

MEDIUMFORMAT

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INTERVIEW:
MICHAEL KENNA

A WORD FROM THE EDITOR

We start the October issue with an extensive and exclusive interview with one of the icons of the photography world – **Michael Kenna**. He was one of the most requested photographers we have featured in our magazine and many of you said that you own one of Michael's books or prints or both. Now, in this wide-ranging and revealing interview, Michael Kenna shares with us his beginnings, his fascination with Japan's landscape, his approach to seeing and crafting imagery, the mastery of book making, prints and much more. This is a true tour-de-force all-Kenna interview, which I am confident you will savour along with his stunning imagery.

Yours truly,

Olaf Sztaba
Editor-in-Chief



An Interview: Michael Kenna

Olaf Sztaba and Sally Jennings

When we asked you, our readers, who you would like us to feature in the magazine, **Michael Kenna** was one of the most often mentioned names. But that's not the only reason this month's interview is a very special photographic event. After all, it is not often that we spotlight a photographer who is an innovator and a true master in a field of photography he pioneered himself. Michael Kenna's minimalist black and white images, often captured on multi-hour-long exposure sessions and all done on film, could not be mistaken for anyone else's work. No wonder his masterfully crafted prints are always sold out, his books are considered works of art and his exhibitions are always sought after. There is one more reason – not necessarily a photographic one but important, especially today. Despite all his achievements, fame and respect, Michael Kenna is one of the nicest, most down-to-earth photographers we have ever had a chance to work with. After we had sent him an avalanche of questions, which he patiently answered, he emailed us: “Now I need to play the guitar and sing,” punctuated by a smiley face. This is Michael Kenna; this is the master himself.



Tree Portrait, Study 1, Wokato, Hokkaido, Japan. 2002

What was your first visual interest as a photographer?

I was born and brought up in what might be described as a poor, working class family in Widnes, an industrial town near Liverpool in North West England. Childhood experiences obviously have a great influence on one's life and as a boy, even though I had five siblings, I was quite solitary, content for the most part with making up my own adventures and acting them out in the local park and streets. I liked to wander in train stations and factories, on rugby grounds and canal towpaths, and in empty churches and graveyards, all locations that I would later find interesting to photograph. Even though I did not use a camera at the time, I suspect this period was ultimately more influential on my vision than the time I later spent in art and photography schools.

During these younger years I had been an altar boy at my local Catholic church of St. Bede's. I loved to be part of the rituals of the church, assisting the priests at baptisms, confirmations, the Latin mass, weddings and funerals. At age ten, I decided that I wanted to become a priest myself and was accepted at St. Joseph's College, Upholland, a Catholic seminary boarding school. I would stay there for seven years. It taught me many important lessons, and there were aspects of this religious upbringing that I believe strongly influenced my later photographic work, including discipline, silence, meditation and a sense that something can be unseen, yet still present.

I developed my first roll of black and white film in a makeshift darkroom at St. Joseph's when I was eleven or twelve. The pictures were made with a plastic Diana camera that I was given as a Christmas present. It was a very basic camera and there were few settings: two for the weather – either sunshine or cloudy, and perhaps three for focusing – portrait, group or landscape. It was an easy camera to use. At one point I accidentally dropped it on a school field trip at Chester Zoo and the lens broke off. I managed to glue it back on later and continued to photograph. Unfortunately, the camera then always had some strange light leaks. I don't suppose it was a coincidence that I would later be fascinated with plastic cameras and have a book published on my Holga images.

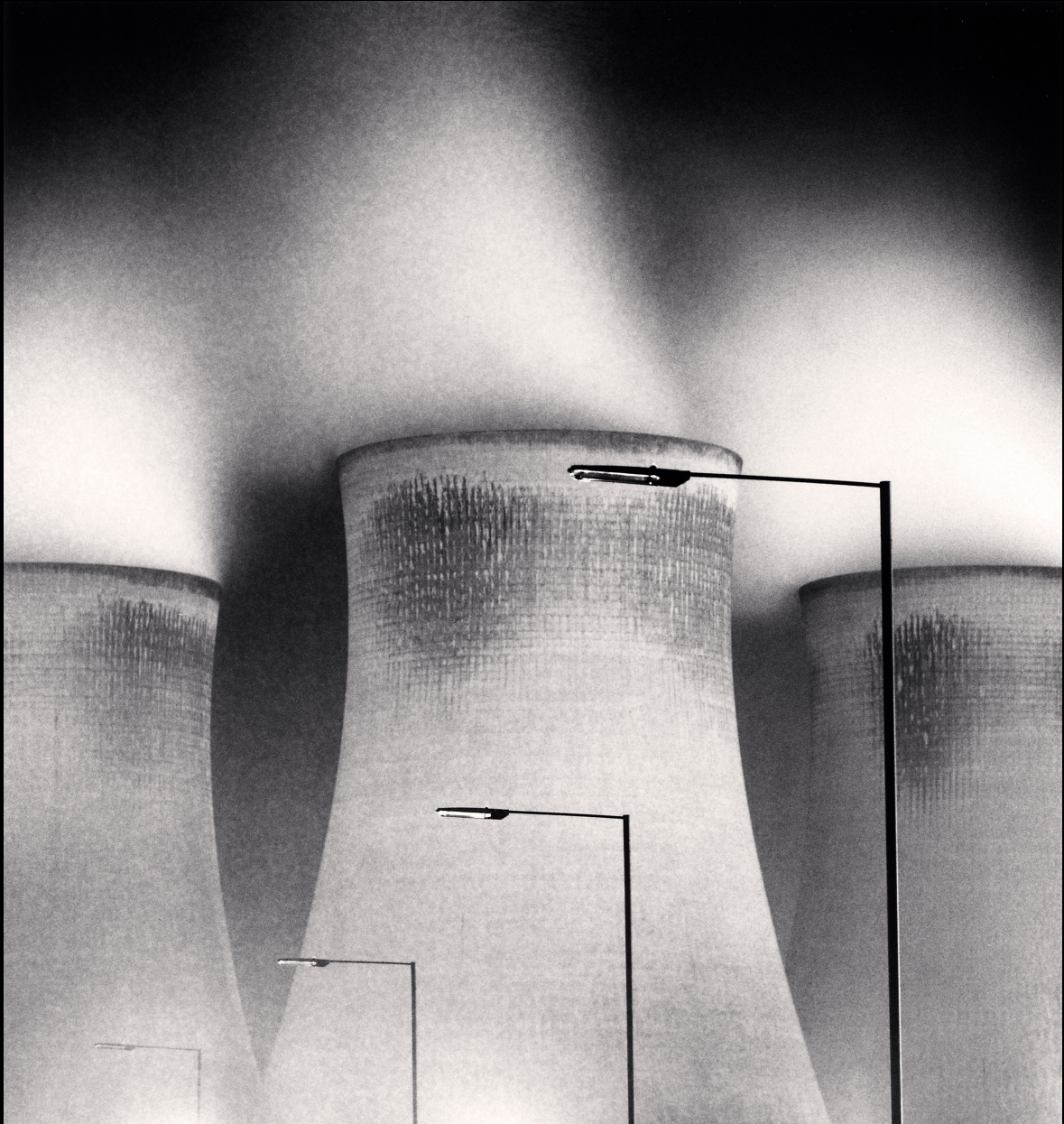
In retrospect, the education at St. Joseph's was excellent, but career guidance was not very strong if the priesthood was not a serious prospect. Fortunately, I seemed to be good at drawing and painting, so I went on to study at the Banbury School of Art in Oxfordshire, where my parents then lived, before specializing in photography at the London College of Printing.



Ratcliffe Power Station, Study 9, Nottinghamshire, England. 1985

You studied art history in school and stressed the importance of it on several occasions. Why do you think it is so important for a photographer to have knowledge and appreciation of art in general?

I was first exposed to History of Art during O and A level classes at St. Joseph's, then at art school in Banbury. I was always deeply interested in this subject and in my earlier years could spend hours looking at paintings in museums, galleries and books. Art is essentially indefinable. Who is to say that one image is better than another? We tend to delegate these decisions to galleries, curators and art historians. I think we can all agree that there are substantial benefits to be gained from education. An understanding and appreciation of the history of art cannot help but inform our personal expression of creativity. Photography is part of the history of art – albeit a fairly recent addition. Art forms inspire other art forms, and I have no doubt that my studies of painting, sculpture, printmaking and other mediums have substantially contributed to my own creative work.



Didcot Power Station, Study 1, Oxfordshire, England. 1989



Flying Bird over San Marco, Venice, Italy. 1990

At one point in your life you wanted to become a priest. The beauty, elegance and quietness of your imagery might well evoke a strong spiritual response in some people. Do you see any connection between photography and spirituality and if so, would you mind sharing your personal thoughts about it?

Earlier, I mentioned some aspects of my education that would later influence my photography: discipline, silence, meditation and a sense that something can be unseen, yet still present. Photography is a means of personal expression. All the decisions a photographer makes somehow reflect what he or she is thinking and feeling. Creative expressions say something about the creator and the subject matter. I refer back to John Sarkowki's famous exhibition titled *Mirrors and Windows*. We reflect our inner being while documenting what we might consider to be an exterior scene. At the heart of the process, the inner and outer are connected. We are all part of one living organism. Heisenburg's Law of Indeterminacy tells us that on a subatomic level we affect whatever we observe. I believe that our individual spiritual proclivities will be reflected in some way in our creative output, regardless of which medium we use.

Wawel Castle and Chimneys, Cracow, Poland. 1992



You were trained as a commercial photographer and you sometimes do some commercial work. Does commercial work require a different modus operandi than your personal work? What's it like switching between the two?

In my studies at The London College of Printing I learned about photojournalism, fashion, sports, still-life, architectural, advertising, and other areas of photographic expertise. I was introduced to an assortment of miscellaneous cameras and formats. On graduation, I was equipped to be able to survive in the competitive commercial photography world. Running parallel to this, I was also photographing the landscape, which was my passion and hobby.

Seeking gainful employment, I first worked for the John Hillelson Agency on Fleet Street, London, where I was tasked with taking other photographers' work around to sell to newspapers. Then I became an assistant and printer for Anthony Blake, and in a minor way, a photographer. I moved to the USA where I was extremely fortunate to find work as a photographic printmaker for the well-known photographer Ruth Bernhard. Slowly, I began to have my own work represented by galleries. Over the years, prints began to sell, exhibitions were held, publications happened. It was a slow process but I gradually established myself in both the commercial and art worlds.

There are evident differences between commercial and personal work, but generally I bring the same photographer to both challenges. Obviously, if somebody is paying me to photograph something quite specific in a particular manner based on lay-outs and design considerations, then I must fulfil my obligations. For example, if there is a car in front of me, the creative director would alert me as to which angle would be optimum for their advertising. My usual procedure would be to photograph what the client wants and then try to photograph other options that have perhaps not been considered. Often, I would be surrounded by a team including clients, advertising agency people, security, assistants, lighting experts, etc. It is a different proposition photographing in front of an audience with time limits and expected deliverables, to wandering off alone to explore subject matter without anybody to answer to. I found commercial work helped to fine-tune my photographic skills. It was challenging as there were no safety nets and I had to produce on demand. I greatly appreciated all the opportunities that came my way. Apart from the financial aspect, commercial work enabled me to travel to many countries. I always tried to add time onto shoots so that I could make some of my "own" work. Most creatives I worked with understood and appreciated the extra mile and often those images were used in their campaigns. Once everything became digital, my advertising work pretty much disappeared. The industry changed and instant international communication was expected, which was not my style. I still have the occasional requests for image usage but rarely do commercial assignments at this point.



Huangshan Mountains, Study 27, Anhui, China. 2009

Hokkaido has been a special place for you and you have shot many iconic images there. What was your first encounter with this island like? What is it about Japan that draws you back?

My first trip to Japan was in 1987 and I was hooked immediately. There are characteristics of the Japanese landscape that remind me of my homeland of England. Japan is a country of islands, surrounded by water. It is a place that has been lived in and worked on for centuries. It is geographically small and spaces are quite intimate in scale. I feel there is a powerful sense of atmosphere that resides in the Japanese soil, and as I like to photograph memories, traces and stories, I feel strangely at home wandering around this country. There is also a wonderful reverence for the land, sometimes symbolized by the ubiquitous Torii gates, which mark the entrances to Shinto shrines. The shrine is often the landscape itself, an island, rock or group of trees. The concept of the land itself as deity is very attractive. If one spends time in Japan, I think it is impossible not to be influenced and seduced by the Japanese sense of esthetics, kanji characters, minimalist artwork, and reverence of certain traditions.

I went to Hokkaido for the first time to photograph in the autumn of 2001. I returned in winter and found the landscape transformed by layers of snow and ice almost into a graphic sumi-e painting. In my work, I generally prefer suggestion to description, black and white to colour, and winter to summer. Hokkaido was and remains a paradise on earth for me, a constantly transforming visual haiku. Surrounded by water and home to exquisite lakes, graceful mountains and countless majestic trees, the island has been inhabited for centuries. Human traces and remains can be detected everywhere, even in remote and wild settings. The reduction of sensory distractions in Hokkaido, the leafless trees, absence of colour, and eerie silences all encourage a more concentrated and pure focus on the landscape. I find that I am constantly inspired by its light and brooding atmosphere which arouses powerful emotional responses. There are many aspects of Hokkaido that have become absorbed in my work. I am often described as a minimalist, and I think my time in Hokkaido could be largely credited for that. I return to Hokkaido to photograph most years and was there back in February of this year before COVID shut us all down.



Manju Island, Toya Lake, Hokkaido, Japan. 2002



Thirty One Snow Fences, Bihoro, Hokkaido, Japan. 2016

Could landscape be a direct reflection of its people? Do you ever think about people when you photograph landscape?

The presence of absence is an integral aspect of my work. Although I rarely photograph people, I look for their memories and traces. When asked to sum up almost five decades of work I usually refer to my interest in the juxtaposition, relationship, even confrontation of the organic elements of the earth and the structures that we humans place in and on the land. Every photographer must choose their own way to work. We all respond individually to the subject matter we encounter. Some photographers focus more on people than environments, but I am not one of them. I like to use the analogy of the theatre stage. Generally, I prefer photographing before and after the performance. I relish the potential of a place, the atmosphere, and I try to portray that visually. I enjoy using my imagination to create stories and trace histories. I like to sense what has gone on, and what will happen next. When the performers are on stage, I cannot help but be drawn into their stories and follow them. I suppose that I become more passive and allow myself to be entertained. I listen to the performers more than myself. There are many times when this situation might be for the best! However, when I am photographing, I usually prefer my work to be without figures. I want viewers to be alone in the image. Being solitary evokes certain subjective feelings. I don't attempt to control the experience; I provide the environment.

"I LIKE TO USE THE ANALOGY OF THE THEATRE STAGE. GENERALLY, I PREFER PHOTOGRAPHING BEFORE AND AFTER THE PERFORMANCE."

You did a book project about a tree at Kussharo Lake which has become so famous that locals refer to it as “Kenna’s Tree.” Why is this tree so special that you returned over and over again to photograph it? Why is it important for you to go back to the same location?

Perhaps it would be most efficient if include the introduction I wrote to this book in May 2013:

"In the winter of 2002, I was most fortunate to have a serendipitous meeting with a glorious Japanese Oak on the banks of Kussharo Lake, Hokkaido, Japan. That particular morning was brutally cold with heavy snow falling relentlessly. The lake was completely frozen over and white. I remember the muffled silence of the place, broken only by the piercing calls of hungry swans as they slid across the ice.

"I have photographed many trees, but this one had a special character. Like an oversized bonsai – elegant and graphically powerful. There was something quintessentially Japanese in its shape, rather like a woodblock print. Looking through the camera viewfinder, I could imagine red kanji characters descending down one side of the photographic frame. My imagination conjured up a wise old woman bent over the lake. I wondered what she must have observed from her keen vantage point over the many years she had been there.

"Since that first encounter, I returned to make photographic portraits of the tree whenever I could. Between my visits, branches broke and fell. To my eyes, this aging tree remained graceful and resilient. I began to regard her as a dear friend and I greatly looked forward to our many reunions. Then, in August 2009, the tree was suddenly cut down. Apparently, she was situated on the edge of a campsite and there was concern that people who climbed on her could fall into the water if more branches broke. The demise of the tree was reported in Hokkaido newspapers – somehow it had become quite well known as “Kenna’s Tree”. Despite my sadness, this sweet association made me smile.

"I did not visit Kussharo Lake again until February 2013, when I made a return pilgrimage. It was as cold and frozen as my first visit. Of course, the tree was no longer there. Just an empty space where my tree had stood serenely for all those years. But the hungry swans still called out in their haunting manner for their morning food, and the lake was once again iced over, silent and still. Time passes, change inevitably occurs, friends come and go, and yet, in a curious way, things stay the same. I have extremely fond memories of this secluded winter hideout, the home of the lovely Kussharo Lake Tree. I will surely return there in the future to walk, listen, remember, and perhaps photograph some more."

Since 2013, I have returned to this location almost every year. My most recent visit was just six months ago. The above text explains most of the reasons I return to places over and over. Another simple explanation is that I regard these places as friends. We all change in subtle and/or more overt ways. Time is precious and the sharing of experiences is important for a friendship to survive and flourish. It is necessary and desirable to meet up whenever possible.



Kusharo Lake Tree, Study 1, Kotan, Hokkaido, Japan. 2002

What's really remarkable is your ability to change subjects from a sublime landscape to industrial vistas to difficult subjects such as your project about concentration camps. Regardless of the subject, these images carry Kenna's signature style but at the same time remain fresh and creative. How do you achieve this balance of continuity, recognition and visual ingenuity?

Let's continue with the analogy of a friendship. Think about our friends. Are they all the same? Do we have the same conversations with each one? I suggest that it is possible to have unique conversations with different friends as each participant brings to the table characteristics and experiences of their own. So too with photographs. When we meet new subject matter, we photographers essentially remain who we are, but the exchange will be different as the subject has changed. In practice, creative beings will try new ways to express themselves. Copying and duplicating work, either your own or of others is not fulfilling in the long term. There is a propensity to do this when we have success with a particular technique or point of view, but this can be a dangerous path and might stifle new ideas. I think we need to be constantly challenging ourselves. How do we balance continuity, recognition and visual ingenuity? I don't have methods to teach how to do this, but just being aware of the risks, and excited about new potential, should help get us along that path.

Your trademark is sublime design. Do you ever draw inspiration from design, for example, industrial design? Is a knowledge of design helpful in photography?

I believe that a knowledge of anything and everything visual should help our own visual progress. Certainly, I have an interest in design, but haven't studied it in depth. However, I almost did, and my life could have been on a completely different track if it wasn't for the whims of fate. During my one year of study at the Banbury School of Art I decided to apply for both design and photography three-year courses at The London College of Printing. Both interviews were scheduled on the same day with the photography interview in the morning and the design interview in the afternoon. I was accepted into the photography program during the morning interview and never went to the design interview...



Chikui Cape Trees, Muroran, Hokkaido, Japan. 2002

You have created an original and minimalistic way of framing which has been replicated by many photographers. You said, “The photography world is rife with copies, because they are easy to do these days.” What are your thoughts when you see photographs clearly drawn from your visuals? Where do you draw the line between “inspired by Michael Kenna” and blatant copying of locations and compositions?

Photographic masters have influenced me throughout my career and I openly acknowledge and thank them whenever I can. We all know the famous quote from Isaac Newton: “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” I believe it is normal, healthy and appropriate to be influenced, and acknowledge the sources of inspiration. Copying is more than okay and very educational. Copying and then pretending it is original work is not very impressive, and only diminishes the copier. At this point if somebody copies my work, I don’t give it a second thought. It’s not worth worrying or stressing about. Everybody has to make their own decisions, work to their highest potential, and live with themselves. I recently had a book published titled BUDDHA and received an email from somebody saying they had made exactly the same photograph in Cambodia and added that I had the temple location incorrect. He was right too! The world is big enough for us all to make photographs. Sometimes we copy each other without even knowing. It’s rather sweet.

Most of your photographs have minimal elements in the frame. Do you start with one element and add others or do you deduct elements from a much larger frame until you are left with what you want?

I am often asked how or why I work in particular ways. I don’t usually have the answers but sometimes questions are more interesting than answers and the mystery of it all is quite intriguing. Speaking in general terms, I edit from the larger palette and focus on what I find interesting and significant. Essentially, I become a hunter of images and try to extract simplicity from complication. I find that I work best when there are no time limits, nobody watching or asking questions, no phone calls or emails to answer. When I go to a location, I don’t know if I will be there for five minutes or five days. Inspiration depends on many factors including light, atmosphere and a personal response. Being creative often means following a lead, working on half chances, fragmented thoughts, coming up to dead ends and re-tracking. Being creative implies an attempt to photograph in ways that might seem ordinary at the time but which may turn out to be extraordinary later. The inverse also happens. Being creative also demands an openness to just wait and listen, and pay attention to what comes from both within and without.



White Copse, Study 1, Wakkanai, Hokkaido, Japan. 2004



Biwa Lake Tree, Study 5, Omi, Honshu, Japan. 2012

You photograph all around the world but you carefully and deliberately chose some locations. Do you have a certain visual criterion when you look for locations?

I have travelled around the world and met many people. I have deliberately kept some as friends. How do these associations come about? It is simple and complex. Simple in so far as we have connections with people: personal, intellectual, biographical, familial, business, etc. But also complex, as it is sometimes difficult to explain why each of us chooses our particular friendships. Locations are similarly chosen based on familiarity, accessibility, productivity, logistics, etc. I have my favourite locations which I regard as familiar friends. I want to revisit them whenever possible. I am also keen to find new places. I could say that I look for places which have memories and traces of the human interaction with the land. Broadly speaking that is what my work is about – the juxtaposition, relationship, even confrontation of the organic elements of the earth and the structures that we humans leave behind. I may have already said this earlier.



Copse Reflection, Vendramin, Veneto, Italy. 2007

How do you know when you have exhausted all the visual possibilities in one location or one project?

I never know, because I don't think it's possible to exhaust all the possibilities in any one location or project. I am happy to return to the same place over and over, as it and I change. Perhaps there is a point when returns diminish in comparison to the invested effort. A new place may stimulate new ideas and responses. I've always regarded photography as a conversation and/or collaboration. Using the analogy of spending time in conversation with somebody, how do we make the decision to move on? When is the conversation over? How much time and energy do we invest in a relationship? These are all personal decisions. It is the Milan Kundera conundrum. What am I missing by going down this road and not the other? What do I gain by remaining where I am as opposed to going somewhere else? Nobody can answer these questions, least of all me.

You said that in order to get creative ideas “I’ve got to be working.” Could you explain what you mean?

I find that work begets work, sources ideas and induces creativity. Sometimes it’s just a matter of moving through one level to the next, going through one door in order to find what’s on the other side of the wall. I find it easier to move through these steps rather than think through them. For others, sitting around brainstorming might work. We all have to figure out what works best for us. For example, when I go to a new place and meet subject matter to photograph, I find that it is beneficial to first make the obvious images. I am rarely satisfied with those results and the next step is to push myself to explore more complex possibilities. Later on, when the film is developed, sometimes it is the very first exposure I made which is the most compelling, but at other times, it is the last exposure. I don’t have a fixed formula for success. I just keep trying and this translates into working.

How did you establish and develop your network of galleries around the world that sell your work? How did you get started? What would you advise photographers who aspire to sell their work in galleries?

I started as most people do, knocking on doors and showing work. Of course, I received far more refusals than acceptances, but eventually one or two galleries took my work on consignment. Over the course of many years, constant hard work, new images, communication and experimentation, I have built up a network of trusted gallery representatives around the world. There are no magic formulas and, sadly, I have no miracle pieces of advice to give. The usual combination of hard work and good luck, combined with a bit of talent, sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t.



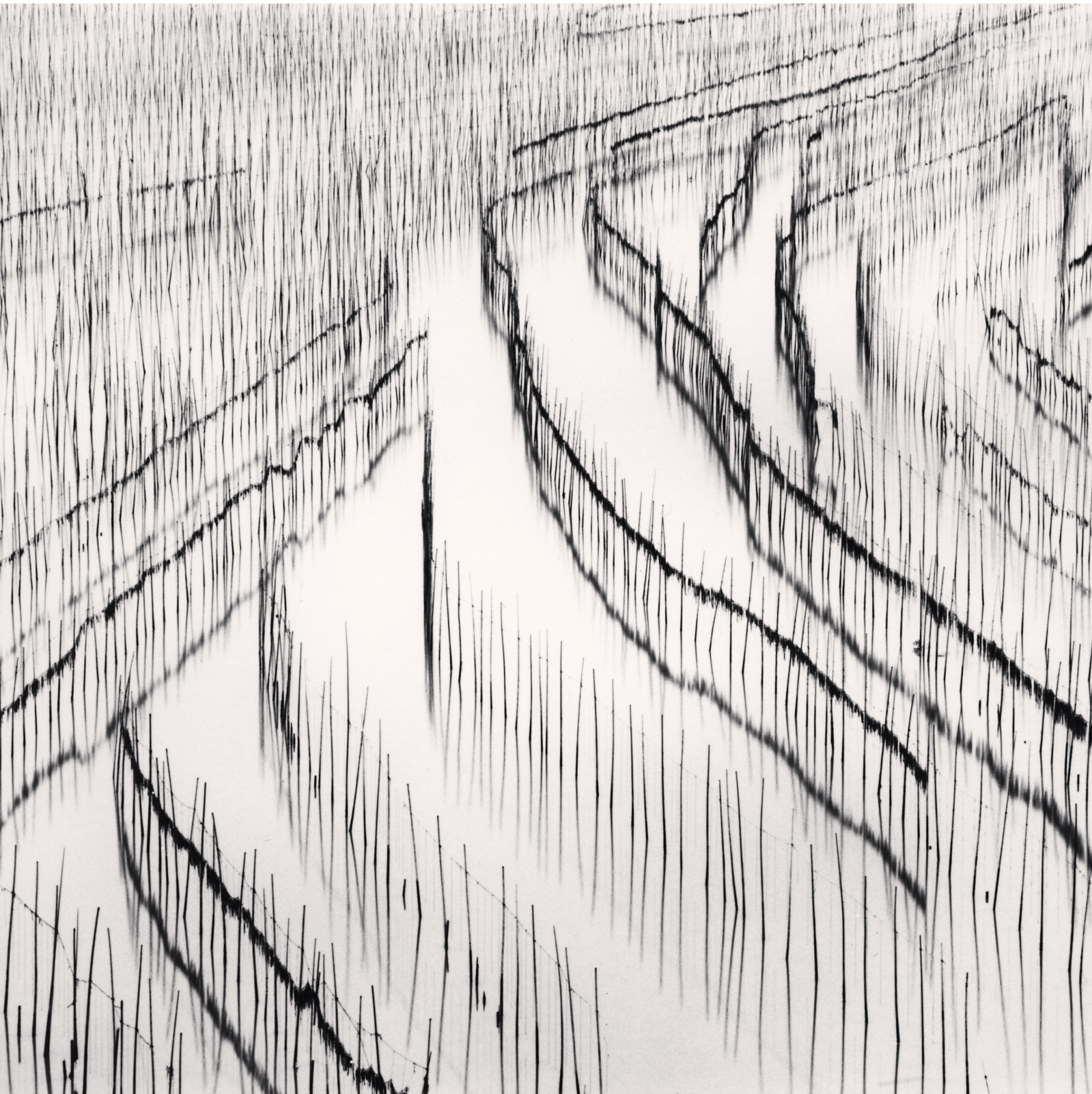
Pool Outline, St Malo, France, 2003

Your prints are quite small, even when displayed in large galleries. Why do you choose to print small?

Ah, we shouldn't judge a photographer by the size of their print. Each photographer can and should choose to present their work as they wish. For my part, I've always preferred a more intimate print to something that is larger. In my own collection, almost all the prints of other photographers I have collected are quite small. I like viewers to be engaged, close-up, one-on-one, much closer than what is currently acceptable and socially appropriate. Optically we all see about 35 degrees in focus – this means a viewer can approach about a foot away from my prints to fully see them. The larger the print, the further away a viewer needs to be. For some subject matter, of course larger prints might work better than smaller. But, for the most part, I prefer my prints to remain approximately the same size so that in any exhibition they can form one large happy family spread out over many years and places. Having said all that, I don't think there is any reason to stick to a set of self-made dogmatic rules. Recently, I reduced the edition size of my prints and gave myself the option to make a few larger prints for collectors who prefer them. Some of these larger prints are quite impressive, even though I say so myself!

Can you discuss the toning process for your prints?

I use a very simple, diluted Kodak sepia toning process which colours the highlights warm and leaves the shadows fairly cool. I find this gives the print a more three-dimensional quality where highlight details are enhanced. Kodak no longer makes this kit but when they stopped, oh probably ten years ago, I bought up as much as I could find and am still using it.



Seaweed Farms, Study 3, Xiapu, China. 2010

Could you please discuss your high-end fine art books? Each one is a piece of art in itself.

Books are an important element in sharing images. Not everybody has the opportunity to see original prints in galleries and museums. Book reproductions may not be quite as good as experiencing original prints, but, at least in my opinion, the quality is a whole lot better than viewing images on a computer screen. Over the course of my career there have been over seventy books and monographs published on my work. These have included limited-edition books containing platinum and/or silver prints, retrospective anthologies, exhibition catalogs, and monographs on specific subject matter. The most recent book published by Prestel is titled “Buddha” and comprises a collection of my works on this subject matter made over the past thirty years. This fall, a new book titled “Il Fiume Po” will be published by Corsiero Editore. It will contain 100 photographs made along the course of the River Po in Northern Italy between 2006-2019. I am also researching images I made in Northern England in the early eighties for a publication with Nazraeli Press. There are other projects on the back burner. I try to have five or six book possibilities in the works at any one time. I am fortunate to have been photographing for a long time so there is a good amount of material to work with.

An entire generation of photographers has been inspired by Michael Kenna not only artistically but also from a commercial point of view. If there was one business tip you would like to pass on to new photographers, what would it be?

The photography industry has changed substantially, both in the commercial and gallery worlds, since I started. Any advice I could give has already been given before. Pliny tells us that “Fortune favours the brave.” Pasteur advises us that “Chance favours the prepared mind.” Both are spot on and I would add that good luck favours those who work the hardest. There must be thousands of books out there on how to succeed in business. I haven’t read any. My work ethic has been guided by these three basic principles and also the succinct words of Ruth Bernhard: “Just say yes!” I have always tried to make the most of every possibility that has presented itself. Some lead nowhere, but most lead me to new areas of creativity and opportunity.

My business model may seem somewhat old-school and outdated but I have always viewed my career as if I were building a home. Foundations are important. Adding bricks, sometimes one at a time, will eventually get the walls built. Planning ahead, delegating, concentrating on the matter at hand while knowing it is but one piece of the puzzle, adding personality, working on the inner as well as outer, having pride in every detail, being patient – the analogies could go on, but you get the idea. I want my home to be sturdy, secure and inviting.



Bamboo Harbor Guides, Study 3, Hinagu, Kyushu, Japan. 2002

Why do you shoot with medium format? Have you ever been tempted to work with the latest digital gear?

I have worked with medium format film cameras since the eighties. Before that I used 35 mm for the most part. These cameras are my old friends and I use them for most situations. Of course, it would be much easier to photograph digitally. For a start I wouldn't have to worry about passing rolls of film through random airport X-ray machines! While photographing I would immediately know what image I had and didn't have. I could photograph handheld. It would be much faster and more efficient than the process I currently use. I have experimented with digital cameras and I can see their attraction as they are so much easier to work with. But I have always preferred the long, slow journey of the silver medium. I don't believe that there is a right or wrong way, just personal choices, and getting to the goal faster has never been one of my priorities. I enjoy slowly setting up, considering, observing and thinking before I photograph. I love the long exposures where I wait and contemplate. I am satisfied with always being unsatisfied while I photograph, as I don't yet know the results. This makes me experiment and explore even more. I am very happy to wait to see the results weeks or months later. After all these years, the negatives never fail to surprise me. I anticipate the time when I can spend some hours quietly printing in the darkroom and I have no complaints about retouching the final prints with my fine brushes and inks. Each step connects me a little closer to the image. When we are finally ready to part and I send the print off into the world, I am secure in the knowledge that I have done as well as I could to make the subject matter glow to its fullest potential. Old fashioned, I know!

"I ENJOY SLOWLY SETTING UP, CONSIDERING, OBSERVING AND THINKING BEFORE I PHOTOGRAPH. I LOVE THE LONG EXPOSURES WHERE I WAIT AND CONTEMPLATE."



Woodpile, Karlstejn, Czechoslovakia. 1990



If you had to choose only one focal length which would it be?

I've always been happy with my plastic Holga standard focal length lens. If I had to choose just one lens for my medium format equipment, I would make it slightly wider, perhaps 105 mm if such a lens existed.

Is there a project or a place which you have always wanted to photograph but have never found an opportunity to do so?

If I had three or four clones, I am sure I would accomplish much more. I feel I have barely touched the possibilities available in this beautiful world we live in. I would happily travel and photograph for many more lifetimes.

If I met Michael Kenna in a coffee shop or restaurant what is the most likely subject we would discuss other than photography?

Cricket, English football, guitar, karaoke, books, music, travel, wine, weather and, of course, the menu. Maybe politics and religion after a few glasses, but definitely not camera equipment.



Tree and Mountain, Suizenji Joju-en Garden, Dumamoto, Kyushi, Japan. 2002

What are you working on right now?

During this challenging pandemic time I find that I am relying a great deal on my extensive negative files to research material for ongoing and future projects. I have a scheduled exhibition at Musée National des Arts Asiatiques, Guimet, Paris for the fall of 2021, so I have been researching unprinted Asian images made since the mid-eighties. Most of my darkroom time is spent on these new/old negatives so they could be considered for this exhibition. I have already mentioned some of the various books I am working on. Along with these projects, I also seem to be writing a lot as I am in front of my computer more than behind my cameras. After some 47 years of non-stop photographing, I find that this has been a good period to reflect and take stock of where I am and what other challenges should be in my future. I suppose like most of us, I am ready to be out again in the fresh air, exploring and photographing.

Michael Kenna

www.michaelkenna.com

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