

## **The Buzz, Chico Enterprise-Record**

### **The Light Fantastic: Photographer Kenneth Parker Treks Miles and Waits Days for the Perfect Shot**

By HEATHER GAMBERG - Buzz Editor 2002

Unlike many photographers, Kenneth Parker doesn't take tons of photos hoping that one will ultimately work out. Instead, he waits for days until the timing is right and takes the one photo he knows will work.

Parker gets most of his large-format, color landscape shots while backpacking in the wilderness.

"That is 99 percent of what I shoot," he explained by phone from his home in Carmel. "So I'm lugging about 80 pounds in large-format-view camera equipment and then all the essentials for backpacking on top of that - you know, tents and food and clothing and equipment and everything.

"I go out for five to 10 days, all over the world, and that's my main vehicle. I really very rarely shoot from the road. There's the occasional day hikes, but the lion's share's always backpacking.

"And then, when I see something that I'm interested in, frequently I'll end up having to wait for the light or often the next day to get dawn or sunset on it. And even then I'm often skunked by some clouds and have to wait another day."

But for Parker, it's worth the wait - and the weight of his K.B. Canham 4-by-5-inch field view camera.

"I try to take some time to really settle into a sense of place and really let it into my spirit until I'm comfortable enough to really start noticing clearly and my intuition starts to flow," he explained. "... But even then, even in the right space, I'll sometimes come back with nothing. Frequently I'll take a week and if I get one shot, I'm ecstatic. If I get two or three, it's an incredible take. It's very difficult to find a strong photograph, at least for me. Needles in haystacks, I've always felt, you know?"

Parker, 49, is making a name for himself - and a living - as a fine art photographer. He was an oceanographer for 15 years before budget cuts eliminated his position at the Center for Ocean Analysis and Prediction in Monterey. After searching unsuccessfully for work in that field, he took advantage of the opportunity to get back into his "first passion, which I never stopped."

The outcome has been positive. Parker's work was recently exhibited at Marigold Arts in Santa Fe, N.M., and now he's been taken on by the John Stevenson Gallery in New York,

which he calls one of the city's top 5 fine art photography galleries. He's also choosing between two of Washington D.C.'s top three galleries and displaying his work at Photographs Do Not Bend in Dallas. Chico's own Vagabond Rose gallery is hosting "Sonnets of Light: The Uncommon Vision of Kenneth Parker" through Jan. 31.

Santa Fe, New York, Washington D.C., Dallas - and Chico? Well, Parker has been commissioned by Debra Lucero Austin, who runs Friends of the Arts-Butte County, to take photos of the Ishi Wilderness Area. Otherwise, he wouldn't have considered Chico a viable market.

Marilyn Souza, owner of Vagabond Rose, said his 20-by-25-inch prints are selling for \$650 each in Chico. But, Parker said, this is the last time they will be sold at that price. The galleries in larger cities are encouraging him to create more - and larger - limited-edition prints and increase his prices.

What makes Parker popular is his unique vision. Rather than settle for the sweeping panoramas typical in landscape and nature photography, Parker hones in on intimate details, often with luminous coloring. It's a technique he said he developed in the '70s while assisting Eliot Porter, a pioneer in fine art color photography.

"I started to tune into a sense of discrimination, a sense of isolation, of everything that is not essential, and I would learn that by watching (Porter) photograph, frankly.

"I mean, I'm carrying all his stuff, I'm his mule, but I would always be curious when something catches his eye and he starts to approach something. I'm thinking, Well, what is he seeing here? I'm already trying to draw the four lines, second-guessing him, because that's how I was training. ...

"There was always a moment in between the changing of the film, the holders, that I would get to look under the black hood and see what he had done. And it was a stunning experience."

He was always surprised by the perspective Porter had chosen, by what he included and what he cropped out.

"So I look at it now as a ... mosaic. It's a mosaic of chaotic tiles everywhere and you're trying to just - I mean, I always feel like I'm just trying to find a singular chink, the one tile in this mosaic without which the whole thing just collapses. ..."

"So I feel that I'm approaching the landscape more intimately. I like to get really close, really tight and really get a sense of just a magical little spot that an elf might be living in and you're transgressing on his little magical hole."

By using that perspective, Parker's photos elicit just the right reaction from viewers.

"You know, sometimes people say, 'God, I just feel like I'm in that picture. It pulls me right in.' To me, that's the most successful compliment I can get, period. Nothing makes my heart sing more than that feedback."

Lucero Austin hopes Parker will do for the Ishi Wilderness Area, which begins in upper Bidwell Park and stretches into the foothills, what "Ansel Adams did for Yosemite." The "Ishi Project," intended to recognize the Yahi Indian who lived in the canyons of Mill and Deer creeks and left behind the wilderness when he was discovered in Oroville in 1911, may someday spawn a book and some kind of monument to Ishi.

"I know (Lucero Austin) has finally won some funds to work on (the project), and she's going to cover my photographing it in April, when apparently there's a short week or two window when the lichen and other things are happening," Parker explained. "I'm sure that'll be entirely backpacking. From what I understand, it's quite remote and you need a guide and everything. She hasn't even done it herself."

Lucero Austin did commission a private flight over the area for Parker. "From what I can tell, it's remarkable geology. There's wonderful structure. ... So it looks to me (like) there's some potential for some good photography. We'll see.

"She's taken me to a few things, day hiking. ... Bear Hole is one. There's definitely a photograph or two at Bear Hole."

Kenneth Parker on display

What: "Sonnets of Light: The Uncommon Vision of Kenneth Parker"

Where and when: Vagabond Rose, 236 Main St., 343-1110

When: Opens Friday with artist's reception 5-8 p.m., runs through Jan. 31, 2003