

Fire in The High Country - Photography in the Aftermath



Dancing Mountain Ash, Mt. Buffalo



Dawn, Mitta Mitta River

It is now just over a year ago that the High Country was ravaged by fire. I had been told that there were no photographs to be made in these areas. My mind struggled with this concept. All I could imagine were shapes and abstraction. The raw quality of the singed earth really had no appeal for me, but combined with weather conditions, then I could turn my photographic eye to making pictures.

In fact turning on and off my so called photographic eye is really a silly comment, because it is on always. I think it is one of the bug bears of my family, I am always looking even when I think I am not. I guess it just goes with the territory.

In early March last year when things had settled down a little I took a drive through many parts of the High Country where the fires had been. Some of the sights were heart wrenching and some, when the conditions were right, were eye catching and visually fantastic. I remember in particular when I made the picture **Dawn, Mitta Mitta River**, I was drawn to the light and shade and to the wonderful silhouetted shapes. It had me excited and I made several photographs within in that small area. When I had finished and was heading back to my car I noticed for the first time the landscape on the other side of the road. It gutted me. I stopped in my tracks and I felt my heart sob. How could something on one side of the road, even though it had been through the same thing, grab my attention so completely and have me photographically stimulated, yet on the other side have me feeling like a bucket of wet socks?

My guess is that my compassion and excitement for this area has equal footing. I can rejoice with it and bleed with it at the same time. It is no different than family I guess. Maybe this is how the indigenous people of all countries feel most of the time. This land connection. For us of western ideology the conditions have to be pretty severe.

Some words from Chief Seattle on the environment say a lot.

“Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of our people.

You must teach your children that the ground beneath your feet is the ashes of our grandfathers so that they will respect the land, tell your children that the earth is rich with the lives of our king. Teach your children what we have taught our children, that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls earth befalls the sons of earth...,
man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. What ever he does to the web, he does to himself.”

The images you see in this article were all made with a Bronica GS 1 using the camera meter. When I took a reading for the photograph, **Dawn Mitta Mitta**, I tilted my camera down to avoid the sun, (I was photographing directly into it), because this would have given me a reading way out of the ball park and resulted in quite an underexposed negative. The negative prints well and there is even plenty of detail in the foreground shadow area although I chose to print it darker.

The photograph **Dancing Mountain Ash** was taken whilst I was teaching a workshop at Mt Buffalo. We had risen early and were hoping to catch some interesting scenes as the sun broke over the summit. Unfortunately, really fortunately, as we headed up the mountain we came across a tree that had come down during the night, right across the road. We had no choice but to turn around and head down. We drove straight into a fog bank and my heart began to beat quite fast. I began seeing all these shapes and patterns amongst the fog. Wow! We parked our cars and disappeared into the fog. I headed straight for this tree and made this picture. I thought at the time I had made an image I would be happy with. It is funny sometimes how some shots appeal immediately and some grow on you. As you gain more knowledge try looking back over you negatives and see how you respond to images you made ages ago. You will be surprised.

After composing this image I took a meter reading and then increased my exposure by 1 more stop to allow for the brightness that would have confused the meter and under exposed the negative if I had left it as read.

Whilst I was printing this negative, which by the way is quite straight forward. Just a little extra exposure in the upper one third and I'm happy. Anyway, whilst I had my hand in the developer and was watching as the print emerged from within the paper, I got to thinking about the popular alternative at the moment. Inkjet or Bubble jet prints. How they compare. What is the difference? I had been stimulated earlier by a “Letter to the editor” I had read in an American Photo magazine I subscribe to (not as good as this one by the way). It was, if I remember rightly under the over worked title, “ The Great Digital Debate”. What it was saying awoke the sleeping giant within me and caused my brain to

overload with ideas.

So here I am letting the Dektol seep into my pours which I believe is better than the radiation that emanates from the all consuming, anti social, all knowing rectangular blue screen. I am thinking about the process of what I am doing, creating a hand made crafted print as apposed to what I can best describe as a poster print that is/are being fobbed off as a finely crafted "Fine Art Prints".

Some of you would know that I produce a Black and White Calendar on the High Country each year. Each image that goes into that calendar is printed in my darkroom as if I am preparing for an exhibition of the finest work I can deliver. The process for me is the same whether it is for the calendar, an exhibition or a print order that someone requires. I deliver the best I am capable off. A hand made Fibre Base print.

The alternative is just ink on top of paper. Commercial printers print my calendar in a similar way. Video stores display posters of movies in stock. The difference here is the type of paper that is used, but the process is pretty much the same. If you are printing your photographs via an ink jet printer, state that's what they are and don't sell them for the same price as a hand crafted fibre base print or a hand crafted Ilfochrome print. They are just not the same. The value of something that has been crafted by hand is much more sought after than the plastic moulded apparatus that everyone has that can produce a picture at the flick of a switch. Think about how you feel about what *you* produce. A lot can go through your mind in three minutes in subdued light with your fingers working a print.

The other image I made that I would like to mention is **Lone Tree, Omeo Valley** which was a result of just cruising around at sunrise one morning to see what was on offer. I was photographing some fog and a burnt out building when a farmer drove up in his farm ute just to say G'day. As we chatted he said I would get some good photographs just up the track a little. This always amuses me because they always speak as if it is a fait accompli. As if pictures are only in certain places and all you need is someone to tell you where they are. He was a nice guy and we chatted for longer than I would have liked at that time of the morning only because I could see the light and conditions changing. I drove a little way up the track he suggested and finally gave up and headed back. When I arrived almost back at my starting point I saw this tree perched on the hillside. So you see the farmer was right. I was just looking the wrong way.

My regret with this negative is that I didn't give quite enough exposure for the bottom section of the print. It's there, but it's a tad thin. A little more would have been great. I've been thinking back what I did wrong and checked my records, but to me it's a mystery. It is just one of those things I guess. A little extra exposure overall would have helped the bottom bit a little and just moved all other values up the scale . Extra exposure in the mid tones and high values would just increase the exposure time under the enlarger. It would make little difference in the overall effect of the print, but that extra exposure in the negative would give the shadow area more detail, which would follow over into the

print.

There is nothing worse I think, than shadows that are begging out for more detail. Print values always look thin as if something is missing. To make a good print is difficult and hard work. Something, (not the hard work) I try to avoid.

It is interesting that for some people who photograph or even don't photograph, but carry a camera for happy snaps (leave it alone Mr. Editor) think that there are only specific places that a photograph should be taken. I am always amazed when you are driving along a scenic road that there are signs sometimes that show a picture of a camera that suggests that you should stop here and take a picture. If you drive another 200 meters up the road and see something out of this world, do you stop or keep on going because a sign isn't visible?

Have you ever been out photographing and you have either your family or friends tagging along and you have warned them that you will be stopping to make pictures whenever you see something. ' Fine, fine is the usual reply, no problem at all'. So you're driving along, see something, pull up and get out your camera. "What are you looking at?" says an uninterested voice. "Oh just something over there. Won't be long". So 15 to 20 minutes passes and finally you pack everything back into the car. "How'd you go?" comes the tired voice. "Oh not bad" is your usual standard reply. You start up the car and drive another 300 meters along the road and stop again.

"What are you doing?" says the voice from the abyss. "Oh I'm just going to make a picture". "But you just took a photograph back there. Why do you want another one?" And on it goes. I am sure we have all been there and had that happen. My only advice to you if you do this with others is to make sure that *you* drive.

After I made the picture of the Lone Tree I kept on driving along the back road to Corryong. Most of it had been burnt, but the great thing was that new shoots and new life had already begun to show their colours. Nature was fighting back and eventually will win. Fire is a necessary thing sometimes for regeneration. The landscape will be different for sometime, but it will always be beautiful and capture the interest of many. Even as you read this the signs are visible and if you want something a little different and out of your comfort zone of photographing then get out into the High Country and make a few images. You'll be ever so glad you did.

Richard White lives in the North East of Victoria His main subject matter is the Landscape and people in their environment. In 2003 he won the Landscape section of the Victorian Professional Photography Awards. He also conducts photographic workshops around the state and interstate and also overseas. For more information or a current illustrated brochure on these workshops write to Richard at P.O. Box 425, Mansfield, Vic 3724, phone / fax 03 5776 9533 or Email: ragwhite@mcmmedia.com.au Alternatively fill out

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