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# DAVID FOKOS

## SERENITY



Two Rocks, Chilmark, Massachusetts, 1995

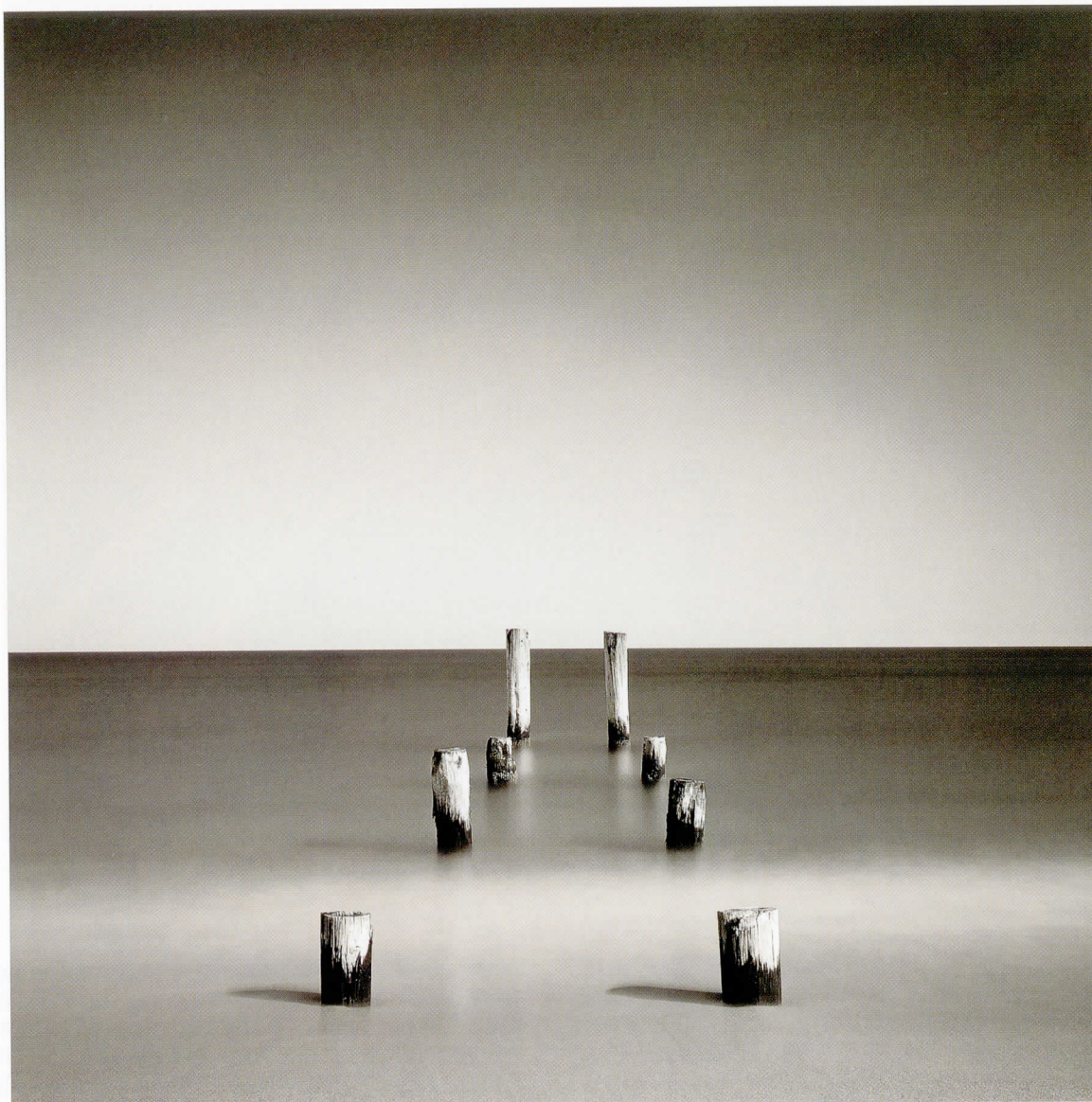
**BY ROSALIND SMITH**—THE UNIQUENESS AND MINIMALISM MAKE us catch our breath as we take in the beauty of the space in which David Fokos' objects rest. Cropped square they give a sense of quiet and balance. In one image two rocks lie peacefully in the water almost side by side. They might be stones—or they might be boulders. There is nothing to reference the scale. For me it is perhaps his most tantalizing image.

"Though I do not practice Zen Buddhism, I suppose a parallel could be drawn between this state of heightened perception and the experience of Zen Buddhists as they practice their arts. In both cases it's about getting your brain to shut up for a minute or two so that you can take a little time to actually see what's going on around you—it's allowing yourself to be more open and receptive to your world. The result of this almost trance-like state is



**"Making photographs is my spiritual outlet. When I am out making photographs I feel a connectedness with nature that rejuvenates me. During my best photographic sojourns I have a wonderful sense of peace and inner calm. In this relaxed state I really begin to see the world around me—the light, the texture, and the geometry. I am also able to 'see' what to me are very beautiful and sometimes-surreal forms that I know can only be revealed by the camera."**

**—David Fokos**



**East Chop Poles, Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, 1996**

that you begin to see the beautiful underlying forms without being distracted by all the cars driving by, the people milling about, or, in the case of my ocean images, without the turbulence you would see in a typical snapshot.

"Trying to capture this feeling in an image, I often make use of the camera's unique ability to record a variable period of time. I use long exposures, ranging from 20 seconds to 10 minutes, which effectively filter out the

'visual noise' and reveal the elegant underlying forms of our world. These long exposures average all the temporal events within a scene. The shorter transient events do not weigh as heavily in the final image average as do the stable, fundamental forms. In other words, waves come and go, but the expansiveness of the ocean and the line of the horizon are always there. Our minds are a vast database of words and corresponding impressions. For





**Missing Rail, Boston, Massachusetts, 1997**

most people (except maybe surfers), the word 'ocean' is strongly associated with its expansiveness and the horizon, but not as strongly associated with small, individual waves. This affects the way we feel about the ocean."

When he was 11 years old Fokos took his first picture on a trip to Hungary with his parents. His camera was a Kodak Brownie and his subjects were cobblestone patterns, looming church spires shot straight up from the base, and trucks delivering coal and firewood. Many years later, while in college, he bought a 50-year-old 5x7 Korona view camera. Having read that Stieglitz referred to platinum printing as "the prince of photographic processes," Fokos decided to give it a try. He purchased chemicals from Bostick and Sullivan and taught himself platinum printing, a process he used exclusively for 15 years.

In 1976, while still in high school, he visited Martha's Vineyard. At the time he had no way of knowing how

significant a role the island would come to play in his work. Using a large-format camera exclusively, Fokos returned to the Vineyard over the next 21 summers and photographed the raw beauty of the beaches, cliffs, and island light. "Despite the hoards of tourists I often had the beach to myself during the early morning and late afternoon hours. Being out as the sun dipped below the horizon, setting up my camera, and making the long exposures became very meditative," he says.

Though Fokos is currently living in California, he returns often to Massachusetts. "There's a quality about the New England coast which I prefer. Perhaps it's just a matter of what I'm used to but I find its draw irresistible."

Early on Fokos was a fan of Ansel Adams and of Adams' style of keeping everything in focus. The small aperture required for extreme depth of field made long exposures a necessity. It was one of those long exposures that pro-





**Steamship Dock, Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, 1997**

duced his first breakthrough image. It was late one day when Fokos found himself photographing along the rocky inland coast. He had set up for an image of some rocks and driftwood on the beach with the surf gently washing in over a bed of smooth stones. The 45-second exposure created an image of ethereal fog among the shimmering stones. "This was the first photograph I made that really captured something of what I felt when I was out there." It was the ethereal quality of light and water in that photograph that pointed him in the direction he was to follow.

After looking at Fokos' austere images, one is not surprised to learn of his admiration for Japanese culture and philosophy. "It is a culture," he says, "that holds the virtues and ideas of quality and aesthetics in high esteem." His immediate surroundings bear witness to this. A pair of cherry stools for removing one's shoes greets us

inside the front door and a triptych of 19th-century Japanese woodblock prints hangs above. The sparseness of the room led one neighbor to inquire when Fokos was expecting his furniture to be delivered. Seated on a cushion at his desk, a thin teak affair set atop two large marble bricks, the desktop only about a foot off the floor, Fokos works on his photographs, determining the cropping and value system of his final prints using Adobe Photoshop.

It is necessary to understand Fokos' mind-set in order to appreciate how he has developed his art. Five years ago he made a photograph underneath one of the ferry docks on Martha's Vineyard. It was a 20-second exposure, looking out to sea with barnacle-covered dock poles in the foreground and a wonderful pattern of water ripples and shadows. "In the image, the sea in the distance appeared to be frozen solid," he recalls, "and the feeling I had when I first saw the picture was as if I was the last





**White Line, Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts, 1996**

person on earth. It was surreal, yet calm and peaceful, sort of like that eerie quiet after a heavy snowfall when the snow absorbs all sound. The image was a special gift for me. It showed me a very beautiful piece of the natural world that I could never have seen with my naked eye. Though the scene was something I was very familiar with, this was different—it was a picture of a feeling, and the elements in the frame were just incidental characters. I always think of it as a 'Zen' photo, a photo of nothing, yet of something intangible."

For 15 years Fokos made only platinum prints contact printed from his large-format negatives. Eventually, he realized that he wanted to express more than was possible through his current methods and that his images would be stronger if he were able to dodge and burn while printing. Due to the long exposures under strong ultraviolet light required when making platinum prints,

traditional darkroom techniques become difficult or impossible. Also, he wanted to make prints larger than his 8x10 contact prints. The solution was to go digital.

It was the early 90s and digital imaging was in its infancy. Fokos had no path to follow. After 18 months of experimenting he wrote a paper outlining his new process and then posted the manuscript on the web. Though improvements have been added over the years, Fokos' process for making enlarged digital negatives still forms the basis for one of the two most commonly used methods. Fokos, who has taught platinum-printing workshops around the country, describes his process on the Bostick and Sullivan site ([www.bostick-sullivan.com/fokos/fokos](http://www.bostick-sullivan.com/fokos/fokos)), where some of his work may also be viewed.

Fokos's method began by using a high-end drum scanner to scan his 8x10 negatives at a high resolution. He would then dodge, burn, and adjust contrast using





**Storrow Drive, Boston, Massachusetts, 1998**

Photoshop. From his computer file he made an enlarged digital negative incorporating all the adjustments, then made a straight contact print from the new negative.

One day Fokos found himself struggling to determine the optimal size print for his images, one which was small enough for someone to hold and take in the entire image, yet large enough to allow the viewer to revel in the detail captured by his 8x10 camera. Since he already had computer image files available, he had a series of Iris prints made in varying sizes. During the process of making the Iris prints, Fokos was impressed by the high-quality results and became intrigued by the potential of alternative printing methods. Eventually, he learned of a machine made by Cymbolic Sciences called the LightJet 5000. Some call this \$400,000 machine a digital enlarger. Rather than focusing light through a lens like a traditional darkroom enlarger, the LightJet uses lasers to ex-

pose photographic paper, which then goes through a normal wet bath development process just like any other photograph.

For Fokos there were three benefits to using the LightJet. First, since the prints are made according to his image file, he could do all his dodging and burning in advance on his computer. This not only allows for far greater precision, but also ensures consistency from print to print. Second, enlargements remain sharp. In a traditional darkroom an enlargement is made by light passing through a negative and a lens high above the paper, resulting in "optical spreading." This means that the larger the print, the fuzzier the image. The LightJet avoids this problem by exposing the paper with lasers. Prints as large as 48x96 are possible on the LightJet and Fokos' editions are now made up of a combination of both 13x13 prints and truly impressive 36x36 prints. Third, though



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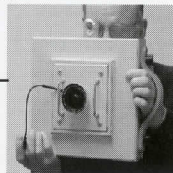
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black-and-white paper can be exposed using the LightJet, Fokos prefers to print his "black-and-white" images on color paper which allows him to achieve richer blacks and a special warm tone to his prints. Upon hearing that he uses Photoshop as part of his process, some people think that Fokos "manufactured" his surreal images on the computer. The reality is that he primarily uses Photoshop for the simple dodging, burning, and contrast control one would find in a traditional darkroom, and additionally to achieve the unique tone of his prints. The haunting quality of his images is a result of his long exposures and careful compositions.

"I find it intriguing," says Fokos, "that I have jumped from antique 19th-century platinum printing to the cutting edge of the 21st century using the LightJet. The digital process has brought me from one realm to another. I am always on the lookout for a better way to do things, so I use whichever process I feel allows me to best express myself. Though I love making images for myself, my greatest satisfaction comes when someone looks at an image and says, 'Gosh, I must have walked past that place a thousand times and never saw the beauty you have shown me here' or 'Your images make me feel so calm and peaceful.' I could live for a month on those comments! It makes hauling around 60 pounds of camera equipment worthwhile."

## TECHNICAL NOTES

Fokos uses a 70-year-old 8x10 Korona View Camera with a 210mm lens. His film is Tri-X, developed in HC110. He scans negatives on a Howtek D4000 drum scanner at 1333 dpi. Prints are output on a LightJet 5000 on Fuji Crytal Archieve paper.

Fokos is represented by Robert Klein Gallery, Boston, Massachusetts; John Cleary Gallery, Houston, Texas; Benham Gallery, Seattle, Washington; and Granary Gallery, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. His E-mail address is: [beakman@netcom.com](mailto:beakman@netcom.com). ▲

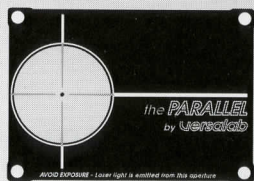
Rosalind Smith has been writing on Photography since the mid 1980s. She is also a painter and printmaker and has exhibited widely in the U.S. and in Europe. She lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

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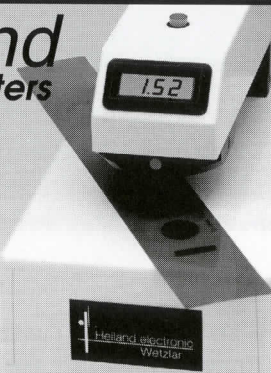
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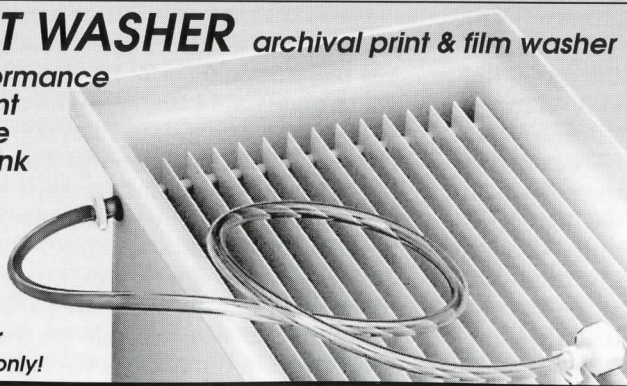
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