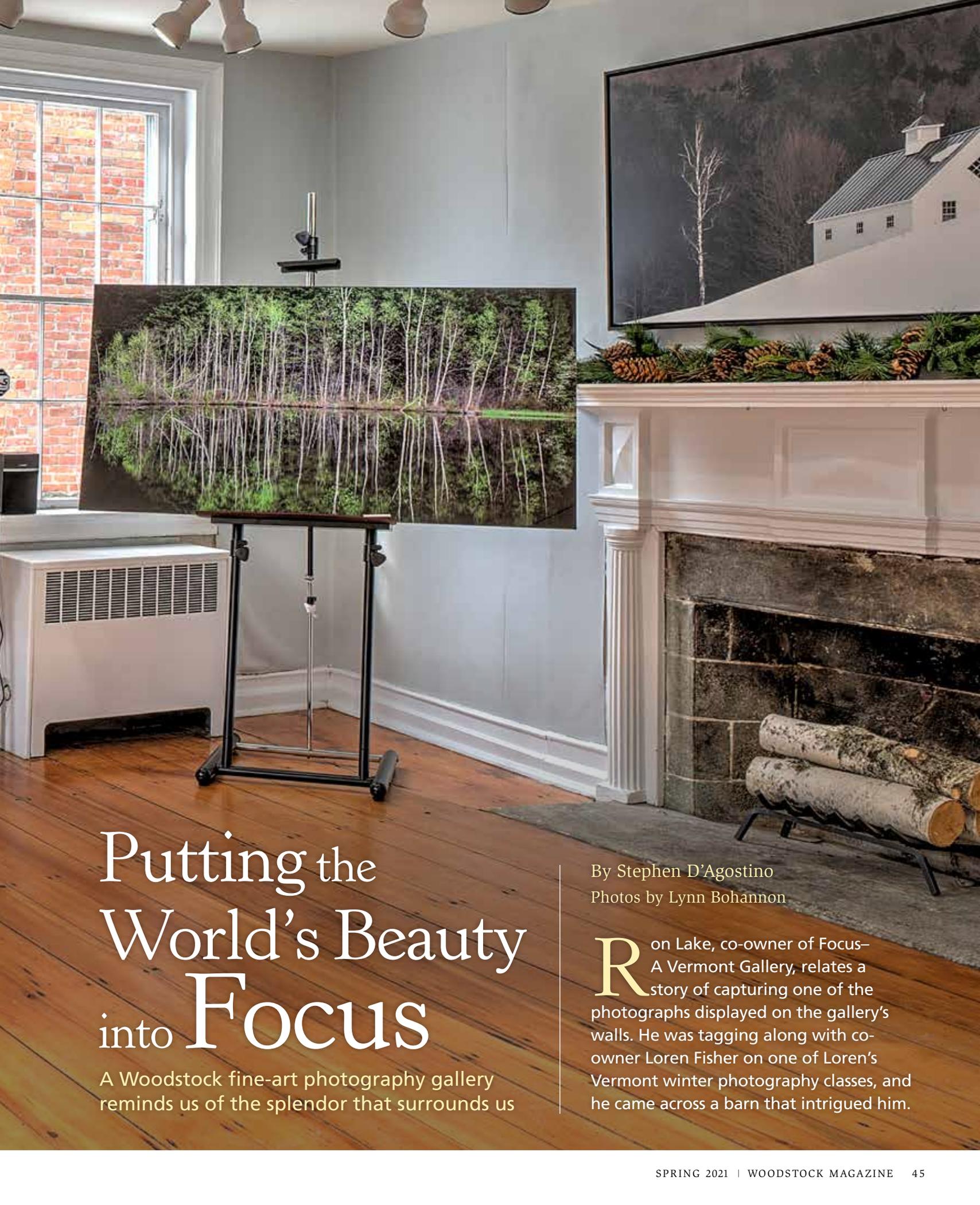




Above: Images from Woodstock, Bridgewater, Reading, and Harland are part of the main gallery.

Right inset: From left, Ron Lake, Loren Fisher, and Bob Wagner are the photographer/owners of Focus-A Vermont Gallery.



Putting the World's Beauty into Focus

A Woodstock fine-art photography gallery reminds us of the splendor that surrounds us

By Stephen D'Agostino
Photos by Lynn Bohannon

Ron Lake, co-owner of Focus—A Vermont Gallery, relates a story of capturing one of the photographs displayed on the gallery's walls. He was tagging along with co-owner Loren Fisher on one of Loren's Vermont winter photography classes, and he came across a barn that intrigued him.





Above: Located in Woodstock's old building, part of the gallery now occupies the room where the first American ski tow rope was devised.

Opposite, clockwise from top: An ice cave in Iceland. A street watcher in Nice, France. Red barns in Quechee. A Riva Classica boat in Positano, Italy.

"It was six degrees out," Ron says. "I was freezing. I couldn't get the picture to work, and I was just about to give up on it." Before he did, he asked himself a question he asks aspiring photographers: "What do I bring to the picture?" Ron grabbed a different lens and focused tightly on the worn boards and the barn's windows—broken, iced over, and askew. Looking through the camera, he saw something he hadn't seen before. He took the shot.

He named the photograph *Ode to Andrew Wyeth* because the photograph has a watercolor quality to it. It also has a story. Once red, the barn is cherishing its former glory under the protection of the windowsills. The copper nails have bled their color onto the window casings.

Before becoming gallery owners, Ron, Loren, and Bridgewater resident Bob Wagner, a relative newcomer to photography, were friends who bonded over finding beauty in places as unexpected as a dilapidated barn.

Loren, a transplant to Woodstock from New Jersey, started his career as a photojournalist. "I saw everything horrible in the world," Loren says. "Death, destruction, riots, shootings. I decided a few years back that I had seen enough of that, and I was going to focus on the beauty that surrounds me. And when I really started looking, because I didn't for a long time, I discovered there is beauty in every place I know."

Wanting to share that beauty and his knowledge, Loren

made fine-art photography his career. It meshed well with another endeavor of his, LorenPhotos, small-group workshops that help people hone their skills with a camera.

At around the same time, Ron, who holds an MFA in photography from Pratt Institute in New York City, began a similar life transition. After spending 35 years teaching photography at the high school level, he, too, decided to devote more time to fine-art photography.

Ron and Loren met, not surprisingly, at an art show in Connecticut. The meeting was serendipitous. "Loren wanted to expand his art classes to Europe," says Ron, "and I know France and Italy like the back of my hand."

In one of his Vermont photo classes, Loren met Bob, who had recently retired from electrical engineering and moved to Vermont from the Boston area. He had bought a digital camera and began to take a more serious interest in what had been a hobby. Trips around Vermont enticed Bob to travel with LorenPhotos to Provence, France, to shoot its famed lavender fields. It was on this trip that Bob met Ron. Over the next few years, the three of them continued to build their friendship as they saw each other in Loren's photography classes here in Vermont, where Ron tagged along, and in Europe.

OPENING THE GALLERY

In the pre-pandemic winter months of 2020, Loren eyed the few vacant storefronts in Woodstock and floated the idea of opening a gallery with Ron and Bob. However, before they could act, other businesses snapped up the spaces, including Woody's Mercantile (see "A Store for Our Times" in the Winter 2020–2021 issue).



Top: The gallery is reflected in night photos from around the area.

Above: An old chapel in Tuscany.



Top: The gallery is reflected in night photos from around the area.
Above: An old chapel in Tuscany.

When the gallery that occupied 1 The Green closed, the retail space in this historic building (see “A Tour Through Time, Part 2” in the Fall 2020 issue) sat empty for a couple of months. Again, Loren brought up the idea of opening a gallery, and again, his friends said yes.



Time of day and season play heavily into the types of photographs the owners of Focus take and the subject matter they chose to capture.

FAVORITE TIME OF DAY

FAVORITE SEASON

Loren	Sunrise if the sun is out. Anytime if it is cloudy.	Winter
Ron	The golden hour, 30 to 90 minutes before sunset.	Summer, in Europe
Bob	Sunrise	Autumn

Work commenced, and on August 1, while the coronavirus pandemic was in a bit of a summer lull, Focus—A Vermont Gallery opened its doors.

Walking into the gallery from Elm Street, Ron’s large photograph *Riva Classica Positano* greets you from a distance. It’s an image of timeless allure: in the background are brightly colored buildings hugging the hillside, and in the foreground, a classic wooden boat ready for its closeup, though Ron admits it took a lot of time and work to get the boat just right. The warmth conveyed by the im-

age puts you in mind, especially on a cold day, of glorious, carefree summer.

To get close to that photograph, you have to walk through winter, presented photographically on the gallery’s walls. Though the images aren’t as warm as *Riva Classica Positano*, they are no less inviting. Each one begs you to slow down and ponder.

Loren points out one of the photographs, *Red Barn*, the gallery’s bestseller. Its composition is simple: the namesake of the title contrasted with the gray of the trees and the white of the snow.

“The photograph is relatable in some way,” Loren says, “even if you don’t have a barn. Part of it is the calmness and serenity that fluffy, snowy photos can pass on. It brings on a reminiscence of something in the past.”

WALL-WORTHY ART

Bob uses a different term to describe relatability. “I call it wall-worthy,” he says. “It’s something you can put on the wall and enjoy time and time again, whenever you look at it. It brings a smile to your face. It brings back a memory or just creates a feeling that you like.”

What makes a photograph wall-worthy isn’t just the subject matter. People can look at the photographs in the gallery and say they have been there. Some people might have even taken a shot of the same scenes with their phones. It’s the gallery owners’ expertise that transforms the things we see every day—or can see if we allow ourselves to—into art.

Bob has several photographs in the gallery of the majestic night sky draped behind a barn or some other human-made object, a juxtaposition that relates the connection of nature and the Vermont spirit. To capture *Dark Horse Over Barn* and his other night shots required planning, patience, the right equipment, and a little meteorological luck. It’s not all work, though, Bob says. “There is nothing like hanging out in a field in the middle of the night in June or July.”

Loren, too, relates the technical expertise required to take some of the shots in the gallery. *Autumn Island* is composed of four aspects of nature. The cloud-draped, twilight sky provides a backdrop over the shoulder of a dark mountain. At the mountain’s feet is a serene body of water, the Chittenden Reservoir, and in the water is a copse of trees on an island just large enough to support it. Despite the approaching darkness (the blue hour, as Loren calls it), the trees are ablaze in color and light.

“I used an 18-million candlepower flashlight,” Loren says. “My camera is open for 30 seconds. I shone the light

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across the water from 250 feet away. I lit up the island and moved the light across it. In 30 seconds, I painted the light across the island.”

MORE THAN ONE WAY TO WALL-WORTHY

It may be hard to choose your favorite image in the gallery. Once you do, there are other choices to be made. Of course, you can go old school and get your favorite photograph on paper. It's not just any paper though. Some papers available lend their texture to the picture, giving it an almost painterly appearance.

Certain photographs lend themselves to being presented on canvas. Looking at *A Visitor*, a shot of a single yellow maple leaf resting on birch logs, your brain may think photograph, but your eyes see painting.

Once you figure out the media, the next decision is size, and that depends, of course, on where you want to display it. *Snowy Afternoon*, at 12 by 18 inches, might look good over your desk as a cue on a busy day to slow down. *Missing One*, at 30 by 90 inches, on metal might be the perfect image on a white wall over the mantel, a reminder of the hardscrabble beauty that makes Vermont a special place. The choice of photograph is yours depending on your taste, but Loren, Ron, or Bob can help you determine the best size and media for the space you've chosen to display the work of art.

Whether you buy or browse at Focus, you can be grateful for the chance to slow down and experience the unexpected beauty in the world around us. It is Loren, Ron, and Bob's passion to capture it. It is our privilege to be moved by it. 🍷

Focus—A Vermont Gallery

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Online Extra

Loren explains how he created the *Autumn Island* photograph in a video at www.woodstockmagazine.com.



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