

2009 Q & A with Michael Light for the book [PhotoWisdom: Master Photographers on Their Art](#) by Lewis Blackwell

PhotoWisdom: Why are you a photographer?

ML: Part of the answer is banal: I'm a photographer because I've been a photographer for so long now that it's all I know, and it's thus by default what I'm best at. The more time passes the greater my admiration for other professions, more concrete ways of living and acting in society. I have always been both frustrated by and uncontrollably in love with the *abstraction* of image-making. Freezing a moment in time and space, controlling it, orchestrating it, giving it importance over the endless flow of moments, collecting those important moments, cutting through the fog of incoherence, forgetfulness, disease and death that accompany our lives, making meaning and narrative amidst the incomprehensible, leaving a hopefully eloquent record of my movement through my times after I'm gone, these are some of the reasons I photograph. I am most alive when I am seeing things beyond my own petty concerns and limitations -- a kind of disappearance -- and then transforming them creatively, leaving records washed with myself -- a kind of reappearance. There's nothing like it, and it's quite paradoxical. I should add that as much as I am a photographer I'm a bookmaker, and always have been. The two go together perfectly. Books bring the work to a public, and can at their best be sacred, charged objects with inexplicable cultural authority that -- at least in the West -- goes back to the Bible. My books balance the inherent abstraction of the photographic medium and make it as physical as possible, and often as democratically accessible as possible. There are still times I wish I was a physician, or perhaps an environmental lobbyist in Washington, or even a mother, but the book form makes what I do a bit more real.

PhotoWisdom: For quite some time, you seem to be interested in the view from above ground - whether your own aerials or the archival images (Full Moon, 100 Suns) you have worked with. Why do you think that is the case?

ML: I've always been interested in the aerial view, partly because there has been a lot of aviation in my family and because I was flying before I was driving, but more importantly because I have always been consumed with concepts of *scale*: why we as humans do what we do in the midst of our surroundings, where the edge of our competence and hubris might be, that point where our narcissistic species-egotism falls away in the face of larger forces. Power, alphabets of the Sublime, wonder, terror, vastness drawn against the domestic . . . my work so far has pursued these investigations through a specifically American lens because I am an American and I studied the abstractions of this particular nation in my undergraduate years, but also because the impossibly seductive and appalling United States has been the outside player on the globe for some time now. Things are changing, of course. Naturally, the more time I spend in the air the sillier things like borders and nations become in the face of geology and region, and the more I think about moving beyond my home country, but there is yet much for me to figure out here. Sometimes it's best to contemplate the vast, or the whole, from the particularities of the closely known. I am not a fan of the trivialization of differences and leveling that can sometimes happen with the globetrotting photographer. We are *not* "one world under the lens," "one nation under Tri-X," and I hate that photography and other media can actually distance people from true

comprehension, even slow numbness. Practitioners of the visual must constantly innovate around this, and know when to put away the camera and use other means.

PhotoWisdom: How do you choose, plan and execute your projects? They are long-term and resource-intensive - major productions. Did you always work this way?

ML: I've always worked from the inside-out, driven by private obsessions and concerns that I've tried to articulate for myself, first, and then hopefully for a larger audience. One project makes another possible, both in terms of confidence and often in terms of resources, and I do think about the relationship of one project to another, about how they might all add up creatively. To me, all my projects are driven by the same fundamental concerns and are all explorations of the same core ideas. Obviously I like to take on big subjects: first human contact with an alien world, that moment when we figured out how to ignite our own stars, the myth and reality of the thoroughly inhabited "empty" American West seen from above. But that populated West is still unspeakably vast, as are the forces creating it, both cultural and geological. All my work is landscape, and the issues circling around landscape are almost incomprehensibly huge. There's a place for quietness in life, certainly, but I've always pursued things all-out and intensely. I always ask students to figure out whatever it is that "keeps them awake in the middle of the night" and make work about that. My planning and organization could be better, but I am basically a one-person shop. My admiration for those artists and cultural workers who work collaboratively in large organic groups, more along the lines of filmmaking or theater, only grows the older I get. There is immense strength in numbers and collaboration, and in truth I have sought out and been blessed to work with a range of astonishing people in my field, people who can magically potentiate a gesture. Directors need producers. The thing for the younger creative person on the outside looking in to remember is that without the artist, the maker, the whole cultural structure ceases to exist. While often not appropriately acknowledged, the artist is desperately needed to make the wheels keep turning through time; on a certain primal level the artist always leads. I try not to forget that.

PhotoWisdom: Did you set out with a definite goal in mind for the aeriels project... or is it more of an area of discovery?

ML: *Some Dry Space: An Inhabited West*, the rather sprawling aerial work I am immersed in now and will be for the foreseeable future, is articulated around documenting the way the built world in the arid West relates to more unsettled areas, and articulating the geology that undergirds both of them. It's equally about cities, suburbs, and natural grandeur. It's also about my very different photographic responses to each of them, and in that way it's about genuine exploration and discovery. I try to have some structure and concept, of course, but when it comes down to taking the doors off my aircraft or the rented helicopter and imaging, I prefer to rip my preconceptions open and try and see like I've not seen before. It's the same when rooting through a forty-year old iconic photographic archive: one has an idea of what one will find, hunches and assumptions, but the real work begins when one starts wandering and meandering. That's the best part, when one surprises oneself and comes away astounded with something

entirely different than the expected. Exploration of the world itself, that un-ironic and enthusiastic old saw of tired photographic modernism, still does it for me a lot of the time.

PhotoWisdom: Your images are very strong in bringing out form. Can you explain what is driving your aesthetic - often monochrome images, the format, the contrast...?

ML: I'm not sure if I can answer what drives my aesthetic, other than an extremely intense concern with light itself and distillation. I like to get down to the primal basics, rock and radiation, and naturally monochrome offers that much more distilled and essentialist an approach. I do a lot of it, but lately I am shooting more and more color, and am quite excited about its added dimensions. These days, too, one's not a slave to it: one can image in color and output anywhere along a spectrum of rich color to total monochrome. I just shot a bunch of color above the Rocky Mountains in Winter, where the snow reduces the palette down so radically, and this work will be somewhere between the harsh pure form of monochrome light and the emotionality and lushness of color. I still image with film, a large-format 4x5 handheld aerial camera descended from German military surveillance -- it's a beast that uses 5" aerial roll film -- because it gives an unparalleled clarity at contemporary exhibition-print scale. That clarity is almost hallucinatory, and it's key to my image-making and work. The clarity of light imaged in the vacuum of outer space, the intensity of light from a small created star, a mountainside or urban metropolis shot-lit in late afternoon seen from an aerial vantage attempting to equal the subject Perhaps this obsession with optical clarity is rooted in my own biology: without correction I am so myopic as to be legally blind. But I correct to better than 20-20. Photography literally and metaphorically allows me to see things I otherwise never would or could.

PhotoWisdom: What has evolved for you in your work over the years?

ML: Confidence, mastery, ambition, and knowing what I personally offer as an artist in the larger sea of image-making. Another thing that has evolved through a lot of hard-earned experience is knowing that when any or all of the above strengths fall apart -- as they of course sometimes do -- that I *will* get through the crisis or uninspired period of lousy work to better times. Even the bad work is necessary; one only gets to the good stuff by making all of it, in all seasons. I've got a slightly larger sense of perspective, which is a blessing.

PhotoWisdom: What is the biggest challenge of the work? The biggest satisfaction in it? The hope for it?

ML: The biggest challenge is without a doubt doing one's best to keep one's work relevant to the culture at large, as times and issues and processes and ways of seeing change. Another challenge, related but different, is to keep the work relevant to oneself, as one moves through life and old passions fade. What are the new ones? A third challenge is to continue to be grateful, both for all that one has, and what one can hopefully continue to perceive.

My biggest satisfactions in my work are twofold: experiencing those revelations where I am so astounded that I could be run over by a truck the next moment and it wouldn't matter, dizzy with a kind of revelation -- and hearing from others that I've given something of that same feeling to them.

Beyond those fundamentals, I do persist in the perhaps delusional hope that after I'm gone my work might serve as an articulate record of one culture's moment, an archaeology of a particular *now*, while also existing in some ways wholly outside of time, at least on the scales that we humans most know it.

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