Slices of Time: An Interview with David Fokos by Nathan Wirth

David Fokos & His 8×10 Korona View Camera

early morning light
waves softly lapping the shore
I am filled with calm

- David Fokos, 2014 -

Nathan: *I often begin each of my interviews with the confession that I should start with something less obvious than the "when did it all begin question," but each time I ponder where I wish to begin, I realize that this is a good place to start. After all, those roots, those first moments, those first interests in photography help to illuminate much about where a particular artist has come from and how he or she developed a particular vision. So, in that spirit, let's begin with what first drew you to photography.*

David: My grandfather gave me my first camera — a Kodak Brownie — when I was 11 years old, just prior to a trip to Hungary with my family. Interestingly, rather than the usual sort of family snapshots one might expect of an 11 year old, I was already showing an affinity for the landscape and a certain type of composition — taking pictures of looming church spires, zoomy perspectives along building facades, and the patterns found in the cobblestone streets.

Here are some shots from my very first roll of film…

Other than that basic high-school class, I am self-taught. As a high school student, the work of Ansel Adams inspired me to photograph the landscape with a view camera. I admired Adams' methodical, scientific approach and the quality of his b&w prints — the infinite depth of field, the high resolution, and the full tonal range. I set out to emulate him, and soon after heading off to college I purchased my first view camera – a 5×7 Korona View from the 1920's. Up to that point I had never even seen a view camera in person. I taught myself how to use the camera and simultaneously taught myself to make platinum prints because I didn't have a darkroom.

Nathan: *I'd love to hear a little bit more about how that eleven year old who started out with a Kodak Brownie later evolved into a photographer fascinated by, as you mention on your website, revealing "what is felt but often unseen." You already mentioned Ansel Adams as an early influence. Are there any particular photographers who played a significant role in your decision to focus on long exposures? If yes, I am very interested in the why and how.*

David: While I was in high school, my family had 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 southeastern coast of Massachusetts. It was during those vacations that my passion for photographing the ocean developed.

For 15 years I worked in isolation photographing the Martha's Vineyard coastline 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 while making the images. As you noted, my objective is not 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

“Daybreak” Chilmark, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

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 during that time 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 composite of many short-term events.

“East Meets West” Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

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 experience 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 the “invisible” world of non-instantaneous events, into the visible world of a photographic print.

Emotional experiences require a period of time – no one is instantaneously bored, for example. So for a work of art to be able to convey the emotion that was felt by the photographer, 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.

My college degree is in engineering, but I also studied Japanese art history, Japanese film, Japanese aesthetic traditions, and haiku poetry. My study in these fields, in addition to the work of the artists mentioned above, has 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

"Menemsha Currents" Menemsha, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

to accomplish my objective.

My study of Japanese aesthetics helped me to understand that 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. That, in turn, allows me to evoke specific emotions with greater precision and more intensity. To me, it is similar in ways to haiku poetry — I greatly admire the haiku poet's ability to convey deeply felt sentiment through a minimal number of words.

Nathan: *I am particularly interested in hearing more about the words "frozen slices of time." In my own work, I am trying to photograph slices of silence, those fleeting instances of silence that reside in the nooks and crannies of a world that we experience through the constant hum of noise, a silence that we can feel, maybe even see, but cannot hear. I am also very interested in hearing more about how Japanese traditions have influenced your work. My BA and MA are in English Literature and, as a result, much of my work is heavily influenced by my focus on studying poetry. I have also studied Zen, some Haiku (Basho in particular– and a wonderful collection of Japanese Death Poems (or jisei) that feature the last reflections of Zen monks and Haiku poets at the moment of their death), the U-kiyoe woodblock printers, and the films of Kurosawa, Mizoguchi, and Ozu, so I have some sense of how such work has influenced your photography. You already explained some of the connections to and influences from Japanese Traditions, but I would love to hear more about this. Are there any specific lines from haiku poems or scenes from films that have significantly influenced your work or have these things been more of a general influence– and in particular do you see any specific relationship between these influences and the "frozen slices of time" that you create?*

"Unfinished Pier" San Luis Pass, Texas (c) David Fokos

David: Perhaps I worded my previous answers poorly so let me just begin my answer to your most recent questions by stating that I am specifically not trying to capture "frozen slices of time". I will elaborate.

As I mentioned, the goal of my work is to evoke within the viewer the emotion I experienced at the time I was making the exposure. So when I'm out photographing, I have to ask myself, what am I feeling, and what is it about this place that makes me feel this way? It took me a long time to figure this out. I thought I was doing everything right, but it turned out that I hadn't really understood what was at the root of my emotional

"Two Poles" Chilmark, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

response. And until I figured that out, I was taking pictures of the wrong things.

I've been making photographs for over 30 years, and much of that time was spent on Martha's Vineyard Island, which lies just a few miles off the southeastern coast of Massachusetts. If you've ever spent time on an island, you know that the ocean plays a significant role in the island experience. For most of us, that experience is largely positive. We enjoy our time by the water. It relaxes and rejuvenates us.

So, imagine yourself walking on a beach — it doesn't have to be on an island — you're walking along the shore, just at the edge of the water. You're relaxed, listening to surf and enjoying the fresh sea air. You pause, thinking you'd like to take a picture of the beautiful water and some charismatic rocks– capture the moment, preserve it so you can later take it out and relive it. You point your camera, click the shutter, and your camera gives you a picture of a wave, frozen, claw-like, after crashing into a rock. Droplets of water and foam hang suspended in the air.

But then, when you look at your photograph, you think, "whoa, that's not what I saw."

While not a photograph, Hokusai's Great Wave off Kanagawa would be a great example of this.

"The Great Wave Off Kanagawa" – Katsushika Hokusai (sourced from Wikimedia's Commons)

A photo like that doesn't convey the feeling of relaxation I have staring out over the water. For me, my long exposure images are a much better representation of what I feel. It took me 15 years of working with my camera for me to understand that this was the sort of image I needed to make to express what I was feeling.

Of course, I understand that neither type of image is an accurate visual representation of the world. Water droplets do not hang suspended in the air, and you will never see an ocean that looks as smooth as they do in my images. Yet, for my experience, my long exposure images with the smooth water are more emotionally accurate.

And therein lies the crux of the matter. Our experience is much more than what can be captured in a snapshot, but cameras don't record emotions and they are specifically designed to make snapshots.

Most everyone owns a camera – probably a digital camera or a camera in their cell phone. Most of the time, people just point and click to make pictures. And, most of the time they probably get reasonably satisfying results. We can thank the camera

"Haybales" Ripsa, Sweden (c) David Fokos

engineers for that – they know, for example, that, whenever possible, the camera should capture the picture in 1/60th of a second or less. That's because most photos will be taken by someone holding the camera in their hands, and an exposure any longer than 1/60th of a second may result in a blurry picture. The engineers also know that most people prefer pictures that are not blurry. However, this can produce strange and unnatural results – such as drops of water frozen in midair.

I understand what you mean when you say that you are "trying to photograph slices of silence, those fleeting instances of silence that reside in the nooks and crannies of a world that we experience through the constant hum of noise." but even those moments, fleeting as they may be, are not instantaneous. What I discovered was that our bodies experience the world over time rather than as 1/60th of a second long frozen slices.

I'm so glad to hear that you too have an appreciation of Japanese aesthetics. *Basho* is arguably the greatest of the haiku poets, but perhaps my favorite poem is from Masahide (as translated by, in my opinion, the best translators of haiku, Peter Beilenson and Harry Behn):

since my house
burned down, I now own
a better view
of the rising moon

Of course, this is only a translation. (Actually, I once took a few semesters of Japanese in the hope that I would one day be able to read the poems in their original Japanese. Yeah, that worked out. *laugh*) but I think the sentiment still comes through in the translation. I love the combined sense of melancholy, peacefulness, calm, acceptance, and appreciation for what one has rather than lament for what was lost.

This poem was an inspiration in the making of my image "Moonrise" Chilmark, Massachusetts.

Of course, there is the obvious reference to the rising moon, but what the viewer may not realize is that the fence one sees in my image was put in place after Hurricane Bob destroyed the beach grasses that were growing there. If you look at my photo from years earlier titled "Beach Path" Chilmark, Massachusetts, you can see that it is the same cliff in the distance, yet there were these beautiful, soft, beach grasses, and the path curved to the right rather than to the left. I loved the perfection of that grass and the path so, in a sense, after Hurricane Bob destroyed that area it was "my house that burned down."

In terms of film, while I love *Ozu*'s storytelling, visually, I really love *Kurosawa*. His cinematography, like that of Stanley Kubrick, is simultaneously epic, and minimal. There are countless compositions one could point to — a moon in the clouds above the silhouette of a castle, a horse and rider on a distant barren hill, the symmetry of the Lord and Lady of the Court sitting on a dais with a scroll centered on the wall between them, the repetition of a row of similarly uniformed solders stretching out into the distance. I am drawn to symmetry and repeating forms (sometimes too much for my own good!). Also, for me, both Kurosawa's and Kubrick's use of perspective is inspiring.

David Hockney said, “Duration is life, and the photograph has no duration. It is dead in that sense. All photographs share the same flaw: lack of time.”

This is a problem for any artist working in a static medium. Painting, sculpture, and photographs are fixed and unchanging.

What does a painting of a tree or a sculpture of woman tell us of the artist’s experience? What do we know of these artist’s emotional response to their subjects? What was that painter feeling when he painted that tree? How did that sculptor feel about the woman whose likeness he captured? We can’t tell because there is a critical element missing. Time.

An emotional experience requires a period of time. So for a work of art to be able to convey that emotion, the experience of time must be encoded into the work. The element of time is critical to expressing our emotional experience.

“Moonrise” Chilmark, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

The problem is that many of our paintings, sculptures and photographs are static, fixed, unchanging. A snapshot is an arbitrary frozen slice of time removed from its time-space context. It has no past and no future, and without that context the photograph just exists in an emotionless vacuum. It is, as Hockney said, dead.

“Steps” La Jolla, California (c) David Fokos

Nathan*: When I first started working with long exposures back in 2009, there was already a significant presence of this style of photography in the online world (especially European photographers), so, in part, my initial desire to teach myself how to do it was born from the lovely work that I had already encountered. I also had the luxury/convenience of working with digital so I could immediately see if my calculations were correct– and I have never had to deal with film-specific issues like reciprocity (though I do plan to work with film in the years to come). What was your initial inspiration to begin working with long exposures? Did you begin with nighttime long exposures and then work towards daytime images? Were there any other photographers whose work inspired you– or did you find your way to the curious world of the long exposure on your own? I am guessing that you likely had some challenges to overcome when you were working on your earliest long exposure images. In other words, I’d like to hear about your early experiences working with long exposure photography.*

David: Just after high school — this would have been in 1979 — I bought my first view camera, a 5×7 Korona View. That winter, while I was away at college, I taught myself how to use the camera. My first shots were of a snowfall in the woods. Through the winter and spring I continued working with the camera, taught myself how to make platinum prints, and once the school year ended the following summer, I took my camera with me to Martha's Vineyard island. It was there that I began photographing the ocean.

"Ten Cormorants" Port Townsend (c) David Fokos

My family enjoyed lying on the beach, but because of my fair skin I avoided the beach during the harsh midday hours. Instead, I took delight in my own private seaside reveries, early in the morning and late in the afternoon. Though my photographs were really dismal, or at best, uninspiring, I persisted simply because I enjoyed being by the ocean making pictures. Time and again I photographed in the same places. It was was very calming, being out there alone, next to a beautiful ocean, setting up my camera and going through the ritual of making exposures. There was a rhythm to it — set up the tripod, mount the camera, frame the shot, focus the camera, set the shutter, insert the film holder, pull the dark slide, make the exposure, re-insert the dark slide, remove the film holder, take down the camera, fold up the tripod, and then move down the beach and do it all over again. As I mentioned, my photos from that time were pretty lousy, but I wasn't too concerned — I was just happy to enjoy my time by the water.

"West Chop Poles" Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

However, even though I was enjoying myself, I wasn't entirely lackadaisical about the pictures I was making. I was trying to make pictures that would convey the wonderful feeling I had walking the beaches, yet they just didn't seem to reflect what it was that I was getting from the moment. This was somewhat frustrating, but I persevered because I just enjoyed being out there. Then, late one day, I was making one last exposure. The low light required a longer than normal exposure of 45 seconds. On that image, there was a small area, about the size of a nickel, in the foreground where the water had been flowing around some smooth, orange-sized stones. Due to the length of the exposure, the water looked like mist. And there, I finally had it — an image (or just a small part of one) that looked the way that moment had made me feel!

Later on there came a second epiphany. I made a 20-second exposure under a dock, looking out between the pilings toward

the horizon. The shadow of the dock combined with the soft ripples in the water and the distant horizon to form a shot that, for me, was essentially an image without a direct subject. To me it seemed more like a photograph of a feeling.

Contemplating what it was about those two images that resonated with me led me to begin experimenting with longer exposures. I rarely photographed at night, so to extend the length of my daytime exposures I stopped down my lens to f45 or f64 and began to use neutral density filters.

For me at the time, photography was just a hobby and I really had no idea what any other photographers were doing. I didn't read photo magazines, none of my friends were photographers, and the Web hadn't yet been invented, so I was effectively isolated. My first real contact with other photographic artists came years later when the Usenet forums and internet mailing lists arrived on the scene. It was then that I began conversing with other photographers on the alt-photo- process mailing list about technical issues regarding platinum printing, but it was all tech-talk and there were no discussions about imagery or long-exposures.

"Island Dusk" Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

"Solar Eclipse I" San Diego, California (c) David Fokos

For 15 years, I continued to make photographs and adjust my vision, and it wasn't until 1995 that I had finally made an image that I thought was successful.

Nathan*: It seems with each interview I conduct, I inevitably end up addressing what each individual means by his or her vision. I'd like to ask two questions regarding vision. (1) What does the term vision mean to you and (2) keeping in mind that you have already addressed it to a certain extent, how would you describe your vision?*

David: To me, vision, or perhaps more accurately, "artistic vision", means having an interesting perspective on something, and then finding a creative and effective way of sharing (through your art) your perspective with others in a way that they have not previously experienced.

Since I rambled on quite a bit in my responses to some of your previous questions, and I believe that I addressed your current question regarding my vision there, I will keep this short.

If I had to summarize and simplify, I would say that my "interesting perspective" is that we (meaning our brains and bodies) are continually reacting to an environment that is very different from the one we see, which is also to say, one that is very different from the one we normally see captured in photographs.

The way that I have chosen to "creatively, and (hopefully) effectively" share this perspective with others is a) by way of a 15-year period of photographic exploration and experimentation during which time I formulated a personal theory and understanding of how our bodies experience the world, and then b) by developing and honing a way of using my camera's ability to average time through the use of long exposures to reveal, what I believe is a more emotionally accurate representation of how our bodies "see" the world (at least in the places I have chosen to photograph.)

"Long Poles" San Simeon, California (c) David Fokos

"Cliff View II" Chilmark, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

Nathan*: How often do you revisit the same places that you have photographed before? I must confess that for nearly two years I returned over and over again to a stretch of beach in the Point Reyes National Seashore here in Marin County, California where I live. Some might say that I was limiting myself by not pursuing a variety of more places, but I strongly feel that studying the same place over and over again offers many rewards– especially since that stretch of Drake's Beach is ever changing, ever shifting. The rocks– which look like they belong to the Cretaceous or Jurassic period– stretch out into the sea like piers during the winter but by summer they are buried in the smooth wind-blown sands– and in-between those extremes the shoreline undergoes these wonderful periods of transition. And I have never seen the same particular quality of light twice during any of my visits. You have spent years taking photographs at Martha's Vineyard, so what are your thoughts about photographing a particular place?*

David: I am very much in agreement with you, Nathan. I believe that exploring a subject deeply rather than broadly results in more sensitive and insightful work. When you spend a lot of time in one place you really come to know it well — it's moods, it's special, hidden spots, and the small details that you might never notice if you were just there for a day. I could travel to all the

great cities and landmarks of the world, and probably make some good images, but if I wanted to make some great images in Venice, for example, then I'd want to really spend some time there. It seems obvious that a native Venetian would know and understand his or her city better than any tourist. So, as a visitor and photographic artist, I'd want as much time as possible to explore all the nooks and crannies, time to understand the city and feel its pulse, and time to find the shots that would say more about the place and my experience there than just your typical postcard pic.

I've been photographing on Martha's Vineyard for 37 years. And, as I mentioned, I spent the first 15 of those years photographing exclusively on Martha's Vineyard. It was during that time that my style developed as a result of my repeated efforts (and failures) to capture the essence of my experience there. I am pretty sure that if I had spent that time photographing in many different places around the world I might never have even realized the shortcomings in my images and I'd still be making superficial photos today.

Nathan*: I'd like to shift the discussion to capturing the image in the field and then later processing it. If I recall correctly, you use a large format film camera. Do you work on your images in the wet darkroom or do use the more modern digital darkroom on your computer? Keeping in mind that you likely approach each image differently, I would love to hear about your whole process from deciding where and what you wish to photograph and everything that leads up to and includes the finished print.*

"Beach Comet" Chilmark, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

David: I have mostly used (and continue to use) an 8×10 camera with Kodak Tri-X film. The film, of course, needs to be developed using chemicals, but once I have the negative I then scan it and finish my work on the computer.
My process varies from image to image. Sometimes, I know the shot I want and how the finished image will look, but it may take years for the right moment to present itself. My "Jetty" image took me 3 years of checking tide charts, sunrise times and weather reports to get just the conditions I wanted. Other times, I can be out with my camera and just be inspired by something I happen upon. "Balanced Stones" is a good example. [note: *David explains both of these images in more detail at the end of this interview. Click here to jump ahead.]*

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.

My subject matter is the feeling I am trying to convey. The objects in my images are simply supporting characters. But the problem with photography is that the camera doesn't record emotion.

How many times have you taken a snapshot of some amazing vista like the Grand Canyon, or an incredible sunset only to be disappointed when you got your prints back? You remembered the experience as having been so much more dramatic than the prints convey. One of the reasons for this discrepancy is that a large part of the experience you had while taking the picture was the emotion you felt while standing there. As I mentioned, the camera does not record emotion. It cannot convey how you felt that morning when you woke up, what kind of mood you were in, the humidity, the smell of the air, the

temperature, the feel of breeze, or the sun on your face. All of these things contribute to the emotional response you have to a place. The job of a photographic artist is to work with the camera's image, to create the drama and add back the emotion.

"Black Gate" Vineyard Haven (c) David Fokos

The difference between documentary work/photojournalism and fine art photography is that in the former, one wants to present photographs with the least amount of manipulation possible (other than the framing of the image, choice of lens, etc.), whereas a fine art photographer is an artist seeking to express an idea, evoke an emotion, or convey a message. For the photographic artist, the taking of the picture is just the first step.

When composing, I first decide what it is that I wish to convey – what is it in the scene that I want the viewer to focus their attention upon, and what emotion do I want to evoke. I try to frame my shots in such a way as to emphasize the emotional triggers and de-emphasize any distractions. I have found minimalist compositions to be the most effective means of evoking a pure emotion within the viewer. When making minimalist images, the composition is especially critical so I pay close attention to how the main elements interact with any lesser elements, the horizon, the positive and negative spaces created by their placement, and the tension or harmony created by the positions of everything. I pay particular attention to the background and to the edges of the frame to make sure there is nothing there that will be a distraction.

When I finally click the shutter, I have already pre-visualized the final image in my head – making the exposure is just the process of gathering the raw material for it.

As I said, I shoot 8×10 Kodak Tri-X Professional film with my 84-year old Korona View Camera. I use just one lens – a 210mm Rodenstock Sironar-S. This lens is a wide-angle lens on my camera (the equivalent of a 29mm lens on a 35mm camera). Ironically, having only one lens to choose from allows me greater freedom. If I had a number of lenses I would continually be trying to decide which lens to use. When you only have one lens, you never have to think about it. Instead of being paralyzed by indecision, I am free to concentrate on my compositions.

My equipment weighs 60lbs. I have to ship my camera equipment, in advance, to wherever I want to go. When shooting, I go out with 12 sheets of film (at $7+ per sheet). I shoot at least two of everything just in case something happens to one of the negatives. Sometimes, I'll try different exposure times, different compositions, or different filter combinations. This means that when I go out I am usually only able to take one or two shots before I have to reload my film holders in a darkroom or changing tent.

After shooting and then shipping my film and camera equipment home again, I develop my film – 5 sheets at a time in a Jobo. Only then do I have the first chance to see if any of my shots are worthwhile. If I have a negative I like I then wet-mount the 8×10 negative to my scanner — an Epson V750 Pro — and scan it at a very high resolution (16-bits @ 2400 ppi). The result is an 800MB grayscale image file (which is equivalent to the resolution of a 2.4GB color file).

Once I have a high-resolution image file in my computer, the real work begins. I often spend a hundred hours or more

"Castle Walk" Northumberland, England (c) David Fokos

working to accomplish the image I pre-visualized – dodging and burning (making certain areas lighter or darker), adjusting local contrast and, when necessary, etc.. This is the part of the process that adds the emotion back into the image my camera recorded.

I craft my images in a way that takes the viewer on a journey. Our eyes are naturally drawn toward light so, for example, if I want the viewer to focus on a certain part of an image, I may make that little white boat over toward the right side glow, while the left, top and bottom of the image are made darker. I make hundreds of local contrast adjustments, and I make sure that there is nothing that will distract the viewer. It's remarkable how small something can be and still upset the balance of an image. It's like someone coughing during a quiet, tender passage of a symphony.

Finally, once I'm satisfied with the image, I make the finished print using an Epson 11880 printer.

***Nathan**: I would love to hear more on your thoughts about the print. Do you do any traditional darkroom work or do you only use the digital darkroom? After carefully looking at your work, I am guessing that you put a lot of time into producing your own prints. Do you have any advice for those of us developing our printing skills? Also– if someone wishes to purchase a print from you, where should they go?*

"Reeds" Edgartown, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

David: All my prints are now pigment prints made on my Epson 11880 printer. For 15 years I made just platinum prints on hand-coated paper and then, for another 10 or so years, I made traditional prints (light-sensitive paper, chemicals, etc.) Now, I make my prints on the Epson.

Again, as I said earlier, cameras, film, filters, paper, computers, software, and printers are just tools, just as the paint brush and trowel are for the painter and the hammer and chisel are for the sculptor. The tools you use are not important, only the final work. No one cares what brushes a painter uses.

You could be a great artist, with brilliant insight, sensitivity, original ideas, and breathtaking vision, but if you can't get it into the final print, then you have nothing. And when you get right down to it, my prints are just a bunch of chemicals stuck to a piece of paper hanging on a wall somewhere (it doesn't matter whether those chemicals are silver-based or ink-based) and I can't always be around to explain my intention to the viewer — my image has to communicate everything I

"Painted Rocks" North Tisbury, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

want to say. Therefore, as an artist, I avail myself of every possible tool that can help me express my vision in the strongest possible way.

I switched over to the Epson once the pigment-based inkjet technology surpassed traditional photographic processes. Right now, I think that in terms of tonality, dynamic range, resolution, archival properties, and consistency, the prints I am making on my Epson are the best I've ever made.

I think that these days most photographers are making digital prints, so the only advice I can suggest is that they test many different papers to find what works best for their images. Sample packs containing a couple sheets of many different papers are widely available at a reasonable cost. It is really worthwhile to get some of these packs and print out one test image on all the different papers. Depending on the paper, the results can be dramatically different.

If anyone is interested in purchasing one of my original prints, they can either contact one of the galleries listed on my website (www.davidfokos.net) or, if those galleries are inconvenient for them, they may contact me directly at david@davidfokos.net.

***Nathan**: What are your views on digital versus film, both in equipment and the processing? If I recall correctly in a previous interview of yours that I read, you feel that much of this comes down to what tools an individual person wants to use … that what really matters is the final creation. Do you ever use digital cameras?*

David: Yes, that's correct – my view is that it really doesn't matter what equipment you use, they're just tools. No one ever asks a painter what brush he uses (except maybe other painters).

I still find some benefit to working with my 8×10 camera, but I know that the days of film are numbered, so I have been experimenting with a medium-format digital camera as well.

"Steamship Dock" Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

My current feeling is that the high-megapixel medium-format digital backs such as the 39MP, 60MP, or 80MP backs from Phase One, and now even some of the high-megapixel, full-frame DSLRs, are often capable of resolution equal to, and sometimes surpassing that of my 8×10 film. And for smaller prints, many of the less expensive DSLRs would easily be just as capable.

"Four Poles" Port Townsend, Washington (c) David Fokos

I still haven't really found my groove with the digital camera, but I have enjoyed some of the benefits of shooting digital such as:

a) I can carry the camera with me on a plane.
b) I can shoot as many frames as I like without reloading film and at no cost.
c) I have instant feedback so that I can check my compositions. So if I'm off a little, or I made some error in exposure, etc., I don't have to fly halfway around the world again to correct it.
d) I can shoot on windy days.
e) I don't have to develop film.
f) I don't have to scan film.
g) Digital files have no film grain.

So, why do I still shoot film? The answer is very specific to the way I work and the kinds of images I like to make. My feeling is that for 99.99% of photographers, my issues would be irrelevant.

Specifically, the reciprocity failure of Tri-X film helps me to not blow out my highlights. A digital camera, though its dynamic range is greater than that of film, is much more linear and that can still cause me some difficulty with my long exposures.

"Steam" Glen Cove, Washington (c) David Fokos

Also, I find the perspective distortion of my view camera's back-tilt to be very useful and, ironically, I can preview the effect on my view camera while composing the image, whereas I don't have a live preview with the digital camera (unless I drag a laptop into the field which I am loathe to do).

Another (minor) issue for me is that I have become used to composing on 80 sq. inches of ground glass (albeit upside-down and backwards), and I find the 2 or 3 sq. inches of LCD on the back of a digital camera to be a less than satisfactory substitute. But this is just a personal limitation and I am sure that with time I will learn to deal with it.

So, my personal belief is that for nearly everyone digital is the better way to go – the tools are technically superior. However, that said, some people may still choose to work with film and other older materials — handmade platinum-based paper, for example — for a variety of personal reasons. It may be that the materials they are working with result in a very specific look. Or, it might be because it slows them down, and makes them really consider their compositions, or maybe they just enjoy working with an old camera and film. In the end it just comes down to the fact that all this technology is just a tool for us to

"Clear Morning" Port Townsend, Washington (c) David Fokos

make the images we want to share with the world. One tool may be right for one person but wrong for another. Each of us has to choose what best helps us do our work.

On a related note, I feel that by giving photographic artists the ability to work with their images on a computer, digital technology has been the single most important advancement in photography since film. I know there are still a few people who grumble about digital, and who think that using Photoshop is wrong, but it's the same stuff photographers have been doing in the darkroom for years, except now it can be applied with more precision

Historically, painters, sculptors, and artists working in other media have had that advantage over photographers. A painter, for example, given sufficient skill and a fine enough brush is able to create a precise painting of his or her vision. Whereas a photographer, working in a traditional darkroom, was limited by the imprecision of waving little bits of cardboard in the light for a few seconds during exposure and not being able to see the result until it was developed and dried. By that point, it was too late – there was no way to adjust the print.

Now, thanks to digital technology, photographic artists have an unprecedented level of control over their images, and I think that is going to allow many photographers to better express their vision.

Nathan*: My work is very weather dependent. I tend to only go out when the weather is fairly crappy, my favorite weather being those periods between rain storms, when the light is present but the clouds are dark and on the move– and, like most landscape photographers, I prefer the hours around sunset and sunrise (though I often have a hard time waking up before dawn). Looking over your work, I can definitely see that you have worked on some images at night, sunrise, and around sunset or shortly after. Do you prefer to work in specific kinds of weather or at certain times of day– and how do such preferences, if applicable, influence the choices you make for what to photograph?*

"Ferry Landing" Port Townsend, Washington (c) David Fokos

David: I, too, prefer photographing early in the morning and late in the day. I only photograph at night about 10% of the time. As for weather, I go out in whatever conditions I need to get the image I want. I've been out for hours in 0-degree temperatures, but given a choice, I prefer to go out when the weather is nice.

"Gasworks" Seattle, Washington (c) David Fokos

***Nathan**: I'd like to shift gears and ask you some more general questions. Does music play a significant role in your processing? Personally, music is inextricably tied to my daily life, so it is an essential part of my photo processing; in fact, much of my work has unfolded while listening to music. As a result, I am always curious to hear about photographers' relationships with their music and work. Do you listen to music while you process your work, and, if yes, what do you prefer to listen to?*

"Mooring Rings Study #1" Boston, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

David: I love music. I used to play an instrument (trumpet), and I used to be an audio design engineer designing loudspeakers for high-end audio systems. However, ironically, when I'm working I'm so intensely focused on what I'm doing that I prefer to work in silence. Weird, right?

***Nathan**: I fear that this question might be a bit abstract, and, perhaps, even unnecessary, but where do you think photography fits in today's art world?*

David: I view photography as an art form on par with all others. Just like any other artist, the photographic artist is trying to communicate a message to the viewer through his or her craft. The craft in this case is photography. There was a time of course, not that long ago, when photography was not accepted as a "true" art form, but I think that would be rare today.

Today, nearly everyone has a camera in their pocket. And even before camera phones, many people took snapshots. So most everyone has made photographs on occasion. I think the feeling that, "Oh, I could do that", or, "It's the camera that makes the image, not the artist", contributed to the slow acceptance of photography as a serious art form. However, those "handicaps" are also some of photography's greatest strengths.

People generally believe that photographs represent a reality that existed at the time the photograph was made. We all have vacation snapshots — we look at them, see ourselves standing at the seashore, or standing in front of the Great Pyramid and say, "Yes, we were there. This picture captures that reality". Our daily news is often presented to us through images that we, again, believe represent reality. However, as photographers, we know this is not true.

The error, of course, is to assume that any photograph accurately portrays reality. We (the population at large) are now becoming aware of the ways in which a photograph may be digitally manipulated. What people don't realize is that photographs have always been manipulated — now it's only gotten a bit easier.

First, and surely the most extreme manipulation of all (at least with respect to my own work), is that our world is not black & white! Second, the choice of lens – telephoto, which compresses space, "normal", or wide-angle which distorts space — is also a manipulation. Cropping pictures, "burning" in areas of the print, and "dodging" others away in the darkroom are part of every photographer's repertoire, as are contrast adjustment, exposure, and toning. Even what we choose to include or exclude from the frame makes each photograph a "set-up".

People do not assume that a painting or a sculpture is an accurate representation of reality, but they want to believe that a photograph is. It is this benefit of the doubt that gives photographic art its unique power.

"Mooring Rings Study #3" Boston, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

"Missing Rail" Boston, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

***Nathan**: In today's world, social media plays an increasing role in photography for many established photographers and even more so for many, many up and coming photographers. What are your thoughts about "sharing your work online"?*

David: I think it's great to be able to share our work online. The internet has allowed my work to be seen by a vast number of people all over the world. Many people, yourself included, may have first become aware of my work from something you saw online — my website, an interview, etc. Personally, I also love being able to see photographs from all over the world, whether they are simple snapshots or the creations of photographic artists. The only downside I am seeing as a result of sharing images via social media is the huge increase in banal imagery made with little or no thought. The signal-to-noise ratio of well-crafted, well-conceived images to the endless parade of selfies and photos of cats has become very low. It can really be fatiguing.

***Nathan**: Are there any contemporary photographers whose work you follow?*

David: I wouldn't say that I really follow the work of any photographer — *i.e.*, I don't make an effort to check in and keep up with their latest efforts; however, when they cross my path I do enjoy seeing the latest work from Toshio Shibata, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Robert & Shana Parkeharrison, Matthew Pillsbury, and Nicholas Kahn & Richard Selesnick.

Nathan: *Are you working on any current projects? Are there any specific projects that you would like to work on?*

"Incoming Ferry" Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

David: I continue to explore the landscape and the ocean as I have done for over 30 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 really 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.

***Nathan**: What are your thoughts on photography workshops, photography courses and degrees, how-to books, and the plethora of online tutorials, equipment reviews, and other "how to" articles? Do you think someone who is seeking a specific artistic vision is better off teaching his or herself or, instead, pursuing some of these more formal avenues of learning / training? Many photographers talk about the benefits of learning without the indoctrination of the so-called rules of image making– and even more talk about the benefits of breaking those rules. Do you have any thoughts about any of this?*

David: To be a good artist requires two things — (1) a command of your medium and (2) artistic vision. I think that workshops, classes, etc. can be beneficial with regard to learning new techniques and mastering your craft. However, I don't believe they can teach vision — that can only come from within. I think the very best thing a photographer can do for their art is to spend a lot of time working on it, thinking about it, and not worrying about "rules". It's easy to get caught up in cycle of taking workshops and classes where it feels like you're making progress, but you're not really advancing your work as an artist — that can only come from making images. Henri Cartier-Bresson said, "Your first 10,000 photographs are your worst."

***Nathan**: Do you have any advice to offer photographers who are struggling to find their own voice, their own personal artistic vision?*

David: Here are some suggestions I often offer young photographers:

1. 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 8×10 camera is a "drop bed" style that is older and more rickety than modern view cameras, but I can set it up in 10

"Arlington Memorial Bridge" Washington D. C. (c) David Fokos

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.

2. 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….

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

"Longfellow Bridge" Boston, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

6. Don't use gimmicks. Printing so I can see the edges of the negative, using a Holga, distressing the image, selective focus, or anything when done for any reason other than it somehow serves the image and helps to better communicate your message to the viewer more clearly should be avoided. This is just a crutch used by insecure photographers who don't think their images are strong enough to stand on their own merit. I'm not suggesting that these are inherently bad techniques, or that they should be avoided, only that you

"Longfellow Bridge II" Boston, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

shouldn't do it unless you have a valid reason.

7. Use whatever tools are available to make your image stronger. Being an artist is about using some media, in this case photography, to communicate some thought, idea or emotion. So long as you are not a documentary photographer, you should do anything you can to strengthen your image. This means cropping, masking, using Photoshop, making platinum prints, whatever — these are all just tools. Whatever it is, if it makes your art better, use it and don't be an apologist.

8. Be your harshest critic. Edit your work ruthlessly. Show nothing but your best. Others will judge you only by what you show, not what is stashed away in your boxes of negatives.

9. Present your work professionally, and consistently. A body of work should look like a coherent body of work. All the images should be presented in a similar (and professional) manner. Unless there is some compelling reason, do not mix black & white with color photos. Do not have landscapes, portraits, still-lifes, and abstracts all together. Eat your vegetables.

10. Don't get overly attached to your process. For 15 years all my prints were platinum prints. I invested many years of research and work perfecting my process. Then one day, I realized that my images would look better on modern materials, so I switched. It wasn't easy, but it was necessary. Everything about your process must serve the image.

***Nathan**: And, finally, thank you very much not only for taking the time to answer these questions, David, but also for doing it so thoughtfully. Is there anything else you would like to add?*

David: You're very welcome — thanks for your interest, Nathan.

"East Chop Poles" Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

Today, image-making has never been easier, but making an original image has never been more difficult. With so many people taking so many pictures it has become increasingly challenging to create something unique. And though it has become more difficult, I still want to again encourage photographers to take the time to thoughtfully consider the images they are making, to think about why they are making them, and to try to "show me something I haven't seen before."

"Foggy Night" Stafford, Texas (c) David Fokos

Oh, and enough with the selfies.

Explore More of David's Work: website | galleries | contact

Several Images with Notes from David

"Balanced Stones, Port Townsend, Washington" (c) David Fokos

Port Townsend is a small town on the inside coast of the Olympic Peninsula, across the Puget Sound from Seattle, Washington. It is a very peaceful and friendly place and I have made many images there.

This particular image, Balanced Stones, was made near the end of the day. I had been working in an area to the south and I was now making my way back to town. I have always been fascinated by the juxtaposition of our natural and man-made worlds, and these poles standing in the water caught my attention. It wasn't until I moved closer that I noticed the two rocks that had been balanced against one another on top of one of the poles. I tried to imagine the person who put the stones there. This wasn't some ostentatious flaunting of someone's rock-stacking/balancing prowess meant to impress others, but rather, two unremarkable stones placed there for no other purpose than some small personal satisfaction. I found the gesture to be sweet and indicative of the sort of people I had met in Port Townsend. I wanted my photograph to reflect this sweetness, peacefulness and innocence.

"Jetty, Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts" (c) David Fokos

It took me three years to make this photograph. There is a peacefulness that comes from the weight of the stones making up this jetty. I love watching the water wash over it, especially in the quiet early morning hours and in the off-season.

With this image I wanted to express this peacefulness and stability, and I chose to do this by photographing it in the early morning light in such a way that would revel the calming action of the jetty upon the water – a perfect metaphor for how the island acts upon me.

"Balanced Stones" Port Townsend, Washington (c) David Fokos

The jetty is visible from the road, and each time I drove by I would stare at it out the window. However, to make the image I wanted – one illustrating the action of the jetty – I realized that the conditions had to be exactly right. This meant that the tide had to be at the right level – too high and it would completely submerge the jetty, too low and all the rocks would be exposed. The time of day also had to be right – ethereal early morning light was best for its quality and direction. Finally, I wanted a cloudless sky so that nothing would distract from the jetty.

For 3 years I consulted tide charts, astronomical tables listing the time of sunrise and sunset, and weather reports. I tried making exposures under less than perfect conditions but was never satisfied. Finally, after 3 years, the perfect day arrived when all the elements aligned at the same time.

"Jetty" Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

"On Time" Ferry – Returning and Going (c) David Fokos

“On Time” Ferry – Going, Edgartown, Massachusetts” (c) David Fokos

These two images make a beautiful pair. The “On Time” ferry running between Edgartown and Chappaquiddick takes just 1 minute to complete its trip, but it cannot escape feeling the force of nature exerting itself as the tide flows in and out of Edgartown Harbor. Though the water is barely visible and the direction of its flow uncertain, by photographing at night I allowed the tide to express itself through its beautiful dance with the ferry. In the “Going” image, the ferry leaves the dock and the captain allows it to be carried toward the harbor before pulling it back toward the Chappaquiddick dock. When “Returning”, it is the ferry’s turn to lead, as it pushes off into the current and then allows the flow of the water to bring it gently into port on the Edgartown side.

“On Time” Ferry – Returning, Edgartown, Massachusetts” (c) David Fokos

“White Line, Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts” (c) David Fokos

“White Line” Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts (c) David Fokos

Ferries, and ferry terminals play a prominent role in the lives of island residents. This shot is a view of the dock in Oak Bluffs just after the last boat of the day left. Many thousands of people have spent a lot of time staring down this dock waiting to load their cars. I made this image because I love the calm that falls over the island after the last ferry is gone. I also thought that the weathered wood of the dock was also evocative of the history and important role the ferry has played for so many years.

“Scenic View, Kiptopeke, Virginia” (c) David Fokos

“Scenic View” Kiptopeke, Virginia (c) David Fokos

What I really like about this image is that we can’t actually see the scenic view, but we assume there must be one beyond the

wall, otherwise why would there be a viewer? And whatever splendor is there, will forever remain a mystery because I'm not telling!

A Few More Images for Your Viewing Pleasure

2 Comments

Reply

Ray Rhodes
February 1, 2014 at 9:18 pm #

Nathan Thank you so very much – David I felt you had been sitting across a table from me – I could see you thinking about your answers – a fabulous insight and so very – very inspirational
Nathan and David – a big thank you to the both of you

Reply

David Fokos
February 27, 2014 at 11:33 pm #

Post a Comment

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