THE SAN DIEGO U-T

David Fokos: Minimalist Contemplations

Written by | Will Parson | Dec 27, 2010

Much has been said about David Fokos' Dickensian surname, and indeed the photographer knows how to bend some light. But if there's one word to sum up Fokos' work it might be Zen. His compositions — often depicting nearly empty horizons — are filled to the brim with the stuff.

Looking at Fokos' depictions of familiar local scenes from La Jolla and elsewhere clues me in to how much his final images diverge from the literal landscapes he photographs.

In our Q&A the San Diegan discusses his process, which ends with hundreds of hours of "performance" in front of a computer screen to bring a scene closer to the emotion he wants to convey. Despite Fokos' — I'll say it — focus, he can be circumspect, recognizing that there are many paths to photographic calm. His path, however, has included 30 years of experimentation in the midst of technological fits and starts. Digital advances eventually reunited his eye for the physical craft of printmaking with his artistic vision. He no longer has to choose between the ultimate print and the ultimate expression of his minimalist contemplations.

Painted Rocks, North Tisbury, Massachusetts 2003

If successful photography of any kind often avoids unwanted or distracting elements, does minimalist photography just take that process further?

David Fokos: I don't think of photography as a continuum with "messy" or "noisy" photography at one end and "clean," "minimalist" photography at the other. However, as you point out, all good photography avoids unwanted elements. When I make an image, I decide what it is in the scene that I want the viewer to focus their attention upon. Then I try to minimize anything else that competes with that. By reducing my images to austere minimalist compositions, I force the viewer to more closely examine what I have left in the frame. In this way I am able to direct their experience.

I frequently give talks, and one of the first things I like to do is show 10 of my images without any commentary. I then ask the audience to suggest some words that come to mind when they look at my images. The response invariably includes words like calm, serene, tranquil, peaceful, quiet, meditative, still, and zen. It is at that point that I pull a piece of paper from my back pocket and show the audience the words I have written on it -- calm, serene,

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tranquil, peaceful, quiet, meditative, still, and zen. I say, "Notice that the words you gave me represent emotions that you felt rather than things you actually saw in my images." Never has anyone said, “ocean,” “rocks," “beach," “poles," or any other object that actually appear in my images. I tell them that this is what art is about -- art is the communication of an idea, thought or emotion, through craft, and I have successfully communicated a very specific emotion to them through my work.

So with my images, the intention is not to show the viewer what these places look like, but rather to share with them the emotional experience. My subject matter is the feeling I want them to experience. The objects in my images are simply a device I use to evoke specific emotions within the viewer. My minimalist compositions allow me greater and more specific control of the viewer's experience.

Breakwater, La Jolla, California 2000

Do your compositions have a certain resonance within Japanese culture?

DF: It is interesting that you should ask this. I have galleries representing me in Tokyo and Osaka, and when I was there for the opening reception of an exhibition of my work, a number of people remarked on the "Japanese-ness" of my work (this, of course, was meant as a compliment).

I've had an interest in Japanese aesthetic traditions for over 30 years and it has had a profound influence on my work. In college, I studied Japanese art history, Japanese film, and haiku poetry. I have been greatly inspired by the haiku poet’s ability to convey deeply-felt sentiment through a minimal number of words.

With my work I do not consciously set out to make “photographic haiku,” per se, or try to illustrate such traditional haiku concepts as seijaku (tranquility), sabi (patina and an appreciation of the ephemeral nature of things), yūgen (a subtle, profound grace), shizen (without pretense), and wabi (rustic simplicity, freshness, quietness, an appreciation of imperfection). Yet I feel that the spirit expressed in these concepts resonates within my images. It was through my work, as I struggled to make the first image that I felt successfully conveyed the emotion I wished to share, that these ideals came to reveal themselves to me.

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Solar Eclipse I - June 10, 2002, San Diego, California 2002

Are the emotions you're trying to convey tied to the physical locations you photograph, or is the connection less literal?

DF: They are tied to the physical locations in that my intention with these images is to evoke within the viewer emotions similar to those I experienced in these specific places.

I've heard you mention that your portfolio includes only 60 images from the last 30 years. Were you ever tempted to be more prolific, perhaps early on in your career?

DF: As of this writing I have 62 images in my portfolio, and each year I add another three or four. That doesn't mean that I've only taken 62 pictures -- it just means that those are the ones that I have selected, worked on, and with which I was finally satisfied. Actually, early on, for the first 15 years when I wasn't satisfied with anything I was doing, I had no images in my portfolio.

Sometimes I'll hear an artist say that they are never 100% satisfied with a piece -- that there is always something they would want to work on to improve it, and it is only with reluctance that they let it go. I never have that problem. I edit my work ruthlessly, and spend hundreds of hours working on each image to make sure it is perfect. As a result, there is not a single image in my portfolio that I would go back and change.

I'm not trying to suggest that my way is better than anyone else's, I'm just obsessive and I can't work any other way. Sometimes I'll see another photographer, like Nobuyoshi Araki who has published over 350 books, and I'll say to myself, "Man, you need to relax!" Are all of Araki's photos masterpieces? No, but he has some good images and he may have progressed further along in his photographic explorations than I have in mine, so there's a case to be made for both styles of working. I know that I'll never be able to work any other way on these images, and that I'll continue to make just three or four a year, but that said, I wouldn't mind if I was a little more prolific.

To that end I've been experimenting with some side projects -- completely different subject matter, projects where the subject lends itself to a different style of image-making. I'm hoping I'll be able to be a bit more relaxed about them. I've made progress on a couple, but I still have 8 or 10 other, fully-conceptualized projects I'd love to produce, though the reality is that I probably never will. Some artists have a problem being creative -- they get blocked. I've never had that problem -- my problem is throughput. If I had a pile of money I think I'd open a studio with me as its creative director and artist/assistants executing the work along the lines of Andy Warhol's Factory or in the way that Takashi Murakami does now.

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Beach Comet, Chilmark, Massachusetts 2010

I imagine you are scanning your images and spending most of those hundreds of hours in front of a computer screen. How has your technical process changed (or not changed) over 30 years?

DF: I first began printing (and continued to do so for many years) on handmade platinum-based paper. Platinum printing is an historical process, the popularity of which peaked around 1870. Platinum prints are characterized by their warm tone and very long tonal scale. However, they are made on matte paper and lack the bright white and rich black of modern silver-based papers (or the even more modern inkjet technology). When the price of platinum skyrocketed during WWI, silver-based papers were developed. A benefit of the new silver-based papers was that they were more contrasty — blacker blacks and whiter whites. Even more important, the silver-based papers were much more sensitive to light. This meant that enlargements could be made by projecting light through a small film negative onto a larger piece of paper. By contrast, platinum paper is not very sensitive to light. The strong light and lengthy exposure time required to expose platinum paper necessitated that the negative be laid directly on top of the paper — generally inside a printing frame that held the two in contact with one another. In other words, platinum is a contact printing process that requires a negative as large as the final print. If you want to make a larger platinum print, you need a larger negative. Another side effect of the contact printing process is that you don't have much control over the print once you begin printing. Modern darkrooms allow for multiple, short exposures where you can add extra light to make an area darker or withhold light from another area to make it lighter, etc.

I began with a 5" x 7" negative, making these small prints on handmade platinum paper (there is no commercially available platinum paper). It was a tricky process — I'd use pipettes to measure out small, precise amounts of various chemicals and then, using a brush or a glass rod, I would coat a piece of paper with the solution and eventually make my print. I engaged in countless experiments, working to improve upon the old traditional chemical formulae. After a number of years I got the urge to make larger prints so I moved up to a camera that could take 8" x 10" negatives.

Then, in the mid-90s, I had the desire to make still larger images. It happened that certain scanning and computer technologies had just become available and I ended up spending a year and a half developing a method for scanning my negatives and making digitally-enlarged negatives that allowed me to make prints as large as 18" wide. Two important revelations resulted from the process. First, once the image was a digital file in the computer I could use Photoshop to make all the traditional darkroom adjustments (e.g., making one area darker while making another area lighter, though the limited power of early-90's era computers made it so I could only work on one small section of the image at a time and that even the most basic operation, such as rotating the image 2-degrees to straighten the horizon would require that I let the computer crunch on it overnight). And second, I realized that I preferred the look of my images on modern photographic paper. So I had a tough decision to make. After spending 15 years perfecting my skills at making and printing on platinum paper I had to decide if I wanted to be a platinum printer or an artist. I decided that I wanted to be an artist and that meant I had to do whatever best served the image. As difficult as it was, I had to abandon platinum printing.

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At about the same time, a new machine called the LightJet was introduced to companies that produced large advertising graphics for commercial signage, trade shows, etc. This machine used the light from lasers to expose photographic paper which then went through the usual photo chemicals and developed into a photographic print. What was exciting about this machine -- besides the high quality of the prints -- was that it could make a print from a computer image file and I already had computer image files from my digitally-enlarged negative making process.

I worked for many years with this process -- scanning the 8x10 film negative made with my now 81-year old camera at a very high resolution (2400 dpi, resulting in an 800MB grayscale file), working many, many hours in Photoshop to perfect my image, and finally sending the file to the LightJet to make a print. Today, my process is almost the same except that I am now making my own prints on a high-end Epson printer which gives me even more control over the final result. It's only been the last few years that inkjet technology has surpassed traditional photographic materials, but now that it has we can look forward to photographers and artists making better prints than ever.

With regard to the time I spend in front of the computer, I work on my images for hundreds of hours, making micro-adjustments and fine-tuning everything. Photoshop gives today's photographic artist this capability. In the past, photographers were severely limited by their materials. A painter, if he was skillful and had all the brushes required, had nearly infinite control over the final work. Photographers, by contrast, could only make crude adjustments in the darkroom. However, with the advent of Photoshop, photographic artists finally have the ability to hone their images and to express the full extent of their artistic vision. Ansel Adams famously said, "The negative is score and the print the performance." I agree with this and think of the taking of a picture as collecting raw material for my final image. The real art occurs when I work on the image to imbue it with the power to express my vision and communicate my message to the viewer, because when you get right down to it, a photograph is just a piece of paper with a bunch of chemicals stuck on it, hanging on a wall somewhere — and I can't always be there to tell people what they should feel so it all has to be there in the print.

West Chop Poles, Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts
1996