



## Carmel photographer Kenneth Parker: Big prints, big places and big ideas



Large format photographer Kenneth Parker holds one of his archival pigment prints titled "Wave Back Crash and Cliff, Big Sur" at the Weston Gallery in Carmel. (David Royal - Monterey Herald)

The Carmel-based photographer has been everywhere in the world except Africa and Antarctica. And he hopes to eliminate Antarctica from his bucket list in the near future.

Parker's large prints, often 24 inches by 30 inches, convey deep, rich colors. His photos include vibrant green Asian rice terraces, exotic sandstone formations in Utah, color-intense Tibetan murals, the intricate melding of stone and foliage at Point Lobos, Burmese temples at dawn, Incan and Mayan ruins, and intriguing canyons rich in golden light, to name just a few.

"Doing really large prints is my absolute passion," said Parker, who uses 4-by-5-inch film (as opposed to 35 millimeter). "If I had my own way, I'd be doing giant prints, like 20, 30, 40 feet, but I've never gotten bigger than 10 feet."

Parker is hard at work on a special-edition portfolio of the Big Sur coast. It will be called "Big Sur: Gentle Fury," and will consist of 12 big prints enclosed in a large cloth-bound box and sold as a set. The prints, he said, will be 22 inches by 28 inches, on 32-by-40 mats, a size he has never used before.

"Shooting the ocean for the Big Sur project is easily the most challenging thing I've ever shot," he said. "It's not just the light, it's not just the clouds, it's not just the wind, the breeze, but it's the waves. Every wave is different. And every crash is different and every spray is different, every little wash and every tidepool is different, and it's absolutely nerve-wracking. You see something happen — that's what you want — and you're waiting for it to happen again."

Parker, 61, is a tall, lean man with dark, curly hair dappled with gray. He is articulate, a stickler for details and quick to laugh.

He has a Ph.D. in oceanography, but it took him a long time to shoot the ocean close to home. Parker said he has spent six to nine months a year for five years shooting exotic projects in Tibet and southeast Asia. Other excursions included South America and his favorite shooting site, the side canyons of south-central Utah.

He said most of his photographs are captured during five- to 10-day backpacking trips in which he hauls 75 to 85 pounds of equipment. He spends several days scouting a site and watching the light and composition.

"I find lots of magical sculptures and washes only accessible to the backpacker," he said. "If I can get a picture a day I'm a happy camper."

He speaks with admiration of the photography masters who influenced his work. Parker was the field assistant from 1975-76 to Eliot Porter, the man who introduced color to landscape photography.

“Eliot was a pioneer, the Ansel Adams of color,” Parker said. “He was the first to give color photography serious, museum-level respectability. He was the first photographer to get a one-man exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.”

Porter’s influence turned Parker, who shot exclusively in black and white for 10 years, into a colorist. “He also turned my head to large format because I realized that otherwise I couldn’t get that kind of clarity and resolution I wanted,” he said.

Fine art photographer Paul Caponigro — famed for his black-and-white photos of [“Running White Deer”](#) and [“Galaxy Apple,”](#) among others — has been a consistent mentor to Parker since the mid-1970s.

And the late Ruth Bernhard, the black-and-white photographer best known for her [“Woman in the Box”](#) and female nudes, deemed Parker her favorite color photographer. “The way in which he works with the light is inspiring,” she once said. “It feels as if he has an arrangement with God.”

Living here places Parker within the boundaries of what he calls the Carmel School of Photography, “still vital and alive, creative and flourishing.” He praises “the first family of photography,” the Westons, and other local masters past and present like Ansel Adams, Wynn Bullock, Morley Baer, William Giles and Martha Casanave. “They leave a precious heritage.”

And while Parker wrestles with the Big Sur ocean, patiently nestled in a back corner of his mind is a single word: Antarctica.

During the U.S. Bicentennial in 1976, Eliot Porter was one of a handful of artists sent to Antarctica by the National Science Foundation (NSF). Porter came back with photos of an astonishing place, the McMurdo Dry Valleys, a region in central Antarctica without snow or ice, and with pastel coloration.

Whichever photographer selected to go there next gets an extraordinary perk — unlimited helicopter time — to a place few people have seen. Tourists, he notes, go to other parts of Antarctica. “But McMurdo Dry Valleys are only accessible by chopper. And that’s an expensive proposition,” he said. “Only the military and the NSF have

money for that kind of travel!”

Parker met a climate change researcher who has been funded every year for 20 years to go to Antarctica, and he has agreed to add Parker’s project as a line-item in his proposal.

Parker admits he’s “kind of obsessed” with the possibility.

But if he isn’t chosen the first year, there’s always the following year for the man who thinks big.

Parker’s photos are shown at the [Weston Gallery](#), Sixth Avenue and Dolores Street, Carmel. He has exhibited at many prestigious institutions throughout the country. Visit [www.kennethparker.com](http://www.kennethparker.com).