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*Irises*, ©Ron Reeder



# Kenneth Parker: The Long Road Home

By Eugene Fisher © 2003

August 1, 1995 was not a good day for research oceanographer Dr. Kenneth Parker. He and the rest of his laboratory colleagues had just been informed that their positions were all terminated, part of a nationwide budget cutback by their employer the Federal Government. So, at age 44 and well terrified, Parker finally did what he had wanted to do so badly 20 years earlier. He shelved his career in science and fully committed himself to earning his living as a fine art photographer. "It was sink or swim, do or die", he reflects.

The Carmel-based photographer bought a ticket for Bali, sublet his house, packed his cameras, and began a yearlong Asian travel odyssey that was the first step towards living the dream. As the countries passed by — Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Nepal, Tibet, and others — Parker's resolve grew, as did his collection of new images. Today the photographer's work is represented by some of the country's most prestigious art galleries such as The Weston Gallery in Carmel and New York's John Stevenson Gallery, and the dream has become a reality.

We all muse now and again about "the road not taken". But Parker was fortunate, for he had options when he abandoned oceanography. Although research science had been his livelihood, Parker's involvement with photography had spanned some 30 years, including exhibitions at The California Academy of Sciences, The Oakland Museum, The Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, and The San Diego Museum of Natural History.

Marsha Ralls, owner of Washington DC's distinguished Ralls Collection gallery comments, "Ken is a fully mature talent who is bringing his work to market late. He is as good as any landscape photographer working today." And Paul Caponigro, another important mentor to Parker since the '70s, writes in an open letter to gallery owners, "Parker's stunning prints have impressed me and will no doubt impress you for their beauty of craft, as well as content. Those who will give sufficient time to discover what has been wrought through his efforts will no doubt be rewarded."

The photographer, now 49, is an articulate and intensely passionate man whose sentences explode with italics and exclamation points. His intellect has the honed sharpness of a research scientist, and the playful inquisitiveness of an artist. He is talkative about his photographic education and adventures, but is surprisingly reticent about discussing the images themselves. His feelings on the matter are apparent when he offers, "I often find myself regarding interviewers and critics as enemies of mystery."

The work, however, seems quite able to speak for itself, and has proven to have a universal appeal, effortlessly crossing taste boundaries. Gallery owner Marilyn Souza of the Vagabond Rose said, "I had one customer the other day who told me, after purchasing one of Ken's prints, that, 'This is the first time I've ever even *considered*

buying a photograph as fine art." Another gallery owner, Barbara Marigold of Marigold Arts, comments " Here in Santa Fe a lot of visitors have been in and out of art galleries all day long. They're tired and they're often bored. When visitors walked into Ken's exhibition they were just 'wowed'. They stopped dead in their tracks. Suddenly they were *not* bored. You could literally hear them pause to catch their breath."

Parker's work also seems very at home in the company of paintings, and some of the galleries representing him are primarily venues for painting, printmaking and sculpture. In fact, one of his galleries has never previously shown the work of a photographer. "It's really cool to think that people are looking at my prints at the very same time as works by David Hockney, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg", comments the photographer. This crossover appeal to collectors of painting cannot find a better illustration than what happened during a telephone interview with Souza: In the background, a man who was walking down the street with his family, poked his head in the gallery door and shouted the question, "That image in the window. Is it a painting or a photograph?"

The painterly qualities in many of Parker's prints are the result of a deliberate palette — one that displays a highly selective relationship with the colors in nature. Eliot Porter once told Parker that he rarely included sky in his photos because "The sky is too blue." Well Parker has extended this beyond a prejudice against the sky alone. He comments, "I generally find the sun too bright, the foliage too green, the forest too cluttered." David Ligare is a world famous painter whose work resides in, among other permanent collections, that of the Museum of Modern Art. Ligare offers, "Ken's work is hyper-observed, and is an intense condensation of observation and emotion. His compositions are overtly romantic, with a hot palette and no sense of irony.

Most photographers, and certainly all curators and critics, must face the question of meaning in a body of photographs, and of relevance. On these matters Ligare offers, "Photography is a *very* instructive art. Always has been. Ken's work teaches patience and attention. His work is the type of art that looks at the large picture, and it will have a shelf life of more than just a couple of years. His work is also useful, in the way Plato used that word, because Ken's work teaches us to love nature and to celebrate the interconnectiveness of life."

To understand this remarkable body of work, one must necessarily look into the artist's past, into his roots. Parker's photographic education was long and by contemporary standards unusual. There were no classrooms and only two workshops. Instead, Parker managed through ingenuity and sheer moxie to maneuver his way into two informal apprenticeships with modern masters Eliot Porter and William Giles.

"I fell in love with photography in high school and just couldn't get it out of my mind", says Parker. In 1973 he took a leave of absence from my pre-med studies at the Ivy League's University of Pennsylvania and moved to Snowbird, Utah to ski, backpack and pursue photography. There, he took a two-month long Zone System workshop with John Telford.

Then, in what was a profoundly fateful decision, Parker decided that he wanted to work with a master photographer within a classical apprenticeship. "I made a list of

who I wanted to work with and absolutely poured my heart out in a letter written in long hand. I wrote that “I want to be your mule, I want to help carry your gear into places you otherwise couldn’t visit.” Parker’s list was decidedly unassuming: Minor White, Brett Weston, Wynn Bullock, Paul Caponigro, and Eliot Porter. All of these titans took the time to write back to the earnest 22-year-old photographer, and one said, “Yes.”

That the “yes” came from the only color photographer on the list, Eliot Porter, can be seen no other way but as the hand of fate at work. The reason being simple: up until this point Parker was almost entirely a black-and-white photographer, with color only very occasionally being shot, and clearly relegated to poor cousin status. That would change in a big way.

Eliot Porter, then 75 years of age, had just been commissioned to do a new book about the American West. Parker packed his bags and from May through August of 1975 the pair visited nearly every western state, logging tens of thousands of road miles. As the eager Sherpa for color photography’s first great master, Parker was all ears and eyes — especially eyes. “After he made an exposure, Eliot would usually let me look at the ground glass before breaking down the setup. I was 22 at the time, very impressionable, and there I was, able to sit there day after day, awestruck, watching a true master at work with his camera like a painter’s easel. It was such a privilege, such a lightening bolt of pure good luck.”

Although Parker was Porter’s assistant and grip, the older photographer allowed his apprentice to also do his own photography. Parker had a Canon 35mm loaded with Kodachrome 25, and a Mamiya twin lens reflex for black-and-white. Unknown at the time, these would be among Parker’s last black-and-white landscapes.

“During the summer with Eliot I began to think, ‘What if I just stopped doing black-and-white?’ I used to ask Eliot about this and he would always say “You know Ken, color is not recognized — that’s my life mission, to create a body of work that will get it recognized, help put it on the same footing as black-and-white.” (Porter achieved this goal in 1979 when New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art gave him the first one-man exhibition of color photographs ever mounted by that venerable institution.)

Parker’s experience with Porter was paradigm shifting in many ways beyond the photographic. Porter’s environmental activism struck Parker as perhaps a viable career option in and of itself. With this in mind the young photographer chose to complete his undergraduate education within the renowned Environmental Studies program at the University of California, Santa Cruz. “Eliot was always saying ‘Ken, you better have an independent source of income if you want to be a photographer.’ ” “In retrospect”, Parker pauses before continuing, “This is perhaps the *worst* piece of advice he ever gave me. If back in my 20s I’d had a do-or-die attitude about making it in photography, I might have avoided misdirecting 20 years of my adult life.”

In the redwood and fog enshrouded mountains above the UC Santa Cruz campus, Parker would complete his final apprenticeship, this one cut from a much wilder piece of cloth than his time with Eliot. William Giles was this wilder cut, an internationally renowned black-and-white landscapist and abstractionist who, along with Paul

Caponigro and Walter Chappell, had been one of Minor White's so called "special" private students. Giles had been the chairman of the photography department at the University of Rochester before moving to Santa Cruz as part of a quest somewhat larger than just photography. He had become deeply involved with eastern mysticism and was producing a major portfolio of his radiant work in a studio provided by his guru Baba Hari Dass, the founder of the Hanuman Foundation, a respected Hindu religious community with a sizable membership.

Giles was in the midst of producing his limited edition portfolio "Mother of Pearls", an exquisite collection of 4x5 black-and-white contact prints depicting nature as a vast stage where forces large and small act out their various dramas. Parker had approached Giles with the same utility-orientation as when approaching Porter, only this time the offer was, essentially, "I'll be your spotting and print mounting mule." This is was no trivial offer — spotting and mounting hundreds of gold-toned 4x5 contact prints is no casual undertaking.

In reflecting on this period Parker remarks, "This experience with Giles was intensely spiritual. Photography itself was *very* secondary to our reflecting on life itself, how it all fits together, how photography was merely a tool to be used for a larger understanding." At this point Parker's voice momentarily catches, and he says, "I know all this sounds a bit quaint in today's cynical world, but it was *very* much for real at the time."

If Porter had taught Parker how to make a photograph, it can safely be said that Giles taught something more intangible but equally important: how to make photography a way of life, a tool for apprehending mystery, a way of investigating one's soul.

When the discussion shifts to questions about his equipment and work methods, Parker becomes visibly bored, as if he couldn't care less. He admits that he doesn't shoot much film when in the field, preferring to meticulously scout a small area at all times of day, and then come back when the light is perfect. "I've had many days in places like Escalante when I do only one setup in a day."

Parker is the quintessential large format photographer, only using his 35mm Canon EOS system for action, portraiture and wildlife. Except for a brief year with that 2-1/4 inch twin lens reflex, 4x5 has been his mainstay since 1976. "The plain truth is that I don't quite take the subject as seriously unless I'm using a large format camera."

The photographer's field kit is decidedly minimalist, and for most of the past 20 years he used just a single lens of 150 mm focal length. He has since added a 210, and concedes that he *might* get a telephoto one of these days. "I have little interest in wide angle lenses — I just don't see in that perspective."

Nearly all of Parker's images are made while wilderness backpacking or traveling rough-and-light overseas, and this makes camera weight a key consideration. After owning a number of lightweight Japanese wooden field cameras, including a Nagaoka and Wista, he has found bliss with his now five-year old K.B. Canham aluminum 4x5. The rest of his field kit includes a Pentax digital spot meter, a Polaroid 545 holder for his QuickLoad sheet film, and a carbon fiber Gitzo tripod with an Arca-Swiss ball head.

Parker used both Fuji Velvia and Provia for a number of years, but has now switched to using only Velvia. "I don't bracket my exposures. Instead, I shoot two or three identical exposures, then process them one at a time, inspecting and then delicately adjusting density 'chemically' via push or pull processing. We're talking about very small adjustments, usually plus or minus 1/4 - 1/3 of a stop."

He is now completely committed to digital printing control. "I've dealt with Cibachrome from the time that material was invented, and I've also worked with internegs and C-prints. I'm through with darkrooms and optical printing — believe me, I won't miss any of that misery, nor its toxic fumes."

Parker exercises tirelessly meticulous control over his printing in cooperation with the affable Bill Nordstrom of Laser Light Photographics in Aptos, California. "I have a very close working relationship with Bill and until I've fully mastered Photoshop myself, his vast technical knowledge means I can get what I'm after with greater efficacy. Bill has probably *forgotten* more about Photoshop and scanning than most people struggle to learn."

Each 4x5 chrome film is scanned on a Heidelberg Tango drum scanner, with a file size of 240 MB. Originally the output was via a Cymbolic Sciences LightJet 5000 laser printer, but he now uses Nordstrom's ZBE Chromira. The latter incorporates LEDs instead of lasers, and Parker feels it is sharper than the LightJet. The output paper is the super stable Fujicolor Crystal Archive.

Parker's future work points inevitably toward new directions, particularly his growing fascination with ancient architectural sites. During his year in Asia in 1996, the photographer had been keenly attracted to the thousand-year-old ruins of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. This interest in ancient architecture renewed itself during an extended South American sojourn in 1998 when he visited Machu Picchu and other ancient Incan sites. "I have a real attraction to these archetypal relics of human consciousness. I'm especially interested in ancient sites where the natural world — moss, lichen, trees and weather — are reclaiming the remnants of human construction."

Late this year the photographer will take his interest in the works of man to the Tibetan plateau. At several ancient monasteries in the highly remote Mustang region, Parker will be documenting a series of ancient Tantric frescoes that have just been restored, soot from centuries of yak-butter candles painstakingly removed to reveal their vivid original colors. Inevitably, this will lead to photographing the monasteries, environs, monks, even the nomadic Tibetans. When asked about how he will approach this new direction, especially photographing people and using artificial light, Parker says, "I don't know." He doesn't say this as if anxious or perplexed — on the contrary, he sounds like someone who finds the future dazzling in its possibilities.

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*Eugene Fisher* is a widely published writer and photographer whose credits include many of the world's major magazines. His recent exhibition at the Canadian Museum of Civilization was the second one-man show ever given to a photographer by that institution. His photography is included in the Permanent Collection of the Smithsonian Institution.