Black & White Fine Art Photography Magazine

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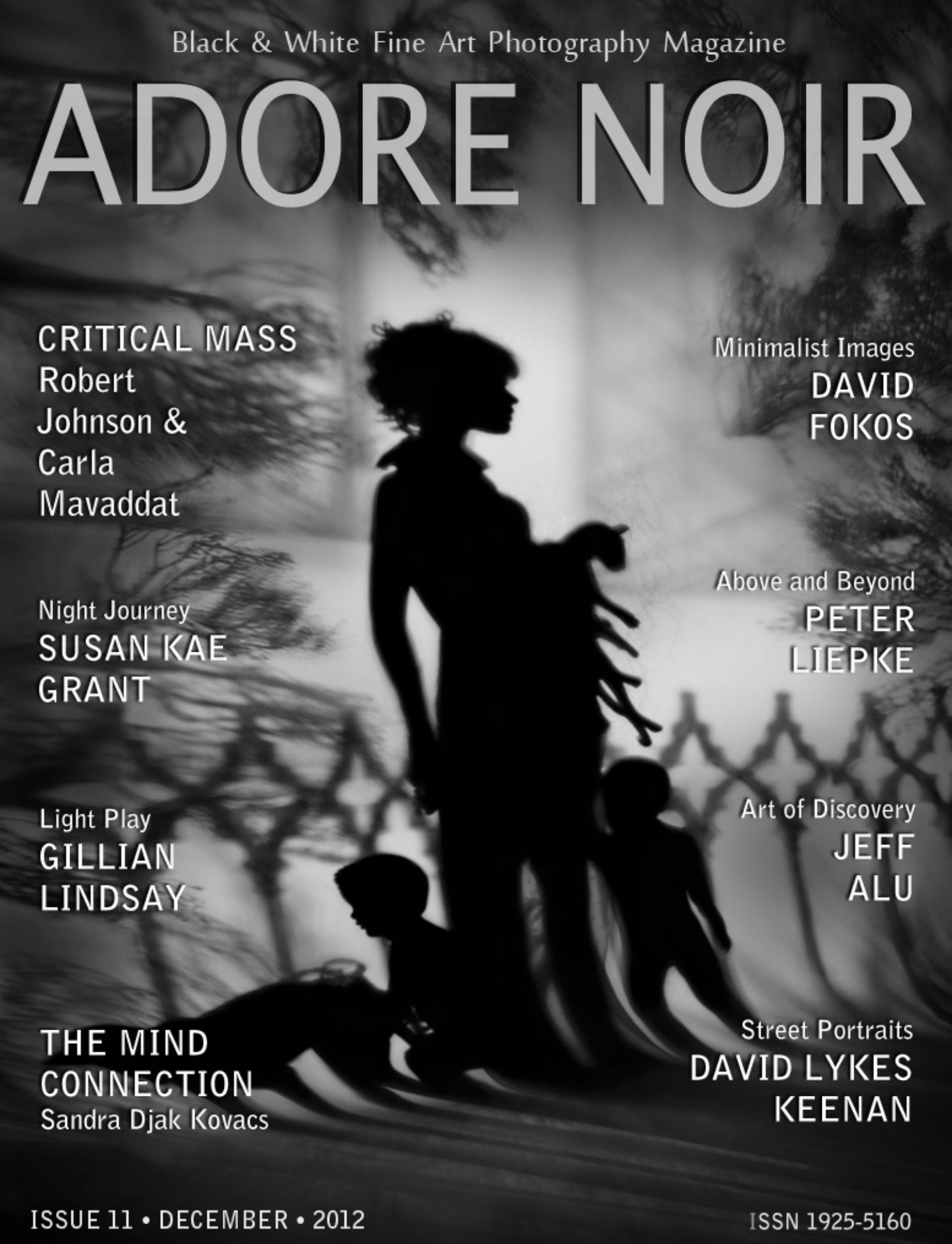

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ISSUE 11 • DECEMBER • 2012

ISSN 1925-5160

FEATURED

DAVID FOKOS

"Much of my work has to do with encoding the element of time within a static image"

AN: Please introduce yourself. Where do you live?

DF: My name is David Fokos. I am a full-time photographic artist living in San Diego, California. I have been photographing with my 8x10 view camera for over thirty years, much of that time on Martha's Vineyard, an island off the south-eastern coast of Massachusetts.

My work, which is represented by sixteen galleries on three continents, has been featured in over fifty solo exhibitions and can be found in the collections of many museums, corporations and private collectors.

AN: When and how did you get into photography?

DF: My grandfather gave me my first camera, a Kodak Brownie, when I was eleven years old. Interestingly, rather than the usual sort of family holiday snapshots one might expect of an eleven year old. I was already showing an affinity for the landscape and a certain type of composition such as taking pictures of the patterns found in the cobblestone streets, looming church spires, and zoomy perspectives along building facades. Not long after that I began using my father's Pentax Spotmatic. As a teenager, I became more interested in photography as a serious hobby. I took a high school photo class where I learned the basics (how to develop film, make prints, etc.) and I sold my first photograph, a red barn in a snowstorm for $50, framed.

AN: Your primary focus is on landscapes and

seascapes, what sparked your interest in this?

DF: The places where I find myself making images are those to which I have a strong, positive, emotional reaction. More often than not, these are places that through their stillness, expansiveness, stark simplicity, or the juxtaposition of man-made objects with nature, evoke within me a sense of quiet contemplation. I first developed a love of the ocean while I was in high school. My family had just moved from the vast Midwestern landscapes of Illinois to the coastal city of Boston. We began taking summer vacations on the island of Martha's Vineyard off the south-eastern coast of Massachusetts. After a number of years my parents purchased a house there, and they now live there year-round. It was during those vacations that my passion for photo-

graphing the ocean developed.

AN: How did you become interested in long-exposure photography?

DF: I spent my first fifteen years on Martha's Vineyard working in isolation with the goal of creating images that would express the essence of my experience, evoking within the viewer, and myself, the same emotions I felt when making the images. With my work, I'm not trying to show the viewer what these places look like, but rather what they *feel* like.

I made many unsuccessful images during that time, images that failed to capture the essence of my experience. But eventually my own style began to emerge as I drew upon my technical

background in science and engineering, and my decades-long interest in Japanese aesthetics to develop a personal theory of how we perceive the world, and a method for expressing that through my art.

What I learned is that the camera records a world different from the one we experience because it doesn't record emotion, and it only sees the world in strange, artificial, frozen slices of time. But this is not how we experience life. We experience our world quite differently. Our sense of experience is built up over time as a composite of many short-term events.

I often suggest this analogy: Suppose you meet someone for the first time. Your impression of that person is not a snapshot in your mind of

the first time you saw that person, but rather a portrait you have assembled from many separate moments. Each time that person exhibits a new facial expression or hand gesture, you add that into your impression of who that person is. Your image of that person, how you feel about that person, is formed over time, rather than upon a single expression or gesture.

Likewise, I believe that our impression of the world is based upon our total experience. For example, the ocean has always made me feel calm, relaxed, and contented. If I were to take an instantaneous snapshot of the ocean, the photo would include waves with jagged edges, salt spray, and foam. This type of image does not make me feel calm; it does not represent how the ocean makes me feel as I stare out over the

water. What I am responding to is the underlying, fundamental form of the ocean, the rhythmic breaking of waves on the shore, its vast expansiveness, and the strong line of the horizon, all of which evoke a sense of calm.

So, I had to find a way to brush away the messy, “visual noise” of the waves to get to the essence of my experience. I have done this by using my camera's unique ability to average time, through the use of long exposures. In this way I am able to quell the visual noise (e.g. the short-term temporal events like breaking waves or zooming cars), to reveal a sort of hidden world. It is a very real world to be sure, the camera was able to record the scene, it is just not one that we normally experience visually. We feel it. We sense it. But in general, we don’t see it.

Our bodies respond to many types of stimuli. What we see, the visual information, is just one type of stimulus, though it is often the most overpowering of the senses. However, due to the short wavelengths of visible light, this information is presented to us in an infinite series of frozen snapshots. Our bodies also react to other types of stimuli on longer time scales, our sense of touch, smell, hearing, etc. The wavelengths of sound are much longer than those of light so it takes our body longer to capture a "sound snapshot." Our skin reacts to sunlight, another stimulus, but how long does it take for us to get a tan or sunburn? The point is that the world exists as a continuum, not just the artificial, frozen, slice of time the camera presents to us in a snapshot. Our bodies respond to the world in a cumulative way, averaging our experi-

ence as we pass through time. Using my camera to capture the passage of time through long exposures, I can reveal what our world "looks" like based on a longer time scale. My photographic process acts as a translator, translating from the "invisible" world of non-instantaneous events, into the visible world of a photographic print.

AN: What are your influences?

DF: As a high school student, the work of Ansel Adams inspired me to photograph the landscape with a view camera. My college degree is in engineering, but I also took classes in Japanese art history. I think both of those fields have strongly influenced my work. My knowledge of science helped me understand why some of my images worked while others failed. It helped me develop a theory of perception that led to a better understanding of what I was trying to achieve, and how I could work with the camera to accomplish my objective.

It has been said that my images have a "precise" quality about them. That is no accident as I spend hundreds of hours perfecting my compositions. I think a lot of that obsession with exactitude comes from my engineering background. When I make an image I know exactly on what I want the viewer to focus and what I want them to see and feel. By reducing my images to austere minimalist compositions I force the viewer to more closely examine what I have left in the frame thus intensifying the viewer's observation of the few things that remain.

In this regard, my study of Japanese aesthetics has had an 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. And while I do not consciously set out to make "photographic haiku," or try to illustrate such traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts as seijaku (tranquility), sabi (patina and an appreciation of the ephemeral nature of things), yūgen (an unobvious, subtle, profound grace), shizen (without pretense), and wabi (rustic simplicity, freshness, quietness, an appreciation of imperfection), 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.

Much of my work has to do with encoding the element of time within a static image. An emotional experience requires a period of time. No one is instantaneously bored, for example. So for a work of art to be able to convey that emotion, the experience of time must be encoded into it. Artists have struggled with this problem for hundreds of years. You can find examples of this in 17th Century Chinese scrolls, the cubist works of Marcel Duchamp and Charles Demuth, and the earthworks of Robert Smithson, for instance. In more recent times, the entropy-related earthworks of Andy Goldsworthy, the Shinto-inspired photographs of Hiroshi Sugimoto, and David Hockney's flirtation with photography have also explored this subject. I found Hockney's discussions about art and photography, as chronicled in the book, *Hockney on Art: Conversations with Paul Joyce*, to be especially thought provoking.

AN: Tell us about a memorable experience while on a shoot.

DF: One would be while making the image *Moonrise, Chilmark, Massachusetts. (p .13)*

This image was one of the most difficult for me to make. I had been working all day, photographing up and down this beach on Martha's Vineyard. I was on my way home, trudging through the soft sand, hot, sweaty and carrying

sixty pounds of equipment. Pausing for a moment to catch my breath I looked back over my shoulder and saw the full moon rising over the water. It was spectacular, but I really didn't want to take my camera out and set it up again, I just wanted to go home and take a hot shower. For minutes I argued with myself, finally saying, "You're here. You have your equipment. Make the picture."

People often ask me about the light on the grasses in the foreground. That light is from the sun. When a full moon rises, the sun is directly opposed to it in the sky, so in this image the sun has recently set, and the remaining light in the sky behind me provided the illumination. Typically, I prefer that everything in my images be in focus, however, in this image that was not possible. I knew that the longest my exposure could be was three seconds, any longer and the movement of the moon would be apparent. Unfortunately, three seconds was not long enough for a proper exposure at the small apertures I favor for depth of field. In the end, I compromised as best I could. I used a slightly wider aperture and let the grasses in the bottom left of the image go out of focus a bit. I exposed for three seconds and then developed the negative for thirty minutes rather than my usual five minutes. After development, I put the negative through a selenium toner bath to increase the density of the negative. Even with all of these extreme measures, one can just barely make out the image on the extremely underexposed negative.

A side effect of the extra-long development and selenium toning is an increase in contrast and grain. Fortunately, this image, being a nighttime shot of mostly sand and grasses, is somewhat forgiving of such defects. The one area I wish was less grainy is the small bit of ocean visible at the end of the path.

AN: Do you have any current projects on the go?

DF: My work is currently on display at the Granary Gallery on Martha's Vineyard, and also at Cris Worley Fine Arts in Dallas, Texas. Soon, I will be sending some prints to the new f/64 gallery in Lisbon, Portugal as well.

In general, I will continue to explore the landscape and the ocean as I have done for over thirty years. I am always fascinated by how much I learn from these images. Before the end of the year I will again be traveling to Martha's Vineyard where I hope to make some exciting new photos.

I would also love to go back to Japan, where I have had several exhibitions, to make a series of images there. Specifically, since so much of my existing work is from the island of Martha's Vineyard, I think it would be very interesting to explore an island in Japan. I think an exhibition of images drawing from both bodies of work would make for a very interesting cross-cultural project.

Additionally, I am helping my wife who is the executive producer for a new half-hour television show about art. I am working as the show's director of videography.

AN: What advice would you give to a young photographer just starting out?

DF: Simplify your photo making process. Photography is not about the equipment, so anything you can do to minimize the amount of time you spend thinking about it and fiddling with it, the better. For example, I use only one lens. If I had more than one lens I would have to stop to choose which one to use— I would be thinking about the equipment. When you have too many choices it's possible to be paralyzed by indecision. Ironically, giving up choice actually gives me more freedom.

My 8x10 camera is a "drop bed" style that is

older and more rickety than modern view cameras, but I can set it up in 10 seconds. I hate having to fiddle with all the knobs— folding this down, raising this up, loosening this, and tightening that, etc. I don't want to be distracted from why I wanted to make the picture.

Again, getting back to the paradoxical relationship between choice and freedom, I would recommend imposing some limitation on yourself. At one time, I told myself that I was only going to photograph scenes with water in them (though I have since moved beyond this). While this may seem limiting, it was, in fact, liberating. There are good images to be made everywhere, so, in essence, by limiting myself I gave myself permission to pass by many of those good photo opportunities without guilt. This

made me focus my work on one subject and explore it in more depth. Which brings me to my next point.

Choose one subject and explore it deeply. I photographed the water for 15 years before I finally began to make images that I think successfully represented how I felt.

Don't worry about trends. A lot of photographers, especially art students, get caught up in the whole "I've got to be hip and edgy, so I think I'll make these pictures as shocking as I can." I think that's just an excuse from photographers who are insecure about their work.

Don't get me wrong. If an artist has a valid reason for making shocking pictures, that's fine, but

don't do it without a good reason. Likewise, there is nothing wrong with "pretty" pictures. The main point is to know why you are making your photographs.

Show me something I haven't seen before. You should be asking yourself this question every time you make a photograph— "Is this something I haven't seen before?" I could go out and take pictures like Ansel Adams, but what's the point? It doesn't show me anything new about the world that I haven't already seen.

Be your harshest critic. Edit your work ruthlessly and show nothing but your best. ♥

See more at: davidfokos.net