

LOOKING GLASS

A P H O T O G R A P H Y J O U R N A L



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MICHAEL KENNA A MAN WITH A CAMERA

Interview
by David Roberts

There is always, it seems, an initial distance between photographers and their subjects. Taking, shooting, capturing are stark terms which betray one approach to camera work. Cooperation, connection, permission and respect are alternative modes. You are a card carrying member of the latter group. Would you tell us about how this attitude and approach informs your work?

I am always aware that I photograph subject matter which I don't own or have any exclusive relationship with. I certainly didn't create the world! I often photograph trees, for example. Trees have lives of their own. When I photograph one, I do not consider it mine. The tree and I have had a conversation, a collaboration to form a photograph. The same process happens with other photographs I make. In my opinion, ownership cannot be claimed.

Trees,
Richmond, Surrey,
England. 1975
All images courtesy
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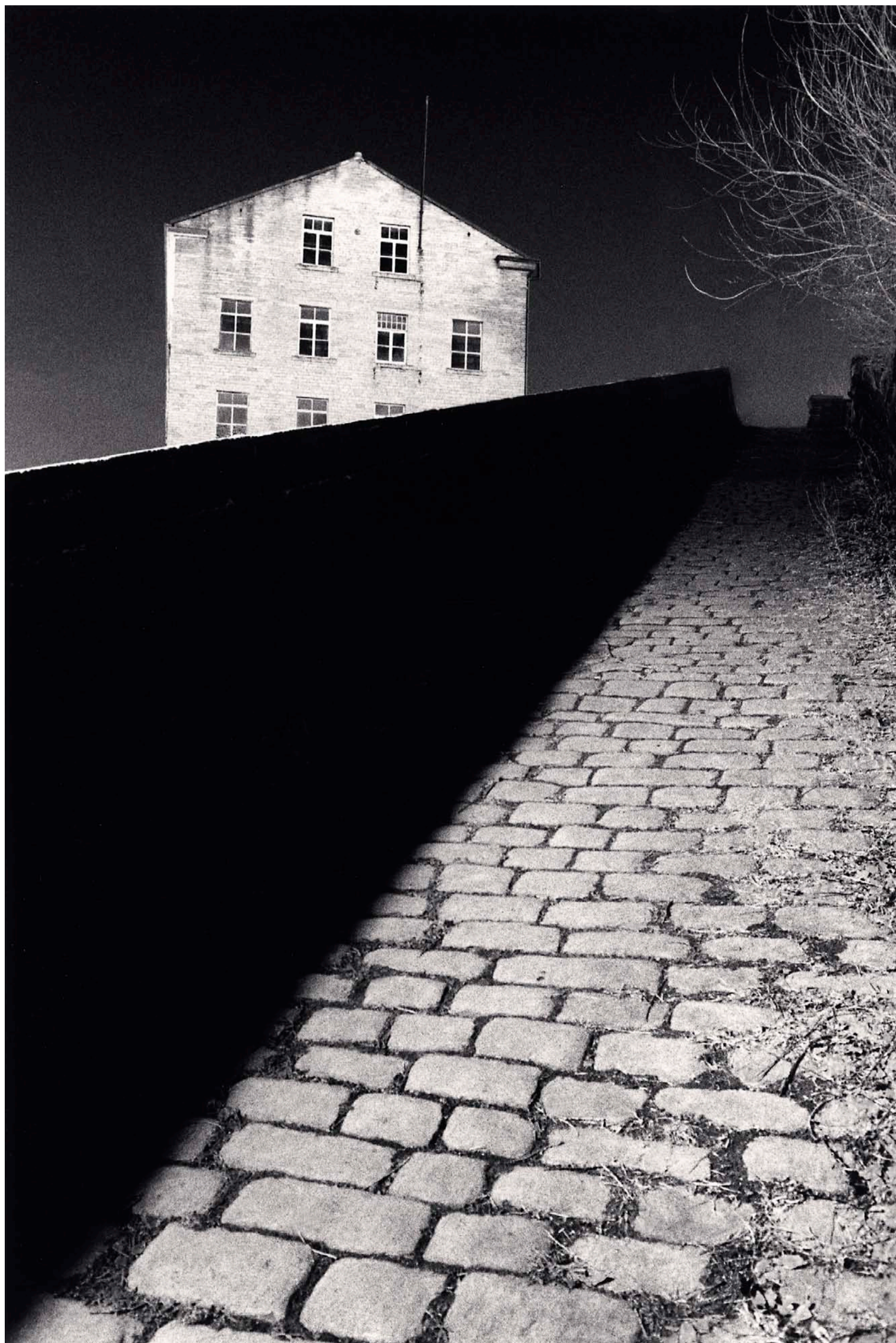
“For the next ten years I searched out and explored all the camps I could, as my personal contribution to the Holocaust memory.”

I will digress a little here but this feeling of needing to share, rather than own, came about most clearly when I was photographing World War Two Nazi concentration camps in Europe during the late eighties and nineties. I first began this project when the division between East and West was crumbling and I was able to access many concentration camps in places which were previously quite difficult to reach for a “westerner”, e.g., Poland, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, etc. These camps were potent with atmosphere and remnants of the past were everywhere. They hadn’t yet become museums. I felt that I was in the right place at the right time to document that state, before masses of people visited and inevitable changes took place. However, I had no immediate connection to any survivors or victims of the camps, and I felt there was something

inappropriate about this project unless I could clearly state to myself that this was not for my personal gain or profit. So, I made a decision to give away all the images I made. This gave me immense creative freedom. For the next ten years I searched out and explored all the camps I could, as my personal contribution to the Holocaust memory. I photographed with humbleness, respect and sadness for what had happened. I consciously asked permission from my subject matter before making photographs. It was a powerful experience. Later I made a set of 300 prints and donated them, along with the 6,000 negatives to the French Ministry of Culture.



Railway Lines and Entry Building, Birkenau, Poland, 1992



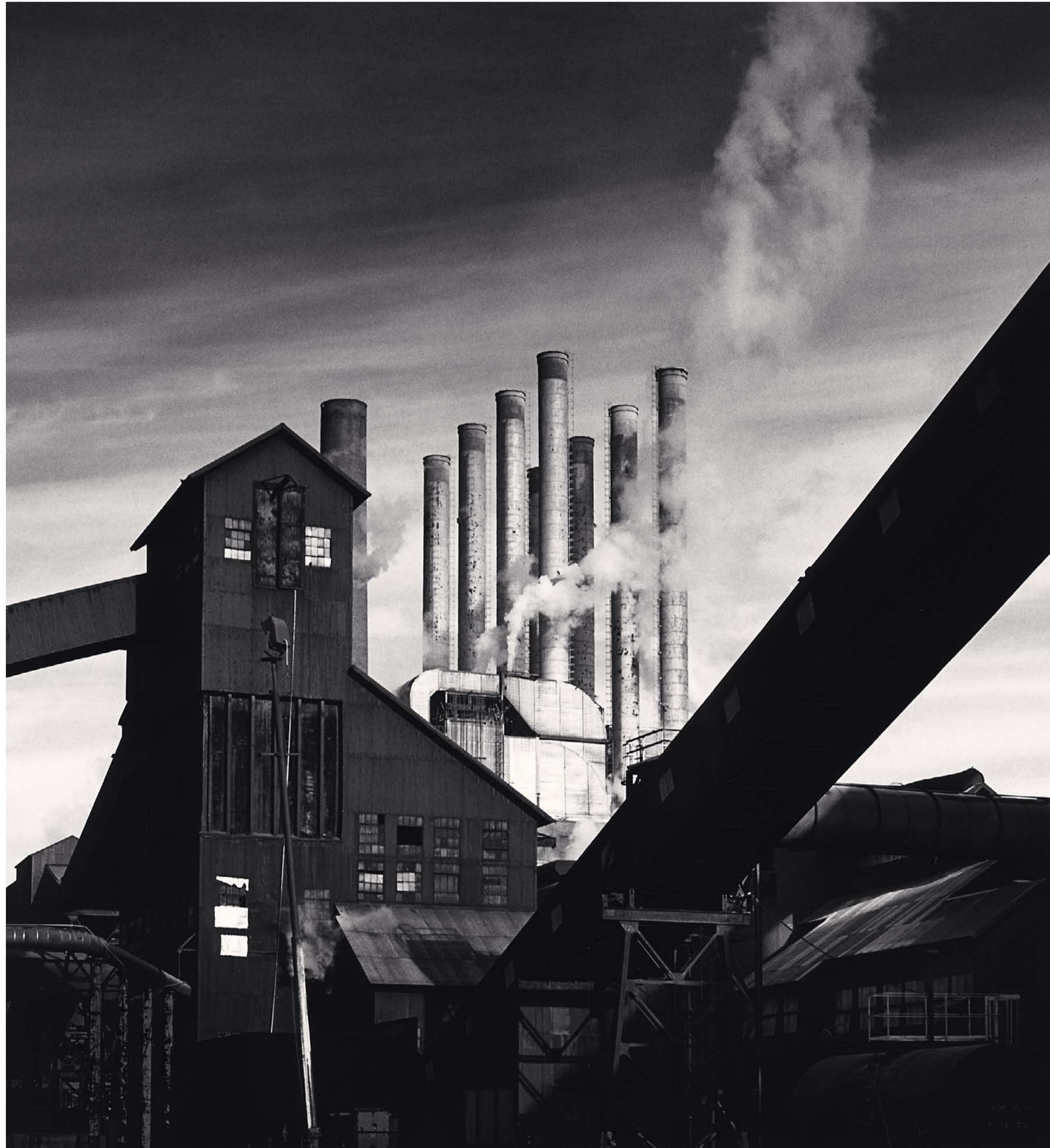
“I think of my photographs as visual haiku poems, rather than full length novels.”

Most photographers use their tools as a means to an end, similar perhaps to the way that a musician uses an instrument. Equipment and related technologies can get in the way of creative expression as easily as supporting it. What is your approach to the ongoing balancing act between craft and vision, technique and art?

In order to speak rhetoric or write poetry, in any language, one has to first learn and understand the vocabulary, grammar and syntax of that language. In order to photograph consistently well, I believe it is also necessary to understand the craft and technical aspects of the photographic medium. I suspect that many artists never reach their highest potential because they haven't mastered the fundamental technical aspects of their chosen medium. An artist limits themselves by not understanding the possibilities open to them. Craft is a

critically important means to express, communicate and share vision.

On a personal level, I have tried to master the craft of photographing for over 40 years, so have become reasonably competent at it. I have chosen the traditional craft of photographing with film and making my own silver gelatin prints. I don't have a lot of interest in camera equipment and use it as a means to an end.



The Rouge, Study 140, Dearborn, Michigan, USA. 1994



Boarding School, Study 4, Up Holland, Lancashire, England. 2003





*"Ruth Bernhard always advised me to say
YES to everything!"*

Many believe that photography is arguably at its best when the subject is the unseen rather than merely outward visages. Sensitivity to ethereal aspects necessitates an ongoing, practical dialogue in landscape photography - abstraction and reality. Would you share something of your approach to landscape camera work?

I often say that in my photography I prefer an element of suggestion over a detailed and accurate description. I think of my photographs as visual haiku poems, rather than full length novels. At the beginning of my photographic explorations I preferred to photograph in the early morning. I liked the calm and peacefulness, the lack of people around, an escape from the constant chatter of normal life. Morning light is often soft and diffused. It can reduce a cluttered background to graduated layers of two dimensional tone, just hinting at what is present, without overly stating or describing.

On a very personal level, in my younger days I was drawn to religious rituals. I spent a good deal of my childhood in the local Catholic church serving as an altar boy. Later, I spent seven years in a seminary boarding school studying to become a priest. Fundamental to Catholicism is the belief in a god, hidden, unseen, but always present. In church the presence of this invisible god is symbolized by a burning candle or light near the altar. Perhaps because of these early influences, I think that, no matter what is visible in front of the camera, I am really trying to hint at what is unseen.



Huangshan Mountains, Study 1, Anhui, China. 2008



Bamboo and Tree, Qingkou Village, Yunnan, China. 2013

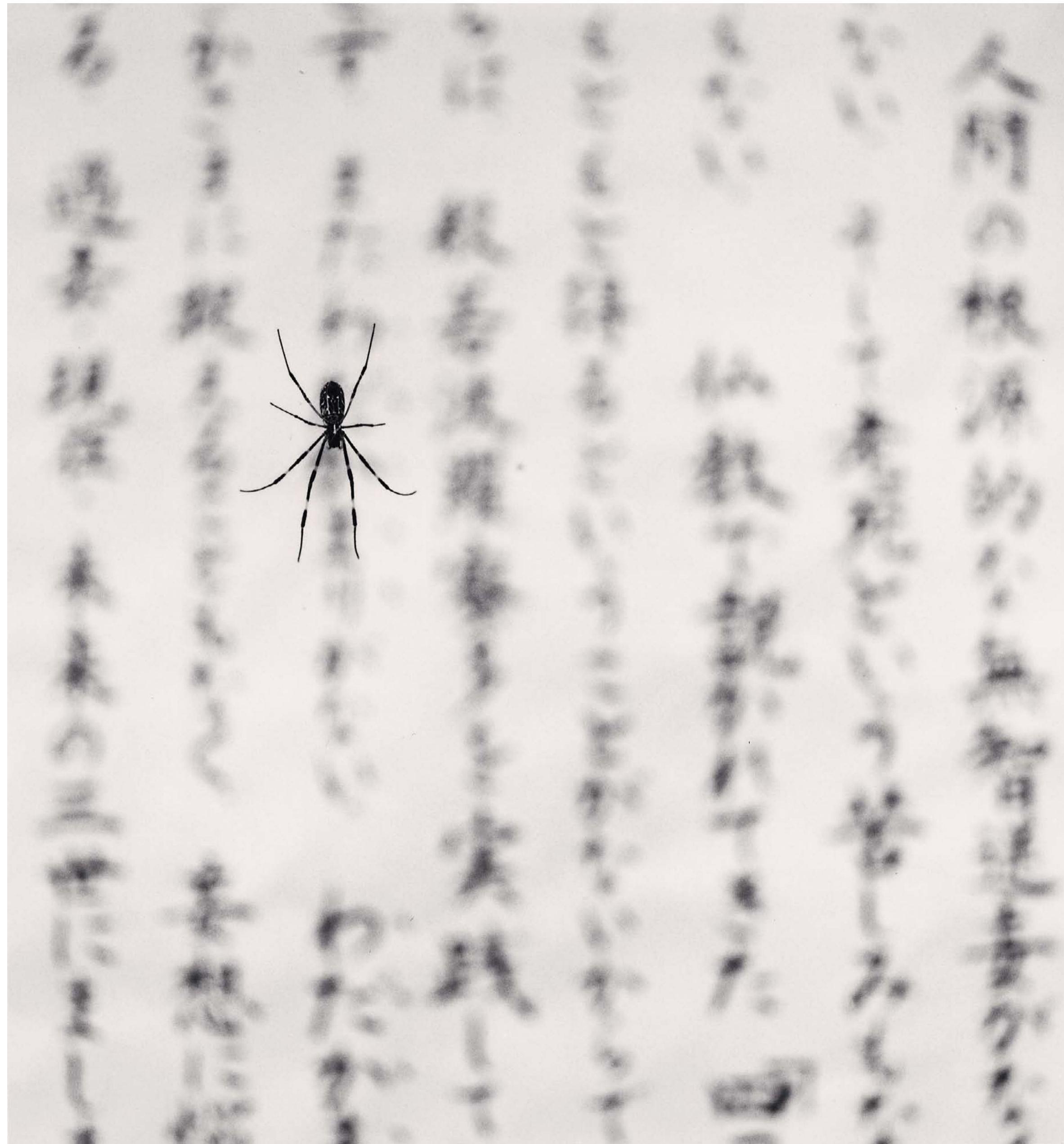


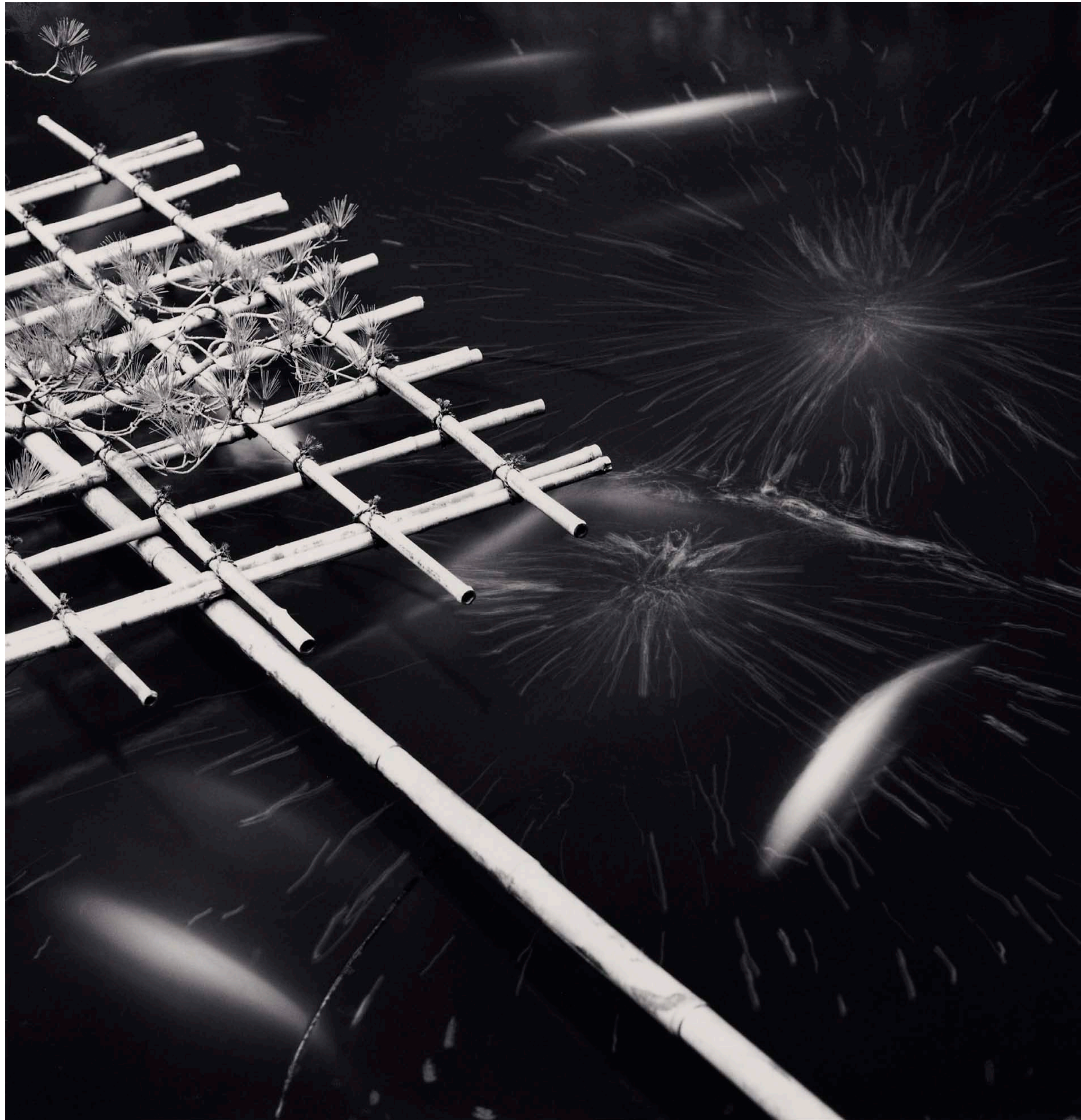
“I often feel that my images are not complete until somebody brings in their own experience and imagination into the equation.”

Looking back, I should also note that many of my images involve pathways, boardwalks roads, etc., which lead to unseen and unknown destinations. Despite whatever belief system we might have, nobody actually knows where we come from and where we are going to. There are many different theories of course. The theologian Paul Tillich once wrote something which has stuck with me: “Doubt is central to faith.” Faith without doubt becomes dogma, at least that’s the way it seems to me. Dogma, I feel is anathema to creativity - and religion for that matter. Anyway, I digress. I should try to answer your question...

When photographing, I generally look for some sort of resonance, connection, spark of recognition. I try not to make conscious decisions ahead of time about what I am looking for. I don’t make any elaborate preparations before I go to a location. Essentially I find locations, walk, explore and perhaps photograph. I never know whether I will be in

these places minutes, hours or days. For me, approaching subject matter to photograph is a bit like meeting a person and beginning a conversation. How does one know ahead of time where that will lead, what the subject matter will be, how deep the conversation will become? When photographing, I think a sense of curiosity and a willingness to be patient to allow the subject matter to reveal itself are important elements in the process. There have been many occasions when interesting images have appeared from what I had considered uninteresting places. The reverse has been equally as true and relevant. One needs to fully accept that we do not have all the answers. We are not in control. Surprises sometimes happen. I like that!









“My other useful camera is a plastic Holga which I often carry in my pocket when the backpack and tripod is not with me.”

Photography is a broad church in which your preferred field of creative expression is the landscape. Similarities are evident, however, between portraiture and landscape work. As Basil Faulty would say, it is stating the ‘bleeding obvious’, that there are obvious differences in subject matter but would you talk about what, for you, forms the fundamental core of creative camera work?

I have never before heard photography referred to as a church, but I appreciate the reference. Basil Faulty is hilarious and in this case very smart. I would heartily agree with his conclusions. My accountant used a pencil when preparing my tax reports. Auguste Rodin used pencils when making his exquisitely beautiful drawings. Their goals were very different. I think this is analogous to the use of cameras. Many of us use these instruments of visual recording. With the digital revolution and the proliferation of cameras in phones, almost everybody has two or three

cameras these days and most are quite easy to use. Several photographers might use identical cameras, but in different hands and with different eyes, the resulting photographs will vary widely. Creative camera work usually involves a personal vision, which is based on background, experience and genetics, as well as disciplined, hard work. Having said that, the law of probability would lead us to conclude that if anybody makes enough pictures, some will be very creative and successful! There are infinite possibilities of creative expression in photography. Many books have been written about such things. Most of them have different theories. If there was a formula, we would all follow it, and produce similar work. My apologies, but attempting to answer this question is beyond my pay grade. Perhaps that’s why I’m a photographer and not a professor...





"I am often asked what I do during long exposures, which can go on up to twelve hours. Apart from the obvious answer, sleep, I return the question: Why do we need to do anything?"

You have enjoyed great success in the world of fine art photography as well as commercial endeavors. If a young, talented and dedicated photographer was starting out in photography and working towards a successful career arc what would be your best advice to this person?

Let me say right away that I don't have any secrets to success. I would be most happy to share them if I did. I'm sure we've all heard the Louis Pasteur aphorism "Fortune favors the prepared mind," and perhaps the words of Pliny "Fortune favors the brave." I think "Fortune favors those who work the hardest" makes the most sense.

Young photographers have to be passionate, determined, disciplined and ready to seek out their own individual styles and identities. On my own journey, at times I have actively tried to see through the eyes of other artists. I have gone to places where these masters have photographed and have consciously emulated their style and subject matter. One advances by "standing on the shoulders of giants." The ultimate goal is to find one's own vision. My advice to any budding artist is never

to be satisfied with imitating others. This is but a means to an end. A serious artist will work with passionate intensity to discover themselves, their own personal vision. I believe this is a fundamental part of the creative path.

I would suggest getting over the camera equipment thing as soon as possible. I've always considered the make and format of a camera to be ultimately low on the priority scale when it comes to making pictures. I tried to explain earlier that craft is very important. But cameras for their own sake seems to me to be quite unimportant. It comes back to personal vision. A sense of esthetics, a connection with the subject matter, an enquiring and inquisitive mind – these factors outweigh whatever equipment we use. Ruth Bernhard always advised me to say YES to everything! Don't be necessarily tied to specific goals but see where the current takes you. Be open to possibilities, for one thing leads to another. Lacking any more serious words of wisdom I would strongly encourage anybody embarking on this career arc to embrace and enjoy the whole process. Being a photographer can be a great way of going through life.



Sydney Opera House, Study 1, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. 2013

"I am not so interested in the visually specific, I prefer the vague and veiled, what is unseen but suggested."

You print your own work in a traditional darkroom where interpretation and magic can often be found. While technical matters can be dry subject matter would you share some of your methods and materials?

Yes, I am still 100% analogue. I use film cameras and insist on making all prints myself in my own traditional wet darkroom. Before trying to explain my equipment, I'd like to state unequivocally that I believe every photographer, every artist, should choose materials and equipment based on their own personal vision. I don't believe that analogue is better than digital, or the reverse for that matter. But I do believe they are different, and it is my personal preference and choice to remain with the traditional silver process. I absolutely love silver prints!

Initially, in the seventies, I worked with 35mm cameras, Voigtlander, then Pentax and Nikon. I "graduated" to Mamiya and eventually to Hasselblad in the mid eighties. I have found that the 120 format of the Hasselblad has given me more flexibility in composing and I prefer the larger negative. I don't, for example, always have to make a decision whether the image will be horizontal or vertical. I can decide that later in the printing stage. Usually, I print it square, but not always, sometimes a square negative can result in a panoramic horizontal for example.

My usual working set-up is to take two camera bodies (500cm), two viewfinders (a metered pentaprism and a waist level), two film backs (for 100asa and 400 asa film), five lenses (ranging from 40mm to 250mm), a Gossen Luna Pro hand held meter (chiefly for night exposures), a light weight graphite tripod with ball socket head, some red and neutral gray density filters, and many cable releases (as I tend to lose them in the dark). Everything has to fit into a backpack (except the tripod) as I walk a lot when photographing and need to be able to work in all conditions without thinking very much about the equipment. These cameras have become old friends, familiar and easy



Michael Kenna, Hokkaido, Japan. 2015 ©Tsuyoshi Kato

to be with. My other useful camera is a plastic Holga which I often carry in my pocket when the backpack and tripod is not with me. I have made many images with this camera and they have somewhat different and very interesting characteristics.

My darkroom is quite basic. Currently I have Beseler and Omega enlargers set up, and a variety of lenses, depending on how big the print will be. There's a dry side and a wet side. I've printed in a darkroom for well over forty years, both for myself and for other photographers. The equipment really isn't that important, it's what you do with it of course. I use a variety of chemicals, developers, stop bath, fixers, sepia toners. My preferred printing paper for the past 30 years has been Ilford Multigrade fibre. Printing for me is an integral part of the creative process and it would take me far too long to explain it all. It would need an interview in itself.

You typically work alone and in quiet places where there are great opportunities to create a bridge between you and the objects of your attention. Taking adequate time to see, hear and experience

a place also seems to be an integral aspect of your process. Many of your photographs, in fact, point to a gathering of time outside of the scope of what our eyes can take in. Would you articulate what it is that you hope the camera will see and then what a fine print will express when time, solitude and opportunity combine?

I often choose locations where I can be quiet, calm and solitary as it is my preferred way to work. However, chaos can, and often is, going on around me when I photograph. I have never felt the need to document what is in front of me. My photographs are interpretations. They are products of the conversations I have with my subject matter. Viewers are invited to enter into the frame to complete the triangle. I often feel that my images are not complete until somebody brings in their own experience and imagination into the equation. Then, they become unique to that person. Each viewer is able to have their own personal experience.

I began to work at night in the mid seventies and this was the start of my fascination with long exposures. Photographing at night was exciting because it was unpredictable. I didn't immediately have control over exposures and it was a surprise to see the results every time I processed film. During a time-exposure the world changes; rivers flow, planes fly by, clouds pass and the earth's position relative to the stars is different. This accumulation of light, time and movement, impossible for the human eye to take in, can be recorded on film. Real becomes surreal which is wonderful.

During the day, when most photographs are made, we normally view scenes from the vantage point of a fixed single light source, the sun. At night the light can come from unusual and multiple sources. There can be deep shadows which act as catalysts for our imagination. There is often a sense of drama, a story about to be told, secrets revealed, actors about to enter onto the stage. I believe photographing at night gave me added potential for creativity during the

day. I began to print night photographs as though they were made during the day, and I made day photographs as though they were at night. I enjoyed the enigmatic nature of the images, the questions raised. As I mentioned earlier, I am not so interested in the visually specific, I prefer the vague and veiled, what is unseen but suggested. The night gave me a whole new canvas and palette to work with.

I am often asked what I do during long exposures, which can go on up to twelve hours. Apart from the obvious answer, sleep, I return the question: Why do we need to do anything? This reminds me of that lovely saying, 'Don't just do something, sit there'. It is a rare luxury to have the time to appreciate the present, to watch the stars trace through the sky as our planet moves, to witness a full moon slowly rising or setting, to track planes, boats, cars as they leave behind their own white lines on the negative, to see how moving clouds will slowly add density to an area of the rectangle.

I think that I have always been patient by nature. As a child I had a game where I would write my name and the date on pieces of paper. I would hide them around the house, in our yard and the local park. The only objective was to see how long I could wait before I retrieved them. There was something in the interval of time, the changes that had happened both in the paper and myself, that interested me. I would spend endless hours on my house doorstep writing down car license plates, or at the local train station recording the numbers of the trains. At boarding school there were many hours spent in prayer and meditation. Even my chosen sport of long distance marathon running involves hours, rather than minutes. But, alas, time really has run out for this interview! It's time I went into the darkroom. I hope you have enough material here David.

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