

Special: The Power Of Black & White

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Resonant Images

by Rosalind Smith

The Photography Of David Fokos

It is a spiritually rewarding experience to stand before the black and white photographs of David Fokos. The mood created by the large areas of rich blacks is haunting while the isolation of objects conjures questions. Rickety poles appear out of context. Rocks sit in a flat, motionless sea and we wonder if something is amiss. Perhaps the effect comes from the gripping silence and the sheer beauty of minimalism in our midst.

Using an 8x10 Korona View camera, Fokos has found his way to bring together art and technology much as he did as a high-end speaker designer working in Boston and in San Diego, where he now resides. Just as he voiced and tuned his speakers, he now directs the same attention to creating magical images on the ground glass.

Print Inspiration

Fokos recalls how, as an early devotee of Ansel Adams, he was struck by the rich darkness of Adams' prints, especially *Moonrise Over Hernandez*. He was shocked when he first saw the straight print from the negative, which looked nothing like the final image. Adams' small diagrams and techniques of dodging and burning further intrigued him. However, waving a little piece of paper on a stick could not offer the precision that he needed. What Fokos needed was the precision to be able to follow the true contour of an object, to work with individual sections and optimize them.

Today Fokos utilizes Photoshop for more precise dodging and burning. By creating paths he is able to make a selection of hard and soft edges, to blend, soften, or blur an edge so the object will take its place in space and appear in ways beyond its normal limitations. This local contrast control is very important to Fokos' photographs.

"There are many people who, when they find I am working in Photoshop, assume the still water and crisp horizon they see is created on the computer. But," Fokos explains, "that surreal quality is really the result of long exposures. There are always waves in the ocean. There is motion while the exposure is going on. The water does not sit still to have its picture taken. Because the exposure is long—anywhere from 1½ minutes to 10 minutes—there is stillness rather than movement and blur. In the

daytime, along with the lengthy exposures, I add dark filters to my lens and stop down my aperture to f/64 to reduce the amount of light getting in there. In one photograph taken on Storrow Drive in Boston there were 579 cars that went in front of the camera during that 10 minutes, yet you don't see any of them."

I couldn't resist asking Fokos how he knew the number of cars and he said, "Well, what else did I have to do while my exposure was taking place and," he added, "there were the joggers and the baby carriages." He recorded it all.

RGB Tonality

Since he is working in an RGB image file he is able to add a slight warm color tone, just to the

warm side of neutral) to the overall work, a tone he could not achieve using black and white paper and that is so specific to his images. The tone is added in Photoshop using a blank layer that has a kind of transparency similar to adding a wash, which he simply fits with the tone. The final print is completed on Fuji Crystal Archive paper, a C-print material that enables him to have very large areas of smooth gradients and an even field of tone.

All of the images are produced using the Light Jet 5000 made by Cymbolic Sciences Corporation. Fokos sends a 548MB file in RGB (as he prints on color paper) to Calypso Imaging in Santa Clara, California. "I print on the color paper because I feel I am getting a much richer black. Color adds depth to



Two Rocks, Study #2, Chilmark, Massachusetts, 1995.

the black and it is more velvety," he says. The Light Jet process, which uses an analog exposure on photographic paper using lasers, offers longevity as well as visual richness. Once exposed, the print is then processed with chemicals as with any other photographic procedure.

"The lasers are right near the surface of the print, enabling the image to retain detail at extreme enlargements," says Fokos. "An ordinary negative would be up high in an enlarger and the light would go through a lens that would be projected and obviously the more the enlargement is increased, the fuzzier the final print. With the laser that problem doesn't exist and the prints have tremendous sharpness.

"My work is the most difficult thing Calypso

prints," Fokos says, explaining that in black and white there are technical difficulties to reach the exact subtle tone of the print. "Color prints are more forgiving to color shifts. I am asking them to actually nail the tone I want. It is almost beyond the tolerance of the machine and each print requires a series of tests." Editions number 50 prints, 35 of which are 13x13", the remaining 15 are 36x36". The square format is previously marked off by Fokos on the ground glass.

High Frequency Perception

Fokos bases his work on the theory that our visual perception is at a very high frequency and explains, "With light at this high frequency wavelength what we see with light is pretty much

instantaneous moments. We perceive lower frequency in our hearing and our body reacts to these events. How long does it take us to get sunburned? It doesn't happen instantaneously. Our bodies react on a longer time scale to the events that are out there. We can't perceive them visually because the frequency is too low. But with my camera, by using long exposures, I can lower the frequency of our visual perception. It is almost like a translator who shows me the world, the things that exist and affect us but that we cannot see. My camera is enabling me to reveal this world and has helped me to crystallize my aims as a photographer.

"So when people say that my picture does not look real, they are wrong. My picture is very real.



Black Gate, Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts, 2000.



Ferry Landing, Port Townsend, Washington, 2001.



Two Poles, Chilmark, Massachusetts, 2001.

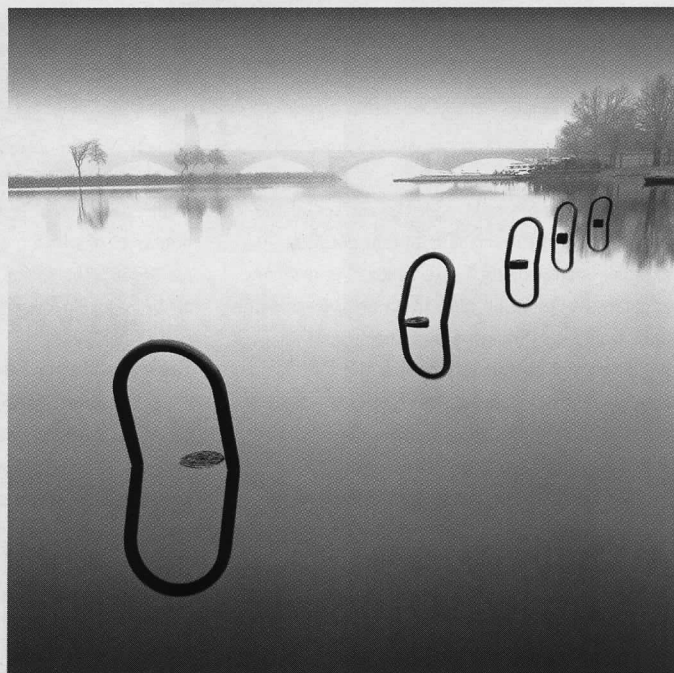


Jetty, Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, 2001.

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Moonrise, Chilmark, Massachusetts, 2001.



Mooring Rings, Study #1, Boston, Massachusetts, 1997.



Balanced Stones, Port Townsend, Washington, 2002.



West Chop Poles, Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts, 1996.

The light reflected off that scene before me is recorded on the film. It is a recording of real events."

Fokos' unique ability to capture and present what he feels is something we all may appreciate in different ways. People are responding to his work in numbers with nine galleries from London to Seattle, Texas, and Martha's Vineyard currently featuring his prints. He has left behind his speaker design career and is working full-time in his digital darkroom to supply his galleries' needs. As we go to print, Fokos has just returned from a photo auction in San Francisco. He had been solicited for a print for a new book entitled *Ocean* and asked to donate a print of the same to the upcoming auction. The print, *West Chop*

Poles, taken on Martha's Vineyard, sold for the highest price in the auction at \$10,000. Needless to say, Fokos was thrilled.

Although it is difficult to put this "energy" into words, David Fokos' prints have achieved high regard and are widely collected. "These things I am exposing exist in nature so they affect everyone, but I am actually interested in seeing them whereas most people may have no intellectual interest in them. I am trying to make the viewer aware," he says, "and that is why the images seem to resonate within people and whether or not they understand it, on some level they recognize the fact that the photograph is what they are responding to."

BIO

In the early 1980s David Fokos was a platinum printer who in the '90s developed a process where he could make digitally enlarged negatives for platinum printing using Adobe Photoshop. After 1½ years working with an electronic publishing company, Fokos was successful in creating a print from a digital negative that was as good as an analog print. He received a degree in electrical engineering from Cornell University in 1984.