Art Professor Rachel Sailor is using her prestigious fellowship to complete a second book on photography of the American West.

By Micaela Myers

UW Department of Art Assistant Professor Rachel Sailor is hard at work on her second book and recently won a highly competitive Georgia O'Keeffe Museum academic scholarship in American modernism—a fellowship that will allow her to work on her book uninterrupted in Santa Fe, N.M., this spring. "They told me it was more competitive this year than ever before," Sailor says. "Five months of uninterrupted research and writing will be very useful."

Photography of the American West:
Sailor, who is originally from Minnesota, studied art history at Oregon State University, the University of Oregon and the University of Iowa. Although the O'Keeffe Museum is dedicated to modernism, Sailor is an Americanist, and her research focuses on 19th and 20th century photography of the American West. Her first book was titled Meaningful Places: Landscape Photographers in the Nineteenth-Century American West, and her new book is focused on pictorialism.

"Pictorialism is a way of taking photographs that makes it akin to painting, it's very self-consciously artful," Sailor says. Art historians often say pictorialism ended in 1907 when famed photographer Alfred Stieglitz moved to modernist photography. "But in fact, camera clubs sprouted up all over America and the American West. So your average person became a pictorialist photographer. Some of them took it very, very seriously," Sailor says. "What I'm doing in this book project—which I'm hoping will also be an exhibition because these photos are so beautiful—is to have a final chapter about the transition out of pictorialism when modernism does take over in 1945."

Bringing it home for the students:
Sailor’s research directly influences the classes she teaches. "I teach the whole gamut of American art photography," she says. "I teach the history of American photography, so my students get to hear all about pictorialism. [I recently taught] the art and photography of the American West, so it informs everything I do." Her students also get to participate in her research.

Sailor enjoys the size and feel of Laramie, Wyo., as well as the cosmopolitan nature of the university, with students and teachers studying and researching around the world. She says, "The thing I like about the students here is that they're very eager and earnest, and that's kind of a rare thing these days with young people."