

The Business of Fine Art Photography

Photographs and text by Robert Turner

AT THE END OF 1996, after working 20 years as a filmmaker, I bought my first large format equipment: a well-used Toyo field camera and two brand new lenses (a third and a fourth have since been added). I set out with a vengeance (and a new Toyota pickup) to accumulate photographic capital in my new medium—a body of work that would support a transition away from the entirely collaborative world of writing, producing, editing, and photographing motion pictures to the individual expression of color landscape photography. The three of us who owned Spectrum Films had worked well and mightily to achieve consensus on just about everything. We had shot on locations from the high Andes of

Peru to the streets of Manhattan. We had produced more than 60 non-fiction films, which were honored with 46 national and international film festival awards. We had even mounted an intense effort to produce an independent theatrical film based on Howard Norman's prize-winning novel *The Northern Lights*. The setting was the Canadian north, and looking back, I am sure it was no accident that the wilderness landscape was essentially a character in the story. Sam Shepard and Ed Harris were cast in key roles and the project came close several times to getting through to the screen. But in the end it was a near miss—a common story in the film business. But that's another article—or book!

In any case, after the company was sold, I set out to build on a lifetime of enthusiasm for the visual arts (I



Bixby Bridge before Dawn. Taken with a Toyo All 4x5 field camera, Schneider 150mm lens, and Fujichrome Velvia.

had been a painter in my twenties) and years of experience in apprehending the world through the lens of a camera. I was anxious to achieve something new and personal. I relished the idea of working alone after years of collaboration. As it turns out, there are times now when I have been alone on the road for a couple of weeks (restaurants are the worst) when I wonder if the pendulum may not have swung too far toward solitariness. But in the end it is clearly a privilege to be out there, and there is still a good deal of collaboration.

In July of 1997, I sold the first few prints in a gallery. Eventually, my relationship with that gallery came to a close, however, a relationship with a sec-

ond gallery developed in the fall of that year and it is still at the core of my business.

Okay. So how do you get your work seen and accepted by the first gallery? That's the obvious question. And it's a big one. In my experience, there isn't a simple secret. Fundamentally, of course, it all goes back to your images. It has to. You have to have at least a few pictures that transcend the ordinary—that evoke a response, first in the gatekeepers, the gallery people, and then in the public. In creating those images you draw on a sensibility, a way of looking at things, that probably has taken years to develop. In my case, I'm sure the days I spent as a kid hiking, camping, and just hanging out in the forests of northern New Jersey and the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York were the beginning of the



Dawn Light on Inner Doorways. Shot with a Toyo All 4x5 field camera, Schneider 150mm lens, and Fujichrome Velvia.

feeling for wild places that compels and informs my current work. At the time it was all about frogs, snakes and salamanders, not pictures. But the thrill I now feel at ranging out into the natural world certainly started then.

One way or another you also build a set of skills—the technique that enables you to get what you see onto film and ultimately into the form of a finely crafted print. In landscape, the biggest challenge is to isolate. We deal in found art. Unlike the proverbial painter staring at a blank canvas waiting for inspiration, we start by confronting a chaotic visual environment that places *too much* on the canvas. The skill is in stripping away the clutter to leave a simple, satisfying composition that evokes a sense of the whole though a few of its parts. Workshops and classes definitely advance the cause but I think it is mostly a process of shooting, printing, and suffering the slings and arrows of your own disappointments. And, of course, the occasional triumphs are hugely reinforcing!

Back to galleries, I think it is important to realize that out of the dozens of galleries that specialize in fine art photography, only a handful will be interested in your

subject and style. And a number of those will not be looking to add new artists to their rosters. You have to inquire until you find someone who is willing to take a look. The breakthrough may well come through a personal referral by someone who knows your work. In my experience, when you find an interested gallery owner, you should remember that your end product is a fine print. It is important to be judged on your actual prints and not on slides, or digital files sent over the web. The exquisite detail and subtle shading that can be mined from a large format original are our stock in trade.

Once you are underway, the path to making a living at your art is an exploratory one. The guiding principle is that one thing leads to another. When an effort pays off you go further in that direction. Progress is incremental. Success will be more likely if you treat it like a business. That means:

- generating and delivering prints on time
- maintaining standardized portfolios and a website to support your galleries
- standardizing print sizes as well as mounting and matting treatments



Ferns under Fall Aspens. Taken with a Toyo All 4x5 field camera, Rodenstock 210 mm lens, and Fujichrome Velvia.

- publishing prices and sticking to them: price increases and discounts must be announced and applied equally in all venues
- maintaining quality control: reject flawed prints, replace damaged ones
- adding new images on a regular basis
- working with people: try to build long term relationships, even at the expense of immediate gain; don't be exploited, but try to avoid the artist/gallery tug-of-war.

As with any important pursuit in life, it seems to me that there are balances to be struck—a *yin-yang* aspect to the process. For instance, as delusional as it may be, you need to have a sense of “manifest destiny” about your work. It deserves to be out there. It will find its audience. With exposure that audience will grow. That's one side. The other is that you have to be careful not to start thinking that you know what you're doing. Insecurity keeps you honest. You're never so brilliant that an image has to be out there just because *you* made it.

Another balance: on the one hand, your work should have a recognizable signature; on the other hand, you need to evolve. You need to have a strong attachment to your style and subject and to stick to them. Yet, you don't want to fall into self-imitation by producing easy knock-offs of your early successes.

It goes without saying that persistence pays off. But it is a mistake to keep banging your head against the wall if something is not working. As your grandmother used to say, patience is a virtue. One thing does tend to lead to another over time. But, frustration at the glacial pace of progress can be highly motivating. It's not so destructive (except, maybe, to those around you) to keep champing at the bit.

You do have to promote your work when you get a chance. But you also have to have faith that people will discover the value in it without your constantly hitting them over the head.

In creating a photograph, there is no doubt that “the decisive moment” (to borrow a phrase from Henri Cartier-Bresson) in which you recognize and capture the coming together of light, form, and meaning is an intuitive one. But the other side of that happy conjunction is preparation. Borrowing now from Ansel Adams: “Chance favors the prepared mind.” It's like training for an athletic event. You analyze the skills that go into it. Break it down and practice the components. Then on race (or game) day you stop thinking and let it happen.

One last balance to contemplate. There is a strong

text continued on page 60



Matilija Poppy. Taken with a Toyo All 4x5 field camera, Schneider 150mm lens, and Fujichrome Velvia.
Shot at f/64 with available light the exposure took 53 seconds.

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Turner-text continued from page 28

element of technical mastery in photography. You need to dominate the equipment and the materials and be able to visualize what they will do. But, it's much too easy to get hung up on the gear. Ultimately, *it's not about the camera!* Technical choices are not trivial, of course. They create limits on the one hand and possibilities on the other. But the camera does not make the picture, the photographer does. It's in the seeing. A trained eye/brain connection makes it happen along with the emotions, the head and the heart, if you will. So, get your head out of the spec sheet and into an art museum.

In thinking about my particular situation, I am quite sure that the progress I have made in fine art photography is built on the legacy of the film business. Running Spectrum Films was a complex operation that taught me organizational skills, a sense of discipline, and an analytical approach to planning, assessing, and adapting. All of that still works. Also, in the film business you tend to involve other people for advice and feedback. I still do that when it comes to choosing images to print. My wife looks at just about all the transparencies on the light box and plays a big role in the first sort. However, since we have often been in the field together, I also get reactions from a trusted group of friends who have a certain degree of visual sophistication and who were definitely not there at the time the film was exposed. They were not caught up in the emotion of the moment. They have no expectations. It is remarkable how often three or four images out of 25 or 30 will rise to the top in everyone's ranking. And they

are not necessarily the pictures I am most attached to. In the end I make the decision, and I usually print an image or two for my own satisfaction, but I am sure the total body of work is stronger for having involved other eyes in the editing process.

In reading a draft of this article, my wife felt that I was leaving out a personality trait that causes a lot of teeth gnashing but ultimately contributes to the success of the whole endeavor: perfectionism. I *will* cop to the charge of engaging in a whole lot of tweaking, starting with the composition of an image in the ground glass and ending with minute changes to color balance and density in printing. I'm sure that is part of the look of the work. I also want to say here that although my wife has her own career as a mathematician she is nonetheless an indispensable partner in my photography—aesthetically, intellectually, and emotionally. We navigate through what is still a relatively new and unpredictable world together.

And finally, it has to be said that fine art landscape photography is not a get-rich-quick scheme. You are on the right track if you are becoming "middle class," slowly. But it is doable, sustainable, and offers other rewards. Indeed, it is a rare privilege to be able to spend time in wild places across the country and to turn that experience into pictures. It is a tremendously satisfying thing to do, both uplifting and restorative. It is all the more satisfying for the fact that the pictures have an audience—people embrace them, are affected by them, and value them enough to buy and hang them on the walls of their homes. ▲

TECHNICAL NOTES ON THE PRINTS

All prints are made from 4x5 Fujichrome Velvia (or Velvia 100F) transparencies, a classic slow speed, high resolution "slide" film. These are exposed with a single camera, a Toyo 4x5 field camera, and a set of four lenses by Rodenstock and Schneider. No filters are used. The image on the original transparency is brought to life on paper by a hybrid digital/photo-chemical printing process. The traditional transparency is scanned on a drum scanner to create a 300 to 400 megabyte digital file, which serves as a vehicle for the color balancing, lightening, and darkening that was formerly done in the darkroom. Once the aesthetic interpretation is realized in the computer, the image is printed on fully archival (non-fading) Fujicolor Crystal Archive Type-C paper, a traditional continuous tone photographic medium. The exposure is made by the red, green, and blue lasers of a Cymbolic Sciences LightJet printer, then processed in conventional chemistry. Each print is signed and numbered as part of a limited edition of 100, all sizes included. The prints are mounted on archival mounting board with acid-free tape hinges and corner tabs.