

Kenneth Parker: Practically Magic

By PAUL WEIDERMAN | The New Mexican

10/11/2002

Kenneth Parker speaks with modesty about his photographs and about his process of finding and making them, but the results are absolutely luminous depictions of fabulous places.

Blue Varnish Wall, captured in a Utah canyon, shouts with psychedelic blues, violets and magentas, fleeting reflections of the sky. The epic scale of the piece was achieved by his climbing the opposite side of the canyon for perspective: What at first glance appear to be medium-size boulders at the bottom of the scene are three stories tall.

In Washington state's San Juan Islands he made Beach Cliff, a picture of a sensuous arc of rock carved by wave action. The fascinating details include barnacles, seaweed and little divots left in the rock floor by falling stones.

Although Parker's work on view at Marigold Arts includes the evocative Nun's Bedroom, shot in Peru, his nature studies dominate. The viewer takes in views of shapely sandstone, the shredding bark of Hawaiian eucalyptus trees, a wonderful complexity of branches in Gambel Oaks and Wall, and a veritable palette of earthy colors in Salt Pan Terraces.

"Those pans supply salt to the interior of Peru," Parker said from his home in Carmel, Calif. "They fill with water, and when it's all stirred up, they're orange. Then they turn into the jades and avocados as they evaporate.

"I first saw a picture of those things in some textbook in grade school. They date from the early Incan days. When I finally went to Peru, it took me three days' driving to find them."

Parker, born and raised in Rochester, N.Y. (also home of the Eastman Kodak Company), began his pursuit of photography in 1970. His career path took him to University of Washington, where he earned his Ph.D. in oceanography. Upon graduation in 1989 he worked for the NOAA Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory in Seattle for five years, then took a permanent position at the new Center for Ocean Analysis and Prediction in Monterey, Calif.

At that lab he analyzed satellite imagery and data on the Alaskan Stream and California Current, endeavoring to track the influence of physical environmental conditions on coastal biological production, including fisheries.

He considered himself fortunate to be working in the beautiful Monterey area, and in a field he loved. But after less than two years, the lab was shut down.

"At that time the Republican Congress took the mandate to start ripping into environmental-science funding, which they perceived as posing obstacles to business," he said. "Geology took an even worse hit than oceanography, but my lab was one of the first to go because it was one of the last to be created.

"It was pretty bad, coming after 22 years of school and getting my doctorate, and I had just achieved tenure. It was a professional trauma and eventually, a couple of years ago, I gave up trying to find a decent replacement job, so I just continued to do what has always been my first passion: photography."

Parker's scientific training serves him well in the technical aspect of his craft. He uses a large-format camera, shooting with Fuji transparency film. He digitizes each negative image, scans it on a very high-grade drum scanner and prints on a digital enlarger using silver-based paper.

"I do my dodging and burning on a computer screen and it's even more precise and tedious than doing it in a darkroom," he said. "I worked in darkrooms for so long - I built five of them over the years - and I just had enough of that."

Parker searches for what he calls "magical places very few people ever see" on long wilderness jaunts. His backpacking equipment, which always includes his cherished K.B. Canham 4 x 5 field camera, often exceeds 75 pounds.

He travels with a girlfriend or other friend, both for companionship and for help getting into position for shots. He was lowered by rope in Antelope Canyon, Ariz., to get the perspective he wanted for Lavender Swirls.

"Finding photographs is extremely difficult, and it's very precious when I find one," he said. "So many photographers drive along, see something, pull over and shoot. I need to calm down, really chill out, and that takes me days to where I'm open enough to see these things. I'll go on a trip for a week and if I get one image I consider myself thankful."

Parker's vision evolved in 1975-76 when he was photographer Eliot Porter's field assistant and apprentice. In 1980 he worked as an underwater cameraman for Rebikoff Institute of Marine Technology in Florida. His work in the 1980s as a cinematographer brought him the Special Gold Award for Cinematography at the 1986 Houston International Film Festival; his projects include Canyon Dreams (Miramar Productions, Seattle) and The Grand Canyon by OARS (Camera One Productions, Seattle).

Veteran photographer Paul Caponigro, a former Santa Fe resident now in Maine, has been a mentor to Parker since 1976.

"We've been friends for a long time," Parker said. "He visits in Monterey often. He just drops by and we go out and walk and photograph."

In an open letter Caponigro wrote "To t he Photographic Community" last December, he refers to Parker as "a bright star shining in our midst who has long been shrouded in the misty atmospheres of his complex but productive life. ...

"Kenneth Parker has in recent years realized his love and commitment to the medium of photography and has left his position as an oceanographer to now capture in images the depths of his feelings for the sea as well as the power of the desert terrain with which he has communed extensively."

In the future, Parker wants to photograph in Antarctica and at the temple ruins in Angkor, Cambodia. For now, he's spending a lot of time on the Big Sur coast.

"I want to do seascapes in ways that haven't been seen," he said. "We haven't seen too much of that done in color, except a few by Cole Weston and Eliot Porter. I want to get some things that are intimate, with a rocky, strong water feeling.

"A lot of what's at Big Sur brings into play my oceanographic background. It's a compelling magic to me. The elemental earth-ocean forces have long beckoned me; they're a strong vortex for my spirit, and as I get closer to that energy, it becomes richer."

"It was a great opening there in Santa Fe, and it's really a thrill to get the kind of affirmation I'm getting, to see someone enjoy something I did so much they want to take it home," Parker said. "It has always been a mystery to me to see which images hit and which don't. Caponigro likes talking about photographs as "dreams locked in silver."

"When something I've seen and felt translates to someone else, I think that's incredibly precious."

That's what tells me I've done something that matters."

Details

Intimate Light, large-format landscape photographs by Kenneth Parker

Ongoing exhibit through Oct. 23

Marigold Arts, 424 Canyon Road 982-4142

www.marigoldarts.com