

▼ THE LAST WORD

Can you believe a photograph?

Serious practitioners of conventional photography know of the many ways that they can stage-manage the truth. It starts in the field. Where do you point the camera? What do you ask of your subjects? Do you move things? What do you leave out? When do you trip the shutter? How do you exploit lens distortions? It continues in the darkroom. Print someone dark to make them sinister? Airbrush the negative? It takes skill, but the possibilities are endless.

In spite of all the ways that a photograph can misrepresent reality, the photographic medium has possessed for years incredible power to generate belief, immediacy, and visceral impact in the viewer.

Twenty-odd years ago, when digital photography first burst into public consciousness with National Geographic's thoughtless moving of pyramids, people said that the day was coming when photography would lose their veracity. At the beginning

of the 90s Photoshop brought the means to manipulate photographs to the desktop, and many declared documentary photography dead and made preparations for the funeral.

The world has just witnessed a sad and terrible event that makes an effective case that photographs (including motion video, in this case) as documents of the truth continue to convince, and do so with great power and emotional impact. The Iraq prisoner abuse scandal had apparently been percolating through the US military bureaucracy for several months with deliberate speed. The investigators and their superiors in our government must have known that leaks were inevitable, but they appeared completely unprepared for the firestorm of outrage that greeted the leaks. That's because the information appeared in the form of photographs. Text, or even video accounts from witnesses would not have had anywhere near the perceived veracity and go-for-the-gut impact.

How can it be that, in an era when photographs can be composited,

selectively erased, distorted, and otherwise modified with unprecedented ease and verisimilitude, that they retain their ability to convince? One factor is the democratization of photography that started with George Eastman and has continued with dizzying speed to include auto-everything PHD (push here, dummy) still and video cameras, tiny cameras, and cameras in cell phones. Another reason is the rise of nearly-ubiquitous, rapid digital communications and the integration of communications systems with photographic ones. The prisoner abuse photos spread speedily over the world, mostly as email attachments, and, later, images on web sites and in the commercial media. The combination of a large number of sources for the images and their immediate dissemination reduced the probability of massive photographic manipulation to near-zero.

We photographers continue to wield a powerful tool. We should take care not to abuse that power.

Comments? Send them to jim@kasson.com.

CENTER FOR
PHOTOGRAPHIC ART
NEWSLETTER
NUMBER 23
SUMMER
2004

FOCUS

▼ DON'T FORGET: IN-HAND DEADLINE AUGUST 9

In addition to the cash award recipients, approximately 30 artists will be selected by the juror for inclusion in the Center Awards Exhibition, presented at the CPA Gallery, Carmel, California. The exhibit will take place in October 2004. To receive information and prospectus: download from www.photography.org, or fax request to 831.625.5199, call 831.625.5181, or write to Center for Photographic Art with SASE, PO Box 1100, Carmel, CA 93921

▼ SUMMER WORKSHOP DESCRIPTIONS

Charlie Cramer *Digital printing for Color and Black and White* Saturday, July 10 \$190

A one-day lecture/demonstration with recommendations on the best ways to embrace the digital domain. Charles Cramer happily printed his color dye transfer and silver gelatin b&w images in his darkroom for over 20 years. In 1997, he was introduced to digital printing. After many years of testing, he is now convinced he can make better prints using digital techniques. He will show comparison prints to make this point. Cramer will go into specifics about which equipment and software he recommends, along with details about the entire process. Participants are also encouraged to bring their own prints for review and discussion.

Holly Roberts *Extending the Photograph Using Collage, Construction and Paint* August 9-13 \$700, \$798 after July 26

Holly Roberts is well known for her complex and powerful imagery created by using photographs as a base, and then

overpainting them with oil paints. This hands-on weeklong workshop will provide an intensive introduction to this process. Participants are encouraged to explore different approaches in order to access deeper levels of expression. The instructor will give demonstrations in gluing, transfer processes and painting, as well as lectures on adhesion, supports, setting up to paint, color studies and archival processes.

Mac Holbert Nash Editions *Digital*

***Fine Art Printing* September 11/12 \$285**

This workshop explores the latest technological developments in making fine-art digital prints, by combining digital printmaking and image editing technology with traditional fine-art presentation techniques. Participants acquire the skills to create a high-quality portfolio that can be easily expanded and updated. Color calibration, advanced imaging techniques, output options, substrate choices are part of what will be discussed and demonstrated.



Ted Orland and David Bayles lead the workshop *Finding Your Own Work*

▼ LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR



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Newsletter Editor

Jim Kasson

We have sent out the first batch of the 14th Annual Center Awards prospectus to members and those who participated in last year's event. \$21,500 will be available for event awards, the largest amount given out in the history of the Center. There are two \$10,000 awards, (the Betty and Jim Kasson Award and the Artists Project Award) as well as one International Award for \$1,500. There are three artists somewhere who will have a great deal of financial support for their work by the 1st of October. Speaking for the award donors as well as all of us at the Center, nothing pleases us more than to be able to support productive artists in their creative process.

This year's juror is Mr. Phillip Brookman, the Senior Curator of Photography and Media Arts at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. He is one of the most respected curators in the United States today. He will be coming to Carmel in August and spend at least three days reviewing the entered material. I've known Phillip for many years and admire his professional abilities and integrity. This is a very demanding job and we are honored by his willingness to be part of this awards process.

Last year there were over 550 entries with a total of over 8,000 slides for review. We are anxiously awaiting an even larger number coming this year. This is an important opportunity for any artist to have work seen by a world-class curator as well as having a chance to be represented in the Center Awards Exhibition or be selected as one of the top award recipients. I encourage everyone to consider taking on the task in getting your work together and submitting it this year. Think about making a commitment for you and your work to be part of this prestigious event. If you sent in a body of work last year and were not successful in getting in the exhibition, give it another try this year. It is a different judge and a another group of work that will be in the mix.

We are excited about seeing a great deal of work up on the screen as we move through the selection process. There is room for everyone from the weekend worker to the most prominent of artists. This is the event of the year and the opportunity of a lifetime.

Dennis High
Executive Director/Curator

and printing. In many ways, it's like a week-end workshop, except it's in much more detail, you can hold on to it, and I'm trying to make it well illustrated.

JK: Tell me about your teaching.

SJ: I started teaching just before my 21st birthday, at Merced Community College. I've taught at a number of community colleges, university extension programs, and workshop programs. I started my own independent workshop program in the late 70s. Then I started lecturing in workshops, conferences, and expositions having to do with publishing: Seybold, FOGRA, etc. We quit doing the field workshops in the early 90s, because I was getting so completely immersed in the world of digital imaging, yet we couldn't really teach that in the field, so I switched all of the teaching to studio workshops. Once the 35mm-sized digital SLRs started coming along two or three years ago, we reintroduced the field workshops, and last year we expanded that into building a digital lab on a 40 foot bus that has a Mac lab with printers and satellite Internet connections.

JK: How would a prospective student contact you?

SJ: The web site is www.sjphoto.com, and email to info@sjphoto.com will get you any information you need. There's a monthly email newsletter that you can sign up for on the web site.

JK: What's it going to take to get you into a two dimensional sensor instead of your scanning back?

SJ: I've been using area array sensors for a while. Once the Kodak DCS 460 became available in 1995, I started carrying it. It used a 6 megapixel chip. Before any of the current round of SLR digital cameras came into existence, I had 30,000 digital images from the 460. All of those images are sitting there for me to do things with now. I used that camera to document the parks project, and there were times when I simply couldn't make images with the scanning camera, I kept right on shooting with the 460. There are a couple of spreads in the book that came from the 460. Within the confines of the book, these 13 inch files are OK. It's still a very viable camera. It's just not as convenient as the current cameras, it doesn't have the LCD display on the back. I'm using the Kodak 14n a lot now. I've been making photographs with that for over a year now, and gotten quite lovely photographs.

JK: You're saying that it's not a transition for you; you use array capture for some things now and as the sensors gain resolution, lose noise, and solve their aliasing problems, you'll use 2D capture more and more?

SJ: Unless I've got full resolution color at this kind of resolution, I don't think I can quit using the scanning back. None of the current 2D cameras can even touch the image quality. There's very little economic incentive for a camera manufacturer to make a really large array. Most commercial film work is done on 35mm or 21/4. Studio work that's done on 4x5 can be done on a scanning back to some degree. I'm glad the 22 megapixel chips are here. I'll be glad if Foveon can succeed in making a higher-resolution chip.

JK: Foveon has a potentially great way to deal with color aliasing problems.

SJ: That's right, there simply are no such problems with the X3 chip, but they have some noise issues right now. I still have a prototype 2K by 2K chip we've got taped into a Sinar camera, and it blows everything in its class away, even looking good compared to the new 22 megapixel Kodak chip that you can buy in backs from Sinar and Imacon. But it's not a production item.

JK: What are the limits of high-res capture?

SJ: If we had an 8000 by 10,000 pixel Foveon type sensor, that might do me pretty well. The 8000 element BetterLight scanning back has proven difficult to use outdoors, because atmospheric distortion alone turns out to be a fair amount of what gets recorded. We're at a point where the scanning backs have sufficient resolution that lenses and micro-vibrations are becoming a problem. If it were an instant capture camera, atmospheric distortion would be rendered in a different way, as would optical distortion, but they would remain issues. I think we'll end up at a point where the glass will be such a problem that we'll have to look at other ways of focusing light. Photographers are a greedy sort, so I'm not sure 8K by 10K would actually satisfy me. But having resolution like I already have that makes a 20x25 inch print essentially a contact print, no grain, real color separation, and the ability to look at the photograph while I'm still standing there, that is already very nice.

JK: What are the problems with current output devices and materials?

SJ: I'm delighted to be on rag paper now printing with ground-up-earth pigments.

JK: The Dmax sacrifices in those materials don't bother you too much?

SJ: Of course they do. I would love to have the option of gelatin silver black in any medium I use. Epson's Ultrachrome inks with their matte black ink help that to some degree, but with the Ultrachrome inks we took a hit on longevity over the original pigments. We're inching back up by stripping out the more volatile ink and improving metamerism, and now the coating agents are getting us back up in life a little bit, where as before we didn't think of them as an enhancement, so much as a surface protector. Now they're becoming an issue on the enhancements, so we're using them again for reasons other than protecting the surface. The dot size is getting interestingly small. The paper is a combination of beautiful and problematic. The Hahnemuhle German Etching paper we use tends to have the coating fleck off, and we get little pinpricks of white.

JK: The Epson Fine Art Textured has the same problem.

SJ: If we're having trouble with it, we'll pull the whole sheet off the roller, and brush it with a big horsehair brush to try to get the coating that's going to fall off to do so before we put the pigment down, rather than after. More than once we've had to tear up a beautiful print because it has a white dust spot in the middle of the sky. I can't spot that stuff. I've saved the pigment,

and I've got my trusty spotting brush from 1975, but when you go to spot a white place the rag paper wicks it to someplace else.

JK: Looking around here, it looks like you're not pushing the color gamut of your printer with respect to chromaticity.

SJ: Real world color reproduces pretty well with the technology that we have now. When you start sopping up the color, you start pushing the edges of the gamut.

JK: But luminance is a different story.

SJ: Yes. Blacks go gray on rag. Pigments go grayer on rag. Spraying brings it back up a little bit, but if you spray it too much you lose the texture of the rag paper. You could argue that it's a waste to put the image on the rag paper if you're going to put it under glass anyway, but I can still see the rag paper, and I love it. I never liked resin coated paper. I never liked it in black and white and I never liked it in color. I came into color photography late enough so that was the only choice I had, unless I was going to go to dye transfer.

JK: What do you think about Henry Wilhelm's print life projections?

SJ: I have an extraordinarily deep respect for Henry. I think he is doing probably the best work anybody has ever done on longevity. I believe his ethics to be completely unchallengeable. Simulated life testing is an evolving science and he will continue to take into account new variables as we become aware of them. He's going to miss things, but I think that his estimates are the best information we have to go on, and given the parameters that we know to test for, they're probably good estimates. Most of the short-term estimates have turned out to be true.

JK: What other improvements would you like to see in output?

SJ: One of the biggest problems now is getting the color through the print drivers. Epson continues to have print drivers that are more geared to a particular look and feel.

JK: They're RGB drivers, and the user can't control the color separations.

SJ: Not only that, they tend to be oriented to more casual users, even on the professional printers, but the extraordinary beauty that they've managed to allow us to put onto paper is wondrous. I wish I had better paper control; I miss the drum of the Iris in that sense. I could build up a black and white image on the Iris by hitting it 7 times with black ink, because there was dot for dot registration. I'm excited about the way things are going. I'm delighted that we're getting gray inks, and I want that to be extended to multiple grays. The dots are getting sufficiently small that we may be able to lose the light magenta and light cyan, although we still need them now.

JK: There are problems, but it sounds like you're happy with the prints you can make now.

SJ: To be able to put color images on rag paper is wonderful. This is the most beautiful photographic medium I've ever seen. And to have permanence completely unprecedented in color photography, well, that's icing on the cake.

argument: "Photography was never about the truth in the first place, and therefore I won't worry about it." You make aesthetic choices that influence the way things look, you choose what you intend to show, but you do it in an honest effort to record a truth associated with the scene or event.

JK: Let's talk about your transition from chemical to digital photography.

SJ: I'd always been interested in technology and the space program. I saw all those electronic images being transmitted: the Ranger 1965 Vidicon tube images just before crash landing on the Moon, and the first Mariner photographs coming back from Mars. I was fascinated with electronic imagery when I was first getting involved in silver-based imagery. It all came to a head when we decided to put together an interpretive program within the exhibit halls for the Central Valley exhibit. When Bob Dawson and I set out on this project, we knew the valley was a complex place, but we didn't fully appreciate where we had come from: the issues: immigration, landform change, agriculture; the scale: 500 miles long 25,000 square miles, the largest valley on the planet Earth. Some of the story of the Valley's complexity needed to be told. We didn't want to do that on the exhibit walls, so I developed this computer video interpretation program. We used a video disc with historical stills, some video, and computer graphics -- electronic images within the context of a fine art exhibit. Gregory MacNicol in Santa Cruz put the graphics and programming together. Then UC press contacted us about doing the Central Valley book. Jim Clark, who was the director of the press, asked me to mock up a chapter. By then I'd married my wife Mary Ford, whom I met on the front steps of the California Academy of Sciences, where she was a senior graphic designer. The Academy had just gotten a Mac SE and a LaserWriter. Typography, layout, images: suddenly the Mac looked interesting, when before it looked like a toy.

JK: The other piece was PageMaker.

SJ: Right: that was the software I used to mock up a chapter. Then Bob and I printed the photographs and pasted them into the laser printed pages. UC press was floored, and asked me to design the whole book, which I kind of wanted and kind of didn't. I went to Apple and asked them if they'd supply us with the Mac II. I started that project, and then I started consulting with Kodak and some scanner manufacturers. I was in San Jose lecturing about how I was doing this book and one of the other guys on the bill was Howard Barney, who had developed a 35mm slide scanner. He gave me one, and we started scanning copy slides for placement, thinking we'd do traditional drum scans at the end. The book took three years to put together, and by the time we were done we had done a lot of drum scans, but by then the LeafScan 45 had come along and we used it too. Howard shipped a preliminary version of Photoshop called Barney Scan XP before Adobe picked it up, so I was using Photoshop before it was Photoshop.

JK: How did you get introduced to the high-resolution image capture?

SJ: I'd come to know Jim Dunn, a Vice-President at Leaf Systems, through my consulting efforts. Jim called me in August of '93 and said that an old friend of his, Michael Collette, had built a scanning back for 4x5 cameras, and I was "the person he needs to show it to." Michael had been employed by an instrumentation company in Palo Alto. He quit in '91 and went into his workroom at home to design and build a scanning insert for view cameras. He engineered the circuitry, programmed it, and hand-built it. He came to see me in September of 1993, and we made a test exposure or two. He seemed like an awfully nice and sincere guy, and I kind of filed it away as yet another thing that probably wouldn't see the light of day. Michael called me in January of 1994, and said "It's done, do you want to go out and photograph?" He showed up in Pacifica, and we went out and photographed every clichéd tourist spot we could think of in San Francisco. We used my view camera, and we shot color negative, black and white negative, and color transparency film. I brought everything home, and we off-loaded the files to my computer. I just couldn't believe the image quality. By the time I was looking at the film the next day, being stunned was an understatement. Film died for me on that day, and it died a brutal and ugly death. I could never go back.

JK: Even with the scanning limitations?.

SJ: The qualitative difference was phenomenal. Sure, I had worries: I had to see if I could actually use this to make strong photographs, and there was only one hand-built prototype in existence. But there were reasons for hope: Mike was interested in finishing the project, and the people from Dicomed were interested in manufacturing the scanner. Over the next few months, Mike and I went out together a few times, and then my friends Bruce Fraser and Bill Schwegler joined us. In March I made the first photograph I was happy with. In the late spring of '94, Mike got a second prototype built, and he basically said, "Here, take it." It was fundamentally shocking to see the results. Everything I'd been doing for 20 years looked like crap in terms of image quality compared to what I could expect to do in the future. That was frightening, exciting, seductive, scary... But with a huge caveat: it took 3 minutes 45 seconds to make a photograph. I had to know if it was a practical field camera, so that's why we kept going out.

JK: How long after you used the scanning back did it take you to get the idea for the National Parks book?

SJ: Within a week of that first test in January 1994. There was a Photoshop conference at the Sheraton Palace in San Francisco. I was speaking there. Pete Hogg, of the Digital Pond, had made me a 30x40 Iris print of the first scanning photograph, the Conservatory in Golden Gate Park. I had been staring at that, and I knew I was bringing it over to my talk later in the day. I was sitting in the back of the room, watching somebody lecturing about putting two heads on people, and I was thinking: "That's not what this is about; I've just seen something that totally changes photographic history. It's a pivot point."

And then, I thought: "The National Parks. What other subject could test this? What other subject is so tied up in photographic history?" I was well aware of Watkins, the Yosemite Act, Jackson, Ansel's work, and the effects that landscape photography had had on the history of conservation. I had the name of the project when I was sitting there in the back of that room: *With a New Eye*. I started writing a description of the project right there. That doesn't mean I was quite ready to commit to it.

JK: You knew how hard it is to do a book.

SJ: I had just come off completing the Central Valley book the previous summer. That was a ten-year project. I knew what I was getting into. I knew I was asking something completely unreasonable of the scanning camera. That's why I took a few months to make sure the back was usable. But gradually I started making some photographs that were worth something. Over the next few months there was confirmation that it was actually possible to do, although hard. I asked Jeanne Adams if she wanted to do a press conference at the Ansel Adams Gallery announcing the project. She did. She hired a video crew. I had not yet used the scanning back in Yosemite, so I went out the weekend before the press conference, and made photographs that live with the project to this very day. The press conference went beautifully. In the middle of Yosemite Valley, we walked out into the meadow. I don't make serious photographs of Yosemite Falls, but I did that day. I'm still kind of shocked at that. Adobe came in as the first sponsor of the project later that month.

JK: And then the photography began in earnest?

SJ: I hit the road in July and August. I was on the road through '97 and '98 a fair amount, until it was clear my son needed me not to be. I've been out more occasionally since then. I originally promised eight to ten parks, and we've ended up with 53. I knew it would stretch out towards ten years. Most of the photography was done in '94 through '98. I didn't need to make any more photographs after '98, but I continued to photograph since the book wasn't yet in publication. I started designing the book about two years ago, did a fairly complete comp of the book at HP Labs last summer, and I'm still working on publication.

JK: You've got a digital photography book coming out soon?

SJ: Wendy Renaldi from McGraw-Hill Osborne came over to see me about my doing a digital photography book. I didn't want to do a Photoshop book, but I a more holistic book, as much about photography as about digital photography. Originally it was going to be after the parks book, but now it's going first. I'm now deep into *Stephen Johnson On Digital Photography*. It's 256 pages long, it'll be in the stores by early October, and is in many ways a distillation of what I've been teaching for the last 25 years, except it concentrates on those aspects of photography that are in transition to digital. It talks about ethics, aesthetics, composition, and it also talks about silicon, sensors, bit depth, dynamic range, color balance, color editing, color management,

▼
by Abby Pfeiffer

Referencing Art
Jerry N. Uelsmann
Nazraeli Press

"During my life as an image-maker, I have encountered many works of art that have left a deep and lasting impression... They became a source of inspiration that encouraged me to explore the boundaries of my own visual quest. The images in this book represent a small selection of artists, art, and art trends that have evoked a lasting sense of personal rapport."

Jerry N. Uelsmann's preface to *Referencing Art* informs the reader that the images to follow were created in a depth beyond the inspired imaginativeness that has produced his signature photomontages for more than 40 years. They are, as he states, a celebration of the relationships he has shared with artists whose influence and impact on his consciousness are reflected in the themes and emotions of his own work.

Uelsmann was among the first wave of students in this country to earn the degree of Master of Fine Arts with an emphasis in photography. "The art historians were in power when I was a graduate student at Indiana University," says Uelsmann. "I had to become intimately involved in art history just to survive. Over time I became eager to go to museums and I found art that was sympathetic to my own feelings and concerns."

Uelsmann "corralled" two associates from the University of Florida, where he taught from the 1960 until 1998, to write *Imagination and the Image*, an essay accompanying the anthology. Art historian Alex Alberro and film historian Nora M. Alter offer a beautifully written and thoughtful discussion of Uelsmann's selections, motivations and process.

"Each of the selected images points to an earlier art work, or indeed body of work, by another artist," explains Alberro and Alter. Uelsmann



Improbable Assignment

©2002 Jerry Uelsmann

"bears witness to the significance of artistic encounters, to the crossing of paths, and to objects that attracted the artist on his journeys." This is accomplished in a variety of ways: by producing images in the style of someone else, by combining a portrait with an image that represents an artist iconographically, by referencing a theme associated with a chosen precursor or movement.

Among the artists honored in Uelsmann's volume are Eugene Atget, Max Ernst, René Magritte, Joseph Cornell, Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp, Julia Margaret Cameron, Alberto Giacometti, Ansel Adams and Vincent Van Gogh. The range of styles and trends is extensive—Atget's expressive documentation, Magritte's surreal and irrational simplicity, Man Ray's technique of surprising juxtaposition, Max Ernst's use of enigmatic collage, Duchamp's irreverent manipulation of a masterpiece, Adams' pre-visualized purism.

Uelsmann's own favorites include *Emerging Giacometti*, in which he photographs one of the existentialist's tall, thin sculptures successively more out-of-focus and then sets the procession in a heavenly landscape. *The Spirit of Julia*, a tribute to Julia Margaret Cameron, is a bizarre montage of object, time and place. A hand reaching through a torn poster

of Cameron is positioned against the backdrop of Bodie, California, a ghost town of the old West. The portrait of Ansel Adams integrated with the face of Half Dome was done in 1973 as a playful gift to Adams. *Full Dome*, a melding of two images to supply the missing half of the famous Yosemite landmark, was created in the same spirit. "There were so many pictures of Half Dome," said Uelsmann. "I finally completed it." *Silent Shore* composites softly closed, full lips with a pensive beachscape—Uelsmann deliberately locates it on the plate facing *Homage to Man Ray*, paying further homage in the recollection of Man Ray's famous *Heure de l'Observatoire*. In *Self Portrait as Robinson & Rejlander*, Uelsmann dualizes himself as Oscar Gustave Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson, 19th century predecessors in the art of composite photography.

The aggregate content of *Referencing Art* is astonishing. It is at once an art history eclectic and a journal of Uelsmann's own impressive career. Those familiar with Uelsmann's work will already be prepared to set aside any expectations of conformity or confinement. The allusion of personal association in *Referencing Art* adds intensity to Uelsmann's tradition of revisualizing images into a photomontage to invent his own reality.

Interview: Stephen Johnson

Stephen Johnson is a photographer, designer and teacher. His photography explores the concerns of a landscape artist working in an increasingly industrialized world. His work has also concentrated on refining the new tools of digital photography and empowering individual artists to use these tools to express their ideas. He was the Curator and Editor/Designer for *At Mono Lake*, a book and National Endowment for the Arts funded exhibition that toured the United States from 1980-1983, reaching an audience of over two million people. Mr. Johnson was co-creator of *The Great Central Valley Project*, a photographic exhibit and book that used landscape photography to examine the human-altered heartland of California. He is finishing work on the digital national parks project *With A New Eye*, using digital sensors to make his photographs rather than film.

Johnson's photographs are part of the permanent collections of many institutions including the Oakland Museum, the Getty, the City of New York, and the National Park Service. Corporate collections include Apple, Minolta, and the Packard Foundation.

Jim Kasson interviewed Johnson in his Pacifica studio and gallery.

JK: You are one of the few fine-art photographers routinely working in both color and black and white. What's your history with the two media?

SJ: I started shooting color film before black and white, unless you count the occasional forays in high school. When I went to junior college, I had a job in the audio/visual lab at Merced College developing and shooting color slides, while at the same time taking a beginning black and white course, so my familiarity with both media was pretty much simultaneous. I actually developed color film before I developed black and white. I was in college, I was 17, I was still getting used to having my own car and being able to drive. Suddenly, I could go to Yosemite whenever I wanted. I was backpacking at will instead of when I could get people to take me, going on over the hill and seeing Mono Lake for the first time. Having been raised among hunters, turned vegetarian, still wanting to be outdoors, but not needing the hunting as an excuse: It all came together. I'd been making things since I was a little kid. I'd always been interested in technology. Landscape photography is the medium where technology, being outdoors, and making things, all came together. Then my first girlfriend dumped me and went off to college, leaving me with her 35. I started wandering around in the foothills with her camera, and ended up actually using one of those photographs in the Central Valley book 15 years later. I left the A/V lab and became a teaching assistant in the photography department, over the next year and a half it all started to come together.



Jim Kasson photo

JK: When did you start to get interested in classic large-format landscape photography?

SJ: During my time at Merced College I'd become more aware of Ansel, Edward Weston, and Carleton Watkins, and the *f/64* group. I'd seen the Ansel Adams Gallery since I was a kid. It made an impression, but I'd not thought much about it beyond, "Well, that's neat." But when I was in college, I remember seeing what must have been an 18x22 Watkins on the wall. I think it was \$800, which seemed like an insurmountable amount of money to me. It started to sink in that this was actually a legitimate way of spending one's career. When I look back at my photographs, they weren't compelling, so it wasn't clear I could be successful. In spite of all that, when I graduated from junior college, I transferred to San Francisco State University, largely because of the photo program.

JK: In those days, were you excited by the process, or by the results?

SJ: It was both having a reason to spend that time outdoors (there's probably some Puritan work ethic running through that) and looking at the prints. I took the idea of printmaking seriously as a craft. The richness of the gelatin silver black was irresistible. I abandoned color for a while, except for occasional slides. When I bought an old 4x5 Graphic View, it was in my mind a black and white camera. By the time I was finishing up at Merced, I was starting to make photographs that I cared about. The fascination with the magic of the medium was starting to turn into something more substantial. Some of the portraits I made in 1975 stayed with me, and I eventually used some in the Central Valley book. I was starting to shoot 21/4 color negative at that point. The 4x5 color came later in 1977 or 1978. I was making C prints and I liked the more natural color better than the R prints

I had made up to then. I had not yet tried Cibachrome.

JK: Cibachrome wouldn't fit your preferred color palette very well.

SJ: Yeah, but I didn't know what my color palette was at the time. I was still figuring it out. But I probably did react against the look of Ciba as I was trying to find my way through some aesthetic path, and Vericolor fit that direction much more. By the time I was photographing at Mono Lake in the late 1970s, I was thoroughly committed to 2 1/4 and 4x5 color negative film and 4x5 black and white. By then I was getting clear on what I was seeing in the world, and what I was trying to get in the darkroom in terms of color. In black and white, I was settling into the beginnings of a style, but my black and white style is still developing.

JK: Controlling color accurately was a lot of work in those days.

SJ: I'd spend a whole day in the darkroom trying to get a particular area of the print neutral, changing batches of paper and have it still not work. My wife tells the story of my coming out of the darkroom after a full day and saying, "Well, I've almost got a color pack."

JK: Strengths of black and white and color?

SJ: Black and white is inherently more abstract. In a sense, it's easier to do a photographic composition in black and white. You see form more easily in black and white than in color. Color has that sense of the real world that makes it have an initial suggestion of the ordinary. That makes it more of a challenge to do well.

JK: Some people head for the Velvia look to make it not ordinary.

SJ: That's probably true. People's instinct seems to be to chase a contrasty, saturated sense of beauty that all starts to look the same, and not look around with their eyes and see the color that's there. There are a lot



Trees, Fitzgerald Reserve, 1994

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of reasons we photograph. There are lots of instincts we build with why we pick up the camera. There has been an agenda that's developed, especially with color, that we need to change things to make the photograph worth seeing. Part of that has come from limitations of the medium, and we've evolved aesthetics to take advantage and cope with the characteristics of the materials. In the late 70s, I started see the style that I have today developing out of color negative film and very careful printing. It's not the advent of the digital sensor that allowed me to pursue a more pastel, natural color. It's just made pursuit easier and more accurate.

JK: Your first choice was between transparencies and color negative, and you chose the one with a long exposure range and more natural colors.

SJ: Right. I was much more interested in photographers like Eliot Porter than I was color photographers who seemed to be about changing color and souping things up.

JK: I'm glad you brought Porter up. I was going to tell you that your images remind me of his, and ask you if you would consider that a complement.

SJ: I would. I never knew him, although I did speak to him once on the phone, and I would have liked to have met him. I called him to see if he had any work for the Mono Lake show. Even through some of the poor reproductions and the yellowing varnish in the early Sierra Club books, you can still see that there are some substantial things going on there.

JK: His work is quiet.

SJ: The real world is too. The world is already self-embellished. You don't need to change it to make it beautiful. You need to stand there and look, try to record what you see. That doesn't mean that it's not perfectly legitimate to try to do something else. We have had since Kodachrome in 1938, and with Autochrome before that, a tradition of color aesthetics building. Fuji Velvia may

be the ultimate expression of that aesthetic, a harsh, saturated and contrasty view of the world. I probably love early color like Autochromes because they were different: a softer, gentler view, but very grainy. We live in a time where it seems like the way we look at the world is through some kind of reality-distortion field anyway, and I don't think that what's photography is about. I believe in my heart that photography has an element of truth about it that is fundamental to our affection for the medium and its sense of magic. I place a high value in trying to record what I see in as straightforward and honest a way as possible. I don't pretend that I am capturing exactly what I see. I'm doing my best and I'm using technology that's unprecedented in the history of photography for its veracity, and that's my goal. That's probably why I'm not that interested in so much of the color work I see.

JK: It'll never be exactly what you saw: you can't reproduce a scene with a reasonable dynamic range on a reflective medium.

SJ: Sure, but what we can do is carry through the aesthetic of what we're showing as what was before the lens. That's photography's greatest power, why it's spread like wildfire and why it continues to be the most popular form of art on the face of the earth. Partly that's because the technology makes it accessible on a casual level, and partly because it has that reality power about it that we cannot separate from our imagination. **JK:** The perceived truth of a photograph is under greater attack than ever before in the era of digital photography.

SJ: Many of my friends who are landscape photographers feel no hesitation at all about painting stuff out, painting it in, souping things up, thinking that it's no different than using Spot Tone on a print.

JK: I plead guilty to spotting cigarette butts out of the foreground of urban landscapes, and doing equivalent things on the computer.

SJ: There are two things going on for me. One is an evolving ethic in my mind, and the other is rethinking the implications on what I've done traditionally. With Spot Tone, most of what we're trying to do is getting rid of dust on the negative.

JK: Over the years you've become more of a purist.

SJ: I think so. On the cover of the Central Valley Book, there's a Coke cup in the lower right corner. [points at the book]

JK: I see it. Bright red, too. You left it in.

SJ: I did. All those photos in the book were scanned, so they had become digital files. I knew the cup was there. I could have easily taken it out, but I never reached for the cloning tool. The cows aren't native, the grasses aren't native, and the Eucalyptus trees aren't native: I think the Coke cup kind of belongs. I might have hopped over the fence, grabbed the cup and removed it from the landscape, but something doesn't feel right about changing the content of the photograph after the fact.

JK: The usage and context matter as well. This is a documentary book.

SJ: Yes. It's meant to be a work of art, but there's no assumption anywhere that these are altered photographs—quite the opposite. I hope the book on the national parks is perceived in the same way. Some of my friends sell landscape calendars where the sky's super-saturated and the out-of-focus branches are coming in from the side no longer. I won't do that. If I notice later something that I didn't see at the exposure, I either live with it, or I crop the photograph. If the wind hits the camera and there's a little jitter to an area, I'll make sure it doesn't get sharpened, and I'll try to get rid of the red-green-blue shimmer, not by cloning in pixels from elsewhere, but by toning down what's there.

JK: That's like dust on the negative. It's an artifact of the capture process.

SJ: I feel far less reticent in dealing with that, but any real content, I won't go that far.

JK: Let me press you a little bit. What do you think of a red filter in this context? A black sky isn't what you really see.

SJ: A lot of us have gone through our black sky period. Some have emerged out the other side, some have not. Altering the tonal conversion to black and white is inherent in the film alone, and helping that along has a long tradition. Selecting from the light that was there is different from synthesizing things that weren't actually there.

JK: Some question the whole concept of photographic truth.

SJ: The argument that I hear more than any other is that a photograph is a lie because it's only showing a particular point of view and a particular moment. That's just absurd.

JK: What's wrong with that statement is the word lie. A photograph is one truth of many. If ten photographers make honest images of the same subjects, you'll end up with ten wildly different images.

SJ: That's one of the beauties of photography. Reality is rich and varied enough. There's so much room for seeing things uniquely without having to resort to synthesis. A photograph is not the only truth, but it can be a powerful, fundamental truth. I don't buy the