

LIMITS: Tracy anticipates ‘a slow strangulation’ of the industrial age

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important. Adapting, Brett ate his first red meat in nearly a decade — a bison burger in South Dakota.

They each carried a tent, a sleeping pad, a 15-degree down sleeping bag, rain gear, bike tools and “a joke of a first-aid kit.”

Brett also carries a titanium spork that he “absolutely adores;” a pair of jeans, which he calls his “weighty luxury item;” and a piece of antler given to him by “a genius fiddler.”

They slept in tents on Little League fields, business parks and church handicap ramps.

But they tried to find shelter whenever possible. Usually that meant hitting up the guy behind the counter of Subway — hey man, do you know a place where we could crash?

“When you roll into a town, and you know you don’t have any place to stay, you’re not hesitant to start asking. What have you got to lose? It’s going to be cold. I’d rather be sleeping inside.”

Necessary trespass

Back in Davis, Brett meets his friends around 6 p.m. near the Little League fields on H Street. His features are smooth and sleepy, his brown hair short and wild. He is a small man, but moves with a quiet confidence that leads people to follow.

Beer and vegetable kabobs in hand, he leads them past the road’s dead end and through a gate.

They walk the train tracks and pass under the Covell Boulevard overpass.

It’s dark. Can’t see. Muffled car sounds above.

They walk. Behind them, a light flashes on, shielding a vague mass in white — a bum. A quick scan? A warning?

Brett keeps going, bringing them to a fence. A sign:

PRIVATE PROPERTY
NO LOITERING
VIOLATORS WILL BE
PROSECUTED

Then a gate armed with three strings of barbed wire and four padlocks. Brett pulls it out, creating an opening in the middle. Everyone slips through.

No moon. Still can’t see well.

They walk. Soft dirt. Tall grass. Hard stone. Someone kicks glass. It tink-tink-tinks over concrete.

“Watch your step,” Brett says. “It gets kind of rocky out here.”

They arrive. People chat, crack open bottles of Fat Tire.

Armed with a headlamp, Brett lifts up a salvaged blue tarp and gathers wood he’s stored. Makes a fire.

When it breaks down to coals, he gets a rusty hunk of steel with open-air strips on top: a makeshift grill. Kabobs — red peppers, onion, mushrooms, tofu, pineapple, cherry tomatoes. They wash it down with more beer.

Lifting above the horizon, an orange harvest moon dwarfs faraway Monopoly houses — Wildhorse — and the silent, tiny traffic gliding over County Road 102.

Broken progress

Last spring, four months after Stage 1, Brett spent his own money riding solo down the California coast to San Diego. His riding partner opted out. “I think for Joe, it was more like a once-in-a-lifetime kind of adventure.”

For Brett, it was only a beginning. He started Stage 2 in March and, over 30 days, captured the quays of the Richmond Shipyard, a deserted refinery in Ventura and a nuclear power plant tucked away on the Southern California coast.

While exploring the San Francisco Naval Shipyard at Hunter’s Point, Brett followed the direction of graffiti — heaven this way — and found what he now calls “Blue Room.”

Broken glass sprinkled in a carpet of green moss, a floor-turned-mirror under a thin sheet of standing water and a silence punctuated only by breezy gusts and the caws of gulls give this place an “ethereal beauty.”

Its otherworldly character imbues this space with an undeniably spiritual, perhaps even divine, essence, Brett writes. “It’s one of the most breathtaking interiors I’ve found myself in.”

But “Illuminated” is “not a travel diary, a form of esoteric post-industrial tourism, a vacation or a pleasure ride. It’s difficult and lonely work I have no intention of romanticizing.”

He has no intention of demonizing industrialization either. After all, it gave us printing presses, railroads, automobiles,

“... *The inability to drive oil production beyond current levels will soon find it arcing steeply downward, ushering in the final chapters of humanity’s industrial phase.*”

Brett Tracy
author of “The Illuminated Thread”

Follow his trip

Find “The Illuminated Thread” at <http://www.illuminatedthread.com>

Check out Brett Tracy’s 2,400-mile route to Houston at <http://tinyurl.com/yev9cyl>

telephones, airplanes, computers, the Internet “and every sort of wonder-gadget.” They were all part of the “heroic effort to exploit the environment in pursuit of progress.”

And people think humanity’s sheer intellectual prowess will carry the species ever higher until “we’re living in space colonies, taking space cruises to Mars and driving in flying cars,” Brett says, laughing.

This idea of inevitable human “progress” is “the dominant religion among our time.”

But that world will end as oil, natural gas, coal — what he calls “stored, ancient sunlight” and our “one-time allotment of hydrocarbon resources” — run out.

“The Industrial Age was a very special time — it was a blip, basically — in the larger story of the human species: this quick, intense period where we took all this energy out of the ground and burnt it up really fast.

He laughs. “We put f---ing humans on the moon for God’s sakes!

“We’ve been borrowing from the future... but the inability to drive oil production beyond current levels will soon find it arcing steeply downward, ushering in the final chapters of humanity’s industrial phase. The long view will reveal the industrial age to be a non-repeating bell-curve.”

The decay won’t happen in an apocalypse. Instant world destruction is our other major myth, Brett says, and it takes many forms: asteroid impact, annihilation by aliens, a wild-fire, virus or some other event where “everyone’s getting raptured off the face of the Earth.”

Unstoppable progress and apocalyptic doom — we view the world and ourselves through these two stories. They tell us who we are as a species, why we do what we do, and where we’re going.

Less and less

Brett has a different story. His has no spaceship cars, no fiery end.

Two hundred years of industrialization gave the world many gifts, he admits. But they all came with strings attached to a foundation made of fossil fuels. As those resources dwindle, the foundation will crack. So-called alternative fuels will fail us, Brett says, for they too, ultimately trace their roots back to a functional industrial base.

Solar panels need silica sand from quarries bored by equipment chugging gas. Turning the sand into silicon requires temperatures above 2,000 degrees Celsius in large-scale factories.

Corn ethanol feeds off an agriculture dependent on massive amounts of fossil fuels to move water, fertilize the soil and power farm equipment.

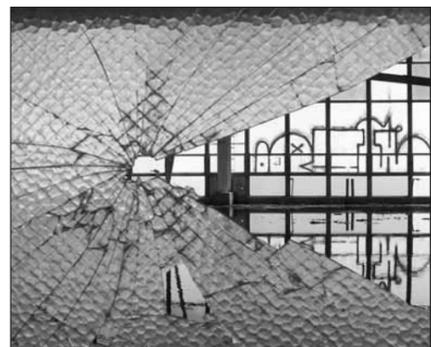
Wind farms require steel and fiber-glass-reinforced polyester turbines made in big factories and transported on ocean freighters and tractor-trailers over asphalt.

“They’re all part of the industrial world,” Brett says.

Americans are scrambling to keep their cars, suburban houses and other industrial luxuries by any means necessary. “We will not let go of our perceived entitlements easily. In this country, motoring is not a luxury, it’s a right. It’s our non-negotiable way of life.”

“But uh-uh,” Brett says, shaking his head, “not going to happen,” even if “we put solar panels on every f---ing square inch of rooftop from here to Tokyo.

“There’s no free lunch in Nature in terms of energy. People seem to think someone’s on it; someone’s working on an alternative that will be able to run things on the scale



BRETT TRACY/COURTESY PHOTOS

Brett Tracy captured the nation’s dependence on a dwindling supply of fossil fuels in his “ongoing bicycle-mounted research project” called “The Illuminated Thread.” Clockwise from top: abandoned quays at the Richmond Shipyards in March and the San Francisco Naval Shipyard at Hunter’s Point where graffiti directed Brett to the “Blue Room” with its “other worldly character.” Above right, Brett and his traveling partner cross Interstate 5 earlier this month near Newman, Calif. Above left, Brett stops along a highway with a 6 percent downgrade as he leaves Black Hill, S.D., in October 2008.

we run on now.

“It’s a fantasy, and it’s a dangerous one.”

Brett holds up his hand in an upturned claw — like Hamlet clutching Yorick’s skull. “We need to hold it up and say, ‘Look what we built — amazing.’ But also, ‘This is tragic; this is a mistake.’”

The end won’t come in a moment, but as “a slow strangulation,” a gradual fall similar to the rise in fossil fuel use over the past 200 years.

Food production and the world’s population will see similar decreases. Based on his research, Brett estimates the planet can harness enough sunlight to support about a billion people without hydrocarbon energy.

Discovering the last oil fields and developing new energy technology will pick up some slack, but “it’s not enough.”

“Instead of an age of exuberance, we’re entering an age of contraction. Instead of super-abundance ... it’s a condition of limits and having to work with less and less.”

Brett sees himself as a teacher, artist, salvage anthropologist, guide and prophet.

“We don’t have a lot of stuff from the fall of Rome, because it was a period of turmoil, confusion and decline; people were worried about having their needs met.”

“A record is a valuable thing. Let’s document (the industrial world) before it falls apart ... at its most hectic and troubled moment, still chugging away on fumes.

“By photographically preserving these places, in a certain sense, they are saved from death.”

The future will ensure industrial ruins receive more than just Brett’s photographic salvation. Refineries, power plants, solar fields — ironically, these “industrial leftovers” will nurture post-industrial life as people retool them.

Absent cars, freeways will morph into bike-ways, walking paths, shelters and rainwater catch basins. Derelict nuclear power plants, too, will capture rain. Cars will become homes, toolkits and rusty ramparts.

Ultimately, Brett wants “Illuminated” to help people “accept the impossibility of preventing the industrial age’s conclusion, face the coming age with courage.”

But he’s setting no endgame on “delivering the good word.” If the project “were a game,” Brett says, “the object would be to keep playing.”

He’s lining up future stages through the Deep South and up the Eastern seaboard to New York. Then he wants to complete a loop, traveling along the Rust Belt back to Chicago. Beyond that, he’s thinking about crossing the Atlantic to visit the ancestral roots of industrialization and globalization — England.

From there, he might hit Germany, Russia, Japan and China, which are all high on his list.

Along the way, he wants to periodically bring the project out of the Internet for events and gallery exhibitions.

He thinks all this could take five years, maybe six — but he’s not too worried about keeping a strict timeline.

“My hope is that the thread will evolve onto a sustainable organism, capable of continuing indefinitely. The world accommodates by offering effectively endless places to explore.”

The beginning

The kabobs finished, everyone mills

around the fire, chatting. A couple of people are texting on their cell phones. Others talk about Facebook.

Brett has the urge to say something but checks himself. Mass realization, he knows, will come slowly. But he’s there to ease the transition, to help people find meaning and courage in a post-industrial life.

“I’m guiding them.”

Brett starts walking to the water tower. The band follows. People climb inside through the funneled bottom. Complete darkness except a perfect circle of moonlight at the top. Splattered green and white paint like a Jackson Pollock painting. Big cave echoes.

Someone yells, “Penis!”

Penis! — Penis! — Penis!

They squeeze back out the bottom as if it were some industrial womb.

They are born to some place strange, surrounded by a nonsensical bricolage: a wayward fire hydrant, an Xbox 360 in splinters, socks, pet bowls and half-buried workmen’s gloves reaching out of the earth.

A couple feet away, concrete stairs and twisted rebar lead to nowhere.

Graffiti everywhere:

KKK

F--- the Police

I *heart* Weed

The Revolution Begins

Shards of a shattered piggy bank litter the ground. A matching bra and panties — red with black outlines of hearts and stars — matted into stone by water and time. A book titled, “How to Win Friends and Influence People,” has been turned into an ashtray.

Like the cave paintings at Lascaux, black handprints climb 10 feet up a steel tower beam. Amidst the paint: “2012: The End.”

Brett scales the tower’s ladder like a spider. Others follow, awkwardly.

He knows that, until last year, developers wanted to turn this place into Cannery Park, a mix of 600 apartments and a 20-acre business park.

The project died when the developer canned the project, but the underlying desire to improve, develop, expand, progress — that’s still there.

“They see it as a void, as an in-between space: it’s between this previous function and before this new development. It’s this sort of non-space.”

Brett has a different view. “I see the vast potential. I see gardens out there. I see people watching that recovery process and literally watching the earth retake that space, bust up the concrete and break through it.”

“A spiritual healing,” he calls it.

“You’re seeing this bionic recovery before your eyes,” he says. “Get used to it.”

One-hundred acres all around. People slowly spin to take it all in: the firmament of light over Nugget Market; traffic on Covell; F Street running along North Davis and then black farmland; the Gateway shopping complex in Woodland; radio towers blinking red; and far off in the distance, the glittering cityscape of Sacramento.

It all feels way off, like another place. Not here.

It feels like history.

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WAYNE TILCOCK/ENTERPRISE PHOTO

Brett Tracy and his friends eat, drink and talk in late January around a makeshift fire circle he built at the old Hunt-Wesson cannery site — “the Brownlands” — before leaving on his trip.