which was of seven black-and-white trees on the horizon of the cloud-covered Nine-Mile Prairie in northwest Lincoln, last February. He entered just the one photo, compared to the photographers who placed silver and bronze, who each submitted multiple shots of their subjects.

It was not lost on him that his stark interpretation of the still Nebraska plains somehow bested the silver-medal subject, the Matterhorn.

“You can go right to the edge of Lincoln and take a photograph that’s appreciated,” he said.

So far, he has done them with considerable limitations. He shoots with black-and-white film only, with one lens (an 80 millimeter) and develops them in a darkroom at his house. He’s only begun to experiment with a second camera, of the handmade pinhole variety, which is even more primitive than his first.

“It’s a way to really slow down the process,” he said, and he’s OK with slow.

He ventured to Nine-Mile Prairie five times before capturing the shot he wanted. He took his favorite photograph, an image of the Roca grain elevator, after it caught his eye on crack-of-dawn drives to his mother’s home in Crete. One day he decided to set up his camera across from it and take a 3 1/2-minute long exposure of it at 4 a.m.

“It’s as lovely as anything you can find in the world,” he said.

On Sept. 7, a selection of his photos will be on display on the first floor of the County City Building, 555 S. 10th St. The exhibit, titled “Close Proximity,” will run through November.