



Alone With Michael Kenna

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In a corner of Michael Kenna's studio, a few dozen medals hang from a hook – inexpensive medallions attached to brightly colored ribbons and imprinted with words like Boston and New York. They are marathon medals. He's completed 44 so far, and will race again in San Diego in June. "I like long distance running," he says. "It's like photography in some ways. I think any-time you're in solitude for three or four hours and physically pressed, your mind tends to be liberated somewhat. I just find that I wander off into my own world." Kenna likes to be alone –with his thoughts and with his camera.

As one of the foremost landscape photographers in the world, he is well known for his intense black and white images. "I am not a paparazzi photographer. I don't run out to a landscape and snap a picture and run away again. I like to know a tree, quite closely. I'll often spend a long time circling the tree, getting to know it. In a sense I talk to the tree. I try to be very respectful and I like to go back to that same tree two years later, five years later, or as often as I can." Kenna gives the impression that he returns to the world of business obligations, magazine interviews, and gallery shows somewhat reluctantly, and he will only stay so long before he's off and running again. He's no Forrest Gump, though. Kenna is not running from as much as running to something. He knows exactly where he is going, if not literally then certainly figuratively, and he has infinite patience. "I'm no sprinter," he says. With camera in hand and running shoes packed in the luggage, he is photography's version of a marathon man.

Kenna likes the process of photography just as much as the final image. He uses unusually long exposures, often several hours at a time, and he usually works at night or at the first light of dawn. "I get to look at the stars and the clouds. It's a real luxury in this life to have nothing to do for a few hours and be creative at the same time." He photographs with Hasselblad cameras from the 1980's – nothing fancy, just durable and dependable. The magic has more to do with time and patience than technology. "The long exposure does something that our eyes cannot do, it can accumulate time," he explains. "It's almost like the camera is collecting residual memory. It's unpredictable, you never know quite what you're getting. I don't like to be in control too much. I think it's best if things happen irrespective of me or outside of what I'm doing. I think nature itself is such a beautiful phenomenon. Trying to control it all the time tames it somehow." Kenna has no interest in taming or capturing. The camera and subsequent images are like a time machine – they take him and the viewer to a specific time and a place, over and over again.



IMAGES: At left, *Biwa Lake Tree, Study 2*, Omi, Honshu, Japan, 2002. Above, *Kussharo Lake Tree*, Kotan, Hokkaido, Japan, 2002.



Home base for Michael Kenna is Portland, Oregon. He and his wife Camille, also a photographer, live in a lovely old home on a tree-lined street. It's spring, so many of the trees are in bloom, but it's also raining, so many of the petals have been knocked to the ground, forming a colorful carpet across several manicured lawns. A large front porch stretches across the front of the Kenna home, and running shoes are arranged neatly by the front door. The studio is in the attic and the darkroom is in the basement. After several decades in San Francisco, Kenna moved to the Pacific Northwest just a few years ago. "San Francisco is an absolutely wonderful, visually stunning place and I don't regret any second spent there, but it's nice to move somewhere else," Kenna says. "In Oregon, real estate is a little different, so now I have a nice big studio which I didn't really have before. It's kind of freeing when you move out of a city. Portland is almost like the country in comparison." And a far cry from industrial England where Michael Kenna first began to develop his artistic eye and perhaps equally important, his reverence; the focus would change from the religion of his youth to photography and nature, but his deep respect for hallowed grounds, in its many forms, would remain constant.

Kenna was born into a big Irish Catholic family in the town of Widnes in Lancashire, England in 1953, where the Church was central to family and community life. "I remember that the local priest was the highest authority and the most important person in my parents' eyes," Kenna explains. "In my own eyes the Catholic Church was a connection to a whole parallel universe. It was before the age of questioning. There were no doubts and I wanted the connection. I became an altar boy as soon as I was old enough. I was attracted to the rituals and ceremonies. I would spend hours alone in churches, praying and listening. I was very impressionable and the priest was somebody that I looked up to."

Six months after telling his parents that he wanted to become a priest, Michael entered seminary school. He was 10 and a half years old. Upholland College was only about 15 miles from home, but it may as well have been 100, at least in the early years. "I spent my first Christmas away from home when I was 11. Later on, as I grew older, the rules were relaxed and we could get home more frequently. Sometimes I would borrow a bicycle after lunch and pedal madly for one and a half hours, spend an hour at home, then cycle back just in time for 'tea' at 5:00."

About four years into his time at Upholland, Michael knew he would not become a priest, but he stayed for the education and learned to appreciate a life of discipline. "It was quite strict - no talking from night prayers at 8:30 P.M. until after morning grace at breakfast at 8:00 a.m. Looking back I never really minded that. It was quite peaceful." That would become a recurring theme in Michael Kenna's life and central to his photography - alone time is

not a luxury for Kenna; it is a necessity. "Maybe because I had a large family I would spend a lot of time on my own, in my own world, finding my own trees, playing my own games, and living in my own imagination. I became independent fairly quickly. I've always liked that. Even in social company, I find I'm best when I'm with one person and I get worse the more people there are. I can't divide my attention into all these different areas. The same with photography."

Michael is no longer a Catholic. He doesn't like the dogma associated with many organized religions, but still considers himself spiritual. And one look at his photographs and who is going to argue? There is a sacredness about the images - perhaps not inherent in the locations, but with his eye and his touch, they are recorded that way. The stark, lonely snow-swept vistas of Hokkaido, Japan to the Ratcliffe Power Plant in Nottinghamshire, England to the Nazi concentration camps throughout Europe, Kenna captures the soul of the landscape and the people who live or in some cases die there - and he accomplishes that without ever photographing a person. In Japan, for example, he speaks about the landscape in terms of the Japanese people. "The quietness is very much in the Japanese character, in the Japanese landscape, and in the Japanese soul. They are a wild bunch in the city doing karaoke at four o'clock in the morning, but the landscape is a quiet, grounded, very beautiful place. There is a kind of disciplined, almost fastidious, quality in the Japanese people and it's reflected in their landscape."

IMAGES: At left, *Nine Birds*, Taisha Shrine, Honshu, Japan, 2001.





It is dark and silent when the clock clangs six times. All at once, the lights are switched on. A deafening roar erupts as the prefect walks the length of the dormitory with a football rattle full throttle. Metal rings on curtain rods start to scrape back. We run down three flights of stone steps to the Azzies. It's freezing in there. A quick face wash, teeth brush and on to chapel for morning prayers, followed by Mass. An anxious wait for the breakfast bell. The first into the refectory gets the biggest butter portion and maybe seconds on toast. Lined up at our tables, grace before meals, and then we can finally talk again.

Excerpt and image from: *Boarding School*, Michael Kenna

IMAGES: At right, *Moonlit Path*, Vezelay, France, 1998

After seminary school, Kenna had to figure out what he was going to do with his life. "There wasn't a lot of career counseling at seminary school. It was kind of a one track thing," he laughs. He was always reasonably artistic, so he enrolled in art school and was exposed to all different mediums, but once he discovered photography he never really looked back. "In retrospect, photography was the perfect medium because it gave me both a means of self expression and also means of survival - which I needed. I came from working class England. There is no safety net. I needed to make a living, and I was pretty much able to from the get-go."

He worked commercially for several years, and the landscape work was nothing more than a hobby. A visit to New York changed that. Michael discovered galleries where photographs hung on the wall with price tags attached. "I went back to England with a little bee in my bonnet - photography as art, I had never really considered it before. I decided to come back and I did." He ended up in San Francisco living very much hand to mouth, sleeping on a friend's living room floor and doing his photography when he could. He did a series of odd jobs to make ends meet: bicycle messenger, house painter, landscaper and framer. And through a series of very fortunate events he was introduced to a woman who would change his life - the legendary photographer Ruth Bernhard.

"I got a job working for Ruth as her printer in the evening. I would work during the day at this frame store, and then I would run up the hill to Clay Street. She would always make some sort of dinner for me and it was the strangest food - yogurt and bacon, cream cheese and carrots, and she always added salt to her extra strong coffee. We'd eat, and then go to work in her darkroom, which was just off the kitchen. I printed with and for her for many years. During this time I started printing my own work because she taught me an enormous amount about printing," Michael says with obvious admiration. They must have made an odd pair - the avant guard sexual adventurer known best for her female nudes, and the ex-seminary student building a reputation for moody landscapes, but they found common ground and forged a life-long friendship. Bernhard died just a few months ago, and Michael spoke at her memorial service. "She was wonderful - feisty, independent, and wickedly humorous. She was great. A printer who refused to believe that something was not possible. You could have a background that was white and she would want it black." To this day Michael still prints all of his own work, and like Bernhard believes that the negative is raw material and he is free to manipulate it any way he likes.



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Michael Kenna on Ruth Bernhard



IMPOSSIBLE TO FORGET

Michael Kenna doesn't go from one project to another; instead he weaves projects in and out of his life over long periods of time, and projects often overlap - offering relief and sometimes balance. The seed for his somewhat controversial concentration camp series was actually planted way back in art school, although he didn't act on it until the mid-1980's. A classmate returned from a vacation in Poland, and as the two students shared chemicals in the darkroom, Kenna was mesmerized by one of his friend's photos - a mountain of shaving brushes. "It was very powerful for me, intensely potent, and was the catalyst for the whole

project," says Michael. "The fact that someone could go on holiday and still find evidence of this huge massacre, this heinous atrocity, somehow affected me." Years later he would travel to a concentration camp outside of Strasbourg, and for the next twelve years he would visit dozens of others. "For me, it was impossible to forget. I couldn't erase it. Sometimes I think we choose projects - we decide to do this or that - other things are chosen for us, and I suspect for me that was the case. I found I couldn't not do it. I had to go to all these concentration camps, and I kept going back trying to make the best possible pictures I could."



MONIQUE'S KINDERGARTEN

The resulting photographs are as haunting as they are beautiful: instruments reflecting light, a hook casting shadows, or railroad tracks leading to somewhere – they are horrific only in the context of a death camp. The viewer is forced to ask, What was that used for? Where are the railroad tracks leading? How many traveled down that deadly path? There are no concrete answers, of course, except to know it was evil. The dichotomy of an exquisite photograph and the reality of the location can be powerful, but Kenna took some heat for making images that were “too pretty.” “I can’t help it,” he says. “It’s just the way I see things.” Kenna donated all the concentration camp images, the negatives and

the reproduction rights to a nonprofit group in France because he didn’t want to make any money off of the images. He just felt it was the right thing to do.

Monique’s Kindergarten, a classroom inside a Waldorf school that Kenna’s daughter Olivia attended (Monique is the teacher’s name), is as sweet and innocent as the concentration camps are insidious and dark, and Kenna photographed them simultaneously. “The school was such an amazing, magical place. I would go in there - 6’2”, my big 4x5 camera, and all the chairs were about six inches off the ground. I felt like a



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bull in a china shop. It would take me an hour or two to really calm down. It was really a beautiful experience in many ways, to be in a completely precious, naïve and innocent place. In retrospect, it was probably necessary. The two projects (concentration camps and the kindergarten) were nice counterparts, but I didn't think about it that way at the time. They were just projects." When he was finished, Kenna had the makings for two books: *Monique's Kindergarten* and *Impossible to Forget*, a lasting testament to the best and worst in the human soul.

Recently, Kenna has been working in Korea and found scenes that gave him a sense of *deja vu*. "In South Korea it's a bit weird because all the sea fronts have barbed wire on them. Every one. It's a very strange place. The series I've been working on is a curious cross-pollination of my early English sea fronts and later concentration camps. I find it absolutely fascinating." Kenna likes the connections that take him from one time in his life to another and back again. And he likes consistency. For example, his prints are always approximately the same size - 8"x 8". "I like having something so consistent that I can have photographs from 1975 sit next to photographs from 2005 and they're at peace. It's as if my whole family of photographs merge, the old pictures can live with the new pictures, and I like that. Size does matter! Most people stand about ten inches away to see these prints. This is a very intimate distance. The bigger the photograph, the farther away you get, and suddenly it's an object you're looking at. You are no longer engaged in the same way. For me, smaller is better."

IMAGES: Above left, *Ratcliffe Power Station, Study 42*, Nottinghamshire, England, 2003. Above, *Ratcliffe Power Station, Study 40*, Nottinghamshire, England, 2003. At right, *Hillside Fence, Study 2*, Teshikaga, Hokkaido, Japan, 2002. www.michaelkenna.net

MICHAEL KENNA



Regardless of the subject matter, Kenna's photographs are always personal – very much like a love song or a love letter. The images have emotional impact. Like the artist himself they are complex in their simplicity. "I do like to be quiet enough to listen when I photograph. I can't really photograph and talk. I have to be really quiet, and I like to think that the photographs can eventually do a similar sort of thing for the viewers. When they engage the print they can listen to it even if they have never been to Japan, Easter Island, or wherever I happen to have been photographing. Perhaps there is some sort of medium of translation back to the original. Some people, when they listen to music, can feel different senses - I believe photography has that capability also."

Kenna racks up the frequent flyer miles, traveling three to four months a year, but doesn't like to be gone for more than three to four weeks at a time. He's averaging more than a dozen gallery shows every year – often scheduling them around his marathon schedule. As much as he travels, he always looks forward to coming home. He likes the change of seasons in the Northwest. "We didn't really have seasons in San Francisco. It was always cold." Now

he puts up with Portland's famous rainfall in the spring, winter and fall so he can enjoy hot summers – barbeque weather. He's been known to drink champagne and tequila on occasion, but he prefers beer - an understated guy who knows he's got it good. "I'm very content with what I do. It's not as if I have any angst about what I'm going to do next. I love my wife. I love my daughter. I love traveling, I love photographing, I love my life, and I don't have any burning ambitions to be on the cutting edge of anything," he says. If he has any frustrations at all it's not enough time. From a photography standpoint he never runs out of ideas, and then there are the other ambitions - like being a rock musician (Coldplay's Chris Martin is a favorite), Zen master or great athlete. Kenna says he even sometimes fantasizes about giving up photography to run, travel, play guitar and read full-time, but it will never happen. For Kenna, photography is his ultimate marathon. He's in it for the long haul.

