

# Local Photographer's Exhibition at SMC Museum of Art Reveals Hidden Bay Area Gem

By Adam Blake



"Black Meadow Pool"

Photography by Stephen Joseph

Stephen Joseph has spent the majority of his career photographing nature in Northern California, from Yosemite to Mount Diablo. He enjoys challenging himself to capture both famous and everyday sights in unique ways. Unlike his other collections, however, the name of his most recent exhibition at the Saint Mary's College Museum of Art will not ring a bell for most locals: Vasco Caves.

Located in Brentwood at the picturesque foothills of Mount Diablo, the Vasco Caves Regional Preserve is not open to the general public and can be viewed by tours only. The sight includes striking rock formations formed by wind erosion over millions of years, rare wildlife such as the endangered red-legged frog, and authentic Native American rock art dating back nearly 10,000 years. All of this added up to a photographer's dream for Joseph.

"Vasco always looked good,"

he said. "It is one of those special places I was very fortunate to photograph. We really don't have any other spot like that."

Joseph took advantage of all the unique textures created from the rocks, reflective pools of water, and surrounding landscape to capture stunning images.

"I photographed a lot of the caves from the inside looking out, and some of them are full 360-degree views so that you see the back of the cave as well as the entrance to the cave," Joseph said. "The Native Americans lived in these caves so I wanted to create images that kind of look like this is what it'd be like living in one."

Initially contracted to photograph the sight for the East Bay Regional Parks District, Joseph found himself returning to Vasco time and again. Ten years later he had acquired an impressive collection of images capturing the sight.

Since the Vasco Caves are

closed off to the public and not commonly known, the photographs will help to expose many East Bay residents to the location for the very first time. In fact, this is the first time these photographs have ever been displayed, although Joseph wrapped up shooting in 2005. "It was nice for me to have a whole group of photographs that no one's really seen before," Joseph said.

Saint Mary's art curator Julie Armistead worked with Joseph before and was impressed when he came in to show her photographs from Vasco.

"It intrigued me because it's such a little known thing, like a secret here in the Bay Area," Armistead said. "I thought it would be really cool to know more about it, and if I was interested in it, that lots of other people would be interested in it, too."

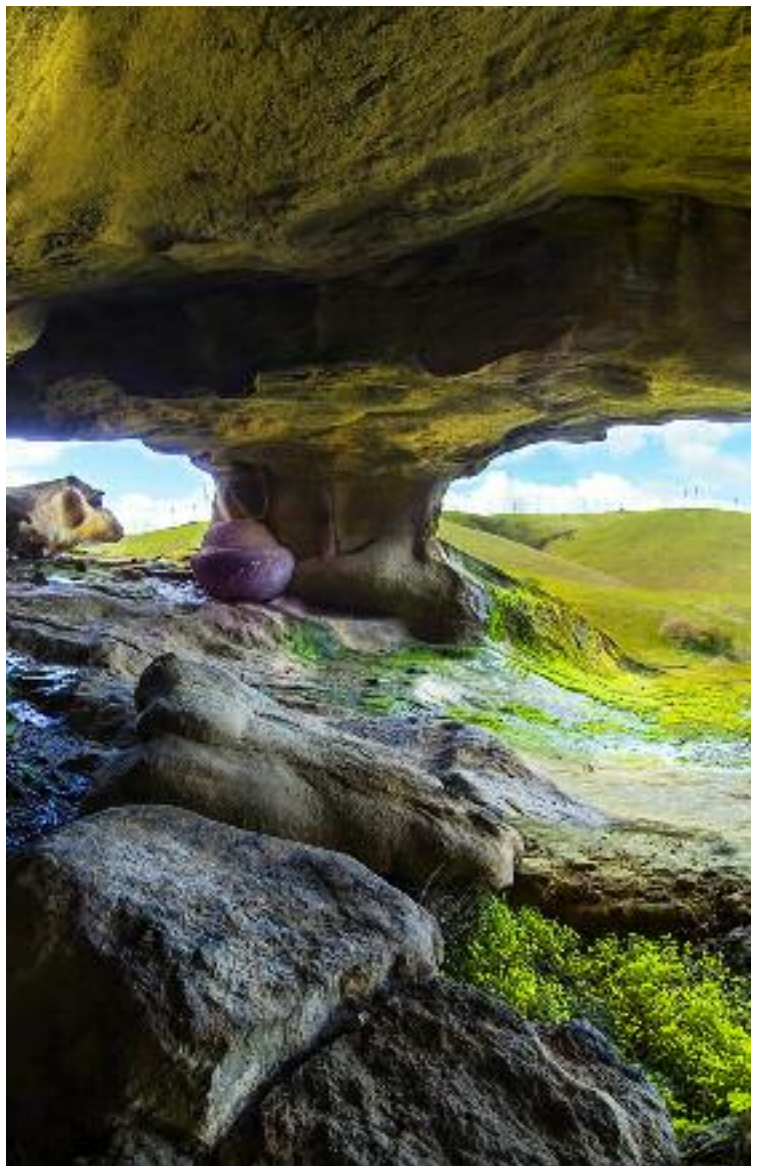
After seeing the photographs, Armistead took a tour of the sight for herself, reinforcing her belief that it would make for a quality exhibition.

"It was a really interesting little bit of secret information about the Bay Area, so I spoke with my colleagues and we agreed that it would be a good show," Armistead said.

Armistead and Joseph selected 24 photographs out of hundreds that would work best together. The photographs are printed onto heavy cotton paper and displayed uniquely without picture frames, held in place with magnets.

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