

# Photographing the Mythical

By LYNN CLINE | The New Mexican

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**California landscape photographer Kenneth Parker spent five months trekking through a land untouched by time, visiting 14th-century monasteries in Nepal, the mysterious temples of Angkor in Cambodia, cascading waterfalls and wonderlands of rivers in southern Laos and Buddhist temples from the ancient Myanmar culture in what is now Burma.**

The images he took on this journey reveal lost civilizations, mythical realms and the sheer stuff of dreams -- giant tree roots wrapped around decaying temples, dawn's magical red glow cast across a sea of towering temple spires and pools of water blurrily reflecting long-abandoned monasteries. They remind us that though this past lies far behind, the remnants our civilization may one day also crumble.

"I feel so very humbled in front of these ruins, it's like transgressing on sacred ground," Parker said by phone from his home in Carmel, Calif. "I felt a responsibility to bring back something worthy."

Viewing Parker's large-format color photographs feels a bit like standing in front of the actual sites he's shot. The works beckon viewers, as if we could simply step into the picture, thereby inhabiting it. He's printed pieces as big as 5 feet tall, though he likes to work with photographs measuring 24-by-30 inches, which is not so overwhelming, he said. He uses a 4x5-inch K.B. Canham field view camera that he carries around in a backpack, loaded with lenses, thick boxes of flat film, tripods and other equipment.

About 15 photographs from Parker's trip to Asia, taken from September 2003 to January 2004, are on view in Light Over Asia, an exhibit that opens with a reception today, July 2, from 5 to 8 p.m. at Marigold Arts.

Parker has had a long passion for photography, but he began his professional life in oceanography, having earned his doctorate at the University of Washington. He worked for the NOAA Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory in Seattle for five years before helping to establish the Center for Ocean Analysis and Prediction in Monterey, Calif. But in 1996 drastic government cuts in environmental-science funding shut down the lab. Rather than despair, Parker picked up his camera and continued to explore his love of photography, which had developed while he was growing up in Rochester, N.Y., home to the Eastman Kodak Company. "The Eastman House is there and it remains to this day one of the absolute pantheons of photography," Parker said. "Back then, you could just go in there, and as long as you put on white gloves, you could look through the portfolios of masters. I used to pore through the boxes of work by Eliot Porter and Minor White. Those days were my defining moment. It was like studying scriptures in an abbey."

Parker went on to work with Porter in 1975 and 1976, after writing letters offering himself as an assistant to his five favorite photographers -- Porter, White, Brett Weston, Wynn Bullock and Paul Caponigro, who once lived in Santa Fe and is one of Parker's major mentors.

"Instead of just asking if I could study with them or be their assistant, I said I'd like to help," Parker said. "I said, 'I will be your mule if I could just hand you the camera and watch you take pictures.' Eliot Porter loved the approach. He said he got letters every week from people wanting him to teach them, but I was the first person who offered to help him."

Parker ended up landing a job, traveling around the country with Porter on a trip to photograph national parks for the subsequent book, American Places, published by E.P. Dutton in 1981 with text by Wallace Stegner. "Eliot had a profound respect, appreciation and admiration for wilderness and for untouched nature," Parker said. "He would reverently set up and shoot the picture, and I wouldn't hear anything but the clicks and clacks of photographic paraphernalia. I learned the art of fine composition from him -- eliminate everything that is not critical from the picture. Only the essential should be there. He understood the beauty and power of a strong composition. It has to be simple to capture the viewer right away."

Working with Porter, Parker started to apply some of what he learned from the famed photographer to his own photography. "He would be silent, walking around very quietly, and I'm the same way now," Parker said. "I walk into something very benignly, very unassuming and unpretentious. I sneak around like a little elf, and I don't talk or say anything. It's almost like I'm stalking a photograph."

Parker said he has come to regard photographers as "seismographers of life and of spiritual awareness." "We're purveyors of beauty and perception," he said. "We're really imparting something mystical and spiritual and beautiful. When I'm photographing out in the wilderness, I chill out. My mind's eye is opening, my heart is opening. Like the way a writer or poet may start to find words, I'm finding the light. I wait until I hear the music metaphorically inside my head. I may have to wait until dawn."

Parker has traveled the world to take photographs, visiting Peru, Patagonia, Bali, the Alaskan wilderness, the fjords of Chile and regions of America, including the Southwest. "The southwestern canyons are one of my favorite places of wilderness in the U.S.," he said. "I go backpacking for five to 10 days when I'm there, making pictures in the canyons with the oasis of water pour-offs and giant, massive sand-sculpted canyon walls."

But for Parker, taking a picture is more than just capturing a place on film. "It's really about learning to see and getting out of your own way," he said. "And it's amazing to be responsible for this precious little bit of someone's heart. If someone sees one of my images and is moved by it, then I feel that I've lit a fire within them."

## Details

*Light Over Ancient Asia*, large-format landscape photographs by Kenneth Parker

Opening reception 5 to 8 p.m. today, July 2; exhibit through August 3

Marigold Arts, 424 Canyon Road, 982-4142