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DAVID FOKOS: VISUAL TRANQUILITY
THE ICONIC IMAGES OF FRANCESCO SCAVULLO
WINNERS: 26TH ANNUAL COLLEGE PHOTOGRAPHY CONTEST

THE TRANQUILITY OF THE MOMENT— **David Fokos**

"I never set out to make just tranquil photographs. I love the ocean. Those times I would go out there on my own were a spiritual kind of time for me. Seeing the sun rise over the sea, I felt rejuvenated, centered and connected to the earth. I loved photography and it was something I could do while I was there."— David Fokos

The images of David Fokos have a tranquility inspired by emotion rather than by subject. His "moments" deal with perception and how he senses the world around him at the time.

Since most people think of photography in purely visual terms, the question arises: how does a photographer take an experience that is not visual and bring it into the visual realm where it can be printed as a photograph?

Through a few serendipitous accidents Fokos began to find his way, ending up with small segments in a photograph that were evocative. One image shows rocks leading out into the water. "It was twilight," he recalled, "and as a result I had to do a longer exposure, 45 seconds. As the waves came up on the shore, water seeped in among the small stones creating a fog-like effect. I found it beautiful and when I printed the picture, this little dime-sized area was important to me. It was so calm and peaceful — like I had felt out there alone at twilight.

"In a photograph I took beneath a pier, the pilings and the dock in the evening light created little patterns in the blank sea and the small ripples. There

Foggy Night, Stafford, Texas 2005

© DAVID FOKOS





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Ferry Landing, Port Townsend, Washington 2001

was really no subject in particular. It was all about the mood. That was the first time I had truly photographed an emotion.”

Fokos began to think about perception as a compilation of sensory impressions rather than as an instantaneous snapshot — more about an experience than a simple recording of a visual moment. By the ocean, the rhythmic effect of the breaking waves becomes part of the experience, and the expansiveness of the sea itself or the strong horizon line introduces a tranquil effect.

Fokos uses two-minute exposures to eliminate short-term transient events such as waves breaking, cars moving or people

walking. By working in this way he is able to peel back the top layer of what he calls “visual noise.” The camera has a unique ability to average time through these long exposures. What’s left are fundamental underlying forms, a composition of stillness and beauty.

This has been Fokos’ prime exploration for the past 15 years. “Our world is chaotic and unsettled, and people respond to the quietness of my photographs,” he says. Fokos observes that photography has a power that no other art form has because people believe that photographs represent a reality that exists.

"I think people react to the serenity in the photographs as a refuge from the chaos of our world, much like the serenity I experienced when taking the photograph. We respond to what we want to see."

—David Fokos

"Our news is presented to us in photographs, on television and in newspapers and magazines. So when you present an art photograph, the media gives it the benefit of the doubt. But photographs are far from real."

What Fokos chooses to include in the frame distorts reality. Think of the use of filters, lenses, cropping, dodging and burning as well as Photoshop manipulation. All of these things warp the reality of a photograph. Often, Fokos will exaggerate elements in order to recreate the emotion he felt when photographing, drawing us closer to the image.

As he explains to his students, "It has to do with the air, the smells, being able to look around, how you felt that day, what

you were thinking about, the essence of the experience. As photographers we must try to exaggerate these elements in order to evoke the same emotion we experienced while we were there and for that emotion to appear natural."

To accomplish this, Fokos often manipulates the sky and the lower part of an image so the light area in the center draws one's attention. He may distort perspective by using the back tilt on his view camera to make the foreground a little larger, giving a deeper sense of perspective than what actually exists.

Nevertheless, Fokos aims to keep the magic alive and retain the plausibility that a thing existed and he just captured it by pushing the shutter. He believes that it is important for people not to be disturbed, even if they notice that the water is unusually placid, unnaturally calm, almost surreal. You will never see an ocean like that, but people don't have a problem accepting it.

"I think people react to the serenity in the photographs as a refuge from the chaos of our world, much like the serenity I experienced when taking the photograph," Fokos says. "We respond to what we want to see."

Fortunately or unfortunately, a school of David Fokos "look-alikes" are trying to emulate his work by dealing with like subject matter. He says, "I don't have a problem with this or with showing people how I do everything because either they have a personal vision or they don't."

With his extensive technical knowledge, Fokos has turned to



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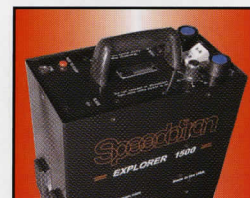
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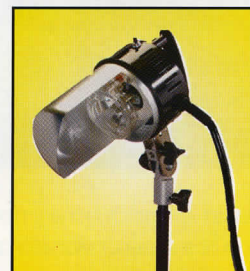
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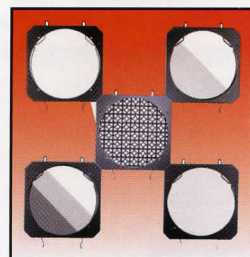
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East Chop Poles, Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts 1996



Fokos might be the least prolific photographer on the planet, producing less than a dozen images a year. He is represented by galleries from Los Angeles, Houston, Atlanta, New York and Boston to his original gallery on Martha's Vineyard, with overseas representation on the brink.

alternative ways of producing his prints. Rather than the traditional method of putting a negative into an enlarger and placing the paper into chemicals, he creates a file on a CD that goes into his computer. The computer controls lasers which expose the photographic paper. Then it is placed into the chemicals where it is developed, producing an analog photograph.

His 8x10 negatives are scanned at 2,000 dpi. The very high resolution enables him to extract extraordinary detail. The images are then finished in Photoshop, where the dodging and burning and the contrast adjustment are completed. When the image satisfies him, he burns it onto a CD and it is ready to go to the light jet machine where the final print is made.

"I work with the printers very closely to get the tone I really like," he says. "I have the images printed on color rather than on black and white paper, which allows me to get whatever tone I want. I tried printing on black and white paper, but the quality is not something I can get by just toning the print conventionally. The blacks are much richer on the color paper."

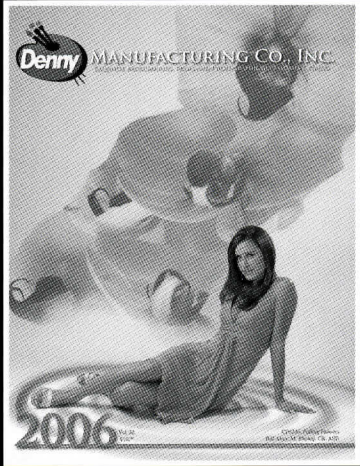
Fokos creates his photographs using a minimum of camera equipment: an 85-year-old Korona view camera and one 210mm wide-angle lens. He has yet to acquire a digital camera, though he

*New Construction,
Sorrento Valley,
California 2002*

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"I would love to go digital. I get 100 times more resolution with my film than I could with digital right now, but it is catching up." — David Fokos

will readily tell you that he thinks digital is the best thing that has happened to photography since sheet film. He hopes that digital will develop high enough resolution to push him into the 21st century.

"I would love to go digital," he says. "I get 100 times more resolution with my film than I could with digital right now, but

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Two Rocks, Study #2, Chilmark, Massachusetts 1995

it is catching up.”

Fokos might be the least prolific photographer on the planet, producing less than a dozen images a year. Represented by galleries from Los Angeles, Houston, Atlanta, New York and Boston to his original gallery on Martha’s Vineyard, and with overseas representation on the brink, he has produced seven new images so far this year and “has a stack of negatives to work on.”

He is an unusual man, a perfectionist who rarely photographs where he lives in San Diego though the ocean is on his doorstep. “I’m drawn to a more gentle type of coastline,” he

says. “The West Coast is very coarse. It is not the clean sand textures of Martha’s Vineyard with its inlets, coves and islands extending into the water. Nor is it the Charles River in Boston that has had 350 years to get things tidy. These are the places that still have a profound influence on me.” ▲

David Fokos’ website is www.davidfokos.net.

Rosalind Smith is a painter and writer who lives in Newton, Massachusetts. She has been writing on photography for the past 19 years.