

David Fokos: See It Sense It Feel It

by Paul Slaughter



David Fokos



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March 01, 2012 — When David Fokos takes a photo, his goal is to create the feeling he wants the viewer to experience; the objects in his images are simply devices to stir up specific emotions. “With my work, I am not trying to show the viewer what these places look like, but rather what they feel like. It is my hope that, looking at my work, you may viscerally share with me the experience of these places,” he says.

A key aspect of Fokos’ work is a minimalist compositional style that emphasizes certain elements while de-emphasizing others, utilizing careful composition. He says, “Our eyes are naturally drawn toward light so I craft my images in a way that



takes the viewer on a journey. 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. In making hundreds of local contrast adjustments, I make sure that there is nothing that will distract the viewer. It's remarkable how small something can be and still unbalance an image, like someone coughing during a quiet, tender passage of a symphony."

Each year Fokos adds three to five new images to his portfolio. This doesn't mean that these are the only pictures he's taken, but it does mean these are the ones he has selected and worked on. Sometimes Fokos hears artists say that they are never 100% satisfied with a piece, that there is always something they would want to improve, and it is only with reluctance that they let it go. Fokos says he does not have that problem because he edits his work ruthlessly until there is no room for improvement.

"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?" he says. "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. The camera does not record emotion... The job of a photographic artist is to work with the camera's image, to create the drama and add back the emotion."

A self-taught photographer and Chicago native, Fokos was influenced early on by the methodical work, high resolution and infinite depth of field of Ansel Adams' black-and-white prints. At age 11 he would shoot landscapes on family trips using his first camera (a Kodak Brownie given to him by his grandfather). He had an affinity for landscapes taken with specific compositions, and liked the perspectives along building facades and patterns in the cobblestone streets. In high school he learned how to develop film and make prints and, using a Pentax Spotmatic, he sold his first framed photograph (a red barn in a snowstorm) for \$50.

Fokos attended Cornell University, where he studied engineering and Japanese history. After graduating in 1984 with a Bachelor of Science degree in electrical engineering, he purchased his first view camera—a 5 x 7 Korona View from the 1920s—from a newspaper ad and, inspired by Adams, set out to photograph the landscape with a view camera.

Fokos taught himself how to use a view camera, then spent the next 15 years working in isolation in Martha's Vineyard with the goal of creating images that would express the essence of his experience. "I made many unsuccessful images during that time," Fokos says. "Eventually my individual style began to 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."

Studying Japanese art history, Japanese film and haiku poetry in college greatly inspired Fokos to convey deeply felt sentiment through a minimal number of words. "[These ideas came to reveal themselves to me] through my work, as I struggled to make the first image that I felt successfully conveyed the emotion I wished to share," he says.

Much of Fokos' work has to do with encoding the element of time within a static image. He says, "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. 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."

At present, Fokos uses an 83-year-old 8 x 10 Korona View camera and only one lens—a 210mm Rodenstock Sironar-S—a wide-angle lens equivalent to a 29mm or 35mm. When on a shooting assignment, he carries 12 sheets of film and takes at least two shots of each image he exposes. After shooting and shipping his film and camera equipment home, he develops the film. Only then does he have the first chance to see if his shots are worthwhile.

Fokos also has a Hasselblad H1 camera with a Phase One P45+ back that he uses on occasion. The camera is capable of producing a resolution equivalent to film and grain-free captures.

"I would absolutely love to go all digital," Fokos says. "Shooting film is much more difficult with 60 pounds of equipment. I



have to ship my camera equipment in advance to wherever I plan to shoot.”

But then why shoot film? “The answer is very specific to the way I work and the kinds of images I make,” Fokos explains. “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 causes difficulty with my long exposures.”

Fokos mostly shoots 8 x 10 Kodak Tri-X film. A selected negative is wet-mounted to his scanner—an Epson V750 Pro—and scanned at a very high resolution (16-bits at 2400ppi) resulting in an 800MB grayscale image file, which is equivalent in resolution to a 2.4GB RGB color file. “Once I have a high-resolution image file in my computer, the real work begins,” he explains.

He often spends 100 hours or more fine-tuning an image in Photoshop—dodging and burning, adjusting local contrast, etc. For prints, he likes to use an Epson 11880 printer, preferring Epson’s Premium Semi-Gloss 250 paper to make prints in three different sizes, and panoramic prints as well. “Today’s digital prints are capable of greater consistency, a wider color gamut, higher resolution, greater dynamic range and deeper blacks,” Fokos says. His large prints are meticulously framed in Los Angeles, and he mats and frames his smaller prints.

When Fokos frequently gives seminars and talks around the country, one of the first things he likes to do is show 10 of his images without any commentary. He then asks the audience to suggest some words that come to mind when they look at them. The responses he receives invariably include words like calm, serene, tranquil, peaceful, quiet, meditative, still and Zen. He then says to the audience, “Notice that the words you gave me represent emotions you felt rather than things you actually saw in my images... This is what art is all about.”

To view David Fokos’ fine art portfolios and learn of his latest gallery shows go to www.davidfokos.net.

Paul Slaughter is a world-traveled photographer and writer, living in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His book of classic jazz greats, Paul Slaughter/Jazz Photographs 1969-2010, has been published. You can view portfolios of Paul’s work at www.slaughterphoto.com.

- See more at: <http://www.rangefinderonline.com/features/portrait/David-Fokos-See-It--6206.shtml?imw=Y#sthash.uDT2T4Oq.dpuf>