

YOSEMITE PEOPLE

“For the first time, a photographer is entering Yosemite as the WPA photographers of the 1930s might have, with a shifted priority on people rather than nature.”

– Carol McCusker, PhD

At Yosemite National Park, more than five million annual visitors are supported by thousands of park rangers, workers, and volunteers. Over two years and 19 visits to the Park, photographer Jonas Kulikauskas documented the complex and contradictory relationships between these visitors, workers, and Yosemite’s “pristine” natural wonders. As crowds clamor to take the perfect selfie with Half Dome in the background, families cool off in Tenaya Creek, and servers prep the Grand Dining Room at the Ahwahnee Hotel, all seem to share in the same unstated wish: Let’s all hurry to the same place to be alone.

It is a bold photographer who attempts to bring a fresh view to this iconic landscape. For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, artists presented Yosemite in a reverential light. Native people have inhabited the valley for thousands of years, but Western artists have depicted a landscape seemingly untouched by humans—a cathedral of wilderness. With the lens of a street photographer, Kulikauskas instead turns his focus back to the crowds. The photographs of Yosemite People contrast the massive scale of nature with the everyday happenings of a world famous tourist attraction. Here you will see the waterfall, but not without the parking lot at its base.

Photography curator Carol McCusker sees Kulikauskas’ images as, “distinctly twenty-first century in their blending of the human with the hallowed.” And they beg an equally modern question: How do we enjoy our most beloved places while promoting the kind of development and use that may advance their demise? How to preserve Yosemite’s unique bounty is a continuous challenge. Can we protect our parks before we love them to death?