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LAKE TAHOE

ART OF THE STATE

BY MARK EARNEST



A self-portrait of Eric Rios taken at Saratoga Hot Spring.

For a change

Eric Rios

One of Eric Rios' photos of Tahoe's east shore is a beautiful landscape shot of the lake with a rock formation in the foreground. Yet there's something a bit off about the whole image, as you look closely. And that something is a garden-variety plastic bottle that's been left on the shore.

While most photographers capturing Tahoe's beauty would take the offending detritus out of the shot, Rios features it practically front and center. That photo is in his first solo exhibition, *Leave it Better*, now at the DeLaMare Library at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Rios said his photos focus on human-driven changes in the Tahoe basin and the Truckee Meadows, and there's plenty of contrast between nature and manmade invasions of its space.

"I've always been really sensitive to pollution," said Rios. "Going into nature and getting out of the smog of the city is a refuge for me—and a sanctuary. I have an urge to protect that sanctuary because it's so special to me."

Rios is a Las Vegas native who loved going to mountain ranges during his time there. Now a Spanish and Basque studies student at UNR, he's getting his minor in photography, and the study of photography and art history has changed his whole approach from straight-forward landscapes to environmental and documentary work.

Most of the photos in *Leave it Better* stem from frequent visits over the past year to Tahoe's east shore. Rios is an avid swimmer, visiting his favorite areas at the lake multiple times a week during the warmer months.

"I noticed the landscape degrading, and that it was a direct result of people coming to recreate," Rios said. "That's when I thought about doing a photography project to help bring these issues to light."

One piece features an oil spill in a parking lot, but overlaid is the phrase, "I pollute, therefore I am." It's a riff on political artist Barbara Kruger, who used text overlays, like the phrase "I shop, therefore I am," to give some sting to her work.

Rios has been traveling to Yerington to take photos of the long-closed Anaconda Mine, which was found to be leaking uranium and arsenic into the soil and ground water for decades, with residents receiving a settlement in a class action lawsuit in 2013. For his work, Rios will be making a panoramic image—five or six feet long—of the mine that will also have text usage similar to Kruger's work.

So far, Rios said he's received mostly positive feedback about his photography work and the messages it imparts. He's even started discussions with those he sees while he's out at Tahoe or hiking near Saratoga Hot Spring.

"I'll tell them about the work I'm doing, and they seem enthusiastic that someone is working on issues like this," he said.

Rios also plans to continue documenting Tahoe's changing landscape.

"I see it as a good opportunity to help inform people on how we are changing the land," Rios said. "We consume so much digital media, images and video, each day. A photograph can be a great tool to get through, to connect with people."

Leave it Better is a free exhibit at the DeLaMare Science and Engineering Library, 1664 N. Virginia Street, at the University of Nevada, Reno. The exhibit runs now through May 6. More info at events.unr.edu.