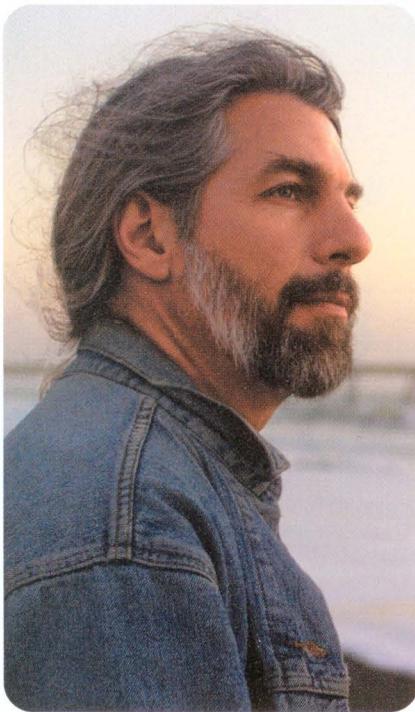


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INTERVIEW BY FRITH BREITZER
PORTRAIT BY MARY FORD

Stephen Johnson preaches the gospel of digital photography

Landscape photographer Stephen Johnson may sound like something of a digital-camera evangelist, but his sparsely elegant, ethereal photographs speak for themselves—and for the medium. A native of Merced, California, Johnson has been a photographer for more than 25 years. A teacher, consultant, and book designer, he was also one of the pioneers of digital bookmaking; his 1993 work, *Making a Digital Book*, sold 11,000 copies. He is hoping to publish *With a New Eye*, an exploration of U.S. national parks. Johnson talked about the implications of digital landscape photography, digital imaging versus traditional film, and his current project.

PUBLISH *What made you decide to try digital imaging?*

STEPHEN JOHNSON Primarily, a need to control the reproduction of my work. When we were getting ready to publish *The Great Central Valley Project* [by author

For the interview in its entirety go to www.Publish.com

Gerald Haslam and photographers Stephen Johnson and Robert Dawson, 1993], the University of California Press asked me to mock up a chapter. I learned PageMaker and printed out the chapter; they were so blown away, they

asked me to design the whole book. That book became sort of a baptism of fire in digital desktop publishing. It was tremendous to have control over such a complex book in terms of design, typography, placements, sequencing, and ultimately the color, luminosity, and accuracy of the scans.

PUBLISH *When did you decide that digital-camera technology had become advanced enough for you to use in your own work?*

SJ In January 1994 Michael Collette, who had designed what would later become the Dicommed scanning camera, showed me a prototype that made it abundantly clear that digital originals could be spectacular. We decided to hit every clichéd spot we could think of in San Francisco—the Golden Gate Bridge, the Palace of Fine Arts, Coit Tower—and we also brought along one [film] camera and a couple of lenses. I shot color negative film, black-and-white negative film, and color slides. What I saw at the end of the day blew me away. When we started looking at the film after it came back from the processor, it was so bad compared with the scans from Mike's digital camera, I was completely disenchanted. That was the last day I shot with film.

PUBLISH *What differences did you see between the results of your film camera and his digital one?*

SJ The differences were dramatic. We shot one photograph from Coit Tower looking toward the bridge. There was a record store at Bay and Columbus that had large replicas of album covers on the

side. I zoomed in on the digital file, and there was Linda Ronstadt. When I looked at the same spot on the picture taken with film, I couldn't tell what it was. It was so drowned in grain, you couldn't see anything. But the digital file was pristine and clear. I could see the detail in the shadows and highlights, the dynamic range of the images. And there was no color correction to do once I opened the scans.

PUBLISH *What equipment do you typically bring into the field, and what do you use to make your prints?*

SJ I usually take a modified Dicomed Field Pro digital scanning camera and a PowerBook G3. I use the Gretag SpectroScan to make color profiles, and I usually output the photos on an Iris Realist 5030, although lately I've started using the Epson Stylus Pro 9000.

PUBLISH *How have your subjects reacted to your more interactive style of taking digital portraits, which allows them to have input into the final images?*

SJ Oh, it's been great. I've always made portraits, and I've always enjoyed it.

**“What I saw
blew me away.
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day I shot with
film.”**

There's something wonderful about people being able to see themselves immediately. They react, and sometimes they perform, and sometimes they become more conservative, but it really turns into an interaction. The portrait becomes kind of a coproduction between me as an outside eye and [the subject's] own internal eye. It's magical. Photography is always magical, but watching people, that's just fascinating.



PUBLISH *How do you respond to critics who say that digital landscape photography is a contradiction in terms because the computer removes you from the natural environment?*

SJ Photography has always been about the highest technology of its time. Even if you're still dealing with film, computers are all around you. Isolating the photographic process and saying, "Well, it's going to remain pure" doesn't make much sense. In fact, silver as a means of recording light is anything but pure. It's toxic, its manufacture is toxic, its processing is toxic, its durability is marginal—and then there are the darkroom fumes.

PUBLISH *What inspired you to take on your current project, *With a New Eye*, and what do you hope to accomplish?*

SJ I had to respond to what I had seen in January 1994. I couldn't see film com-

Johnson's newest project, *With a New Eye*, includes (clockwise from top) images of Volcanoes, Arches, and Grand Canyon national parks.

pletely fall away without my saying, "Now what do I do about it?" So when I began *With a New Eye* in 1994, my first goal was to see if the digital technology was real. I think I've now completely put that to rest. The second was to see what these capabilities might do to my own sense of beauty and aesthetics. National parks have been photographed endlessly, but I don't think they really are that well known.

At the Grand Canyon I heard a couple say, "It doesn't look as good as the postcards." We expect places to look like their photographs rather than see their intrinsic value as real experiences. Maybe what digital photography can offer is not a step away from the experience of a place but a step closer to it.

Stephen Johnson can be reached at www.sjphoto.com.