

Better Photography - India

2005 Interview with Richard White

1. We love your images. Each of them has the power to draw the viewer to themselves. Please share with us some of the secrets.

Well thank you that you like my photographs. I guess as image-makers we like to hear this, but for me it certainly isn't the thing that makes me photograph. My photographs are just my response to what I see and I guess because I am always looking I see so much more than others.

Mostly I am attracted to things of beauty so I think this makes it easier for a viewer to respond initially. The trick with any art is to hold people's attention and make them look deeper into the piece. Lighting of course plays a major part in how people will respond to an image as well. I always seem to photograph when the light is more interesting, morning and evening. Occasionally other times but mostly at the so-called 'magic light' times.

2. What is your source of inspiration?

Mostly it is just to create and make pictures. That inner desire to capture the things I see. Sometimes I will see work by another photographer and I am inwardly inspired to get out and do more. For me it is a necessity to fulfill that desire that just lives within me. I have no choice, I have to do it.

3. What were the crucial turning points in your photography life?

There have been a few that I can recall with no hesitation. I think the single most important thing was in 1992, seeing an exhibition by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston under one roof and being in awe of the print quality of the images. One print took me to another place. It glowed and even when you compared it with the others in the exhibition I thought it stood alone. It was a photograph of Pepper #30 by Weston. I just couldn't take my self away from it. I remember standing and looking at it for at least ten minutes, moving on but coming back five minutes later just to stand and look again. I must have done this 3 or 4 times and in all spent the best part of 30 to 40 minutes just looking at this one print. I came away from that exhibition wanting that print quality.

Seeing that exhibition also made me realize that my first love was Black and White and that I should stop taking everything in colour and black and white. I resolved with myself that it was to be one or the other with the scene before me.

After that exhibition I read everything I could, bought books, practiced and eventually went to the USA and did a workshop with John Sexton, who had been an assistant to Ansel Adams in the latter years of Adams's life. After that workshop my vision changed. I knew what was possible from photographic paper and after much more

practice I really felt that I was in tune with the images I was making. I was pre-visualizing them prior to the taking and this made a huge difference not only to what I took, but my approach to the subject matter.

After the workshop with Sexton I determined to slow down and think more about the image I was taking. Some images of course are just intuitive and happen with minimal thought, but there are always plenty that you need to think about and this is when I slow down if time and weather conditions permit.

The other thing that came with slowing down was deciding to buy a 4" x 5" camera. I had decided to buy one after the Sexton workshop but didn't do so until almost a year later. Finding one I wanted and limited finances at the time played a major part in the delay.

4. Richard, you are a self-taught photographer. Did the lack of a formal training ever bother you?

I can't say it bothered me overall. Just at times when I was on a learning spurt and I couldn't find out how to do something. I used to think that if I had formal training then I would be fine. Now I know that is not the case and in some ways I am glad I didn't because I have found my own style and technique the hard way and I think that that is not altogether a bad thing. The question is would I recommend being self-taught to others? Well I'm not really sure, but I think you get there much quicker if you're taught.

5. How do you manage to keep abreast with the latest?

Well I subscribe to about 4 magazines that always have stories on the latest and the greatest. I think I've learnt to read between the lines over the years. I remember in the late eighties and most of the nineties every upgrade of product with regard to film and paper was new and improved, or whiter whites and blacker blacks. How much whiter than white and blacker than black can you get? Now I am reading the same lines that are being applied to digital products. You see it is just a rehash of old advertising, just designed to get our attention, but probably not altogether true. But I still read it so as I know what's going on.

6. First love and first frame are generally a prized keep for the heart. What's your take on it as regards photography?

I'm not really sure how to answer this question except that I have several images that are favourites that have been taken over the years. On a recent trip to Nepal I made a photograph that I really like so I will add that to the list.

Very clear in my mind is the very first image I made with a view camera. It's not a prizewinner, but for me it's a sense of achievement because it was the first and it worked a treat.

Another time that sticks in my mind was when I was in my twenties travelling in Europe and I made a picture of a bridge in Liechtenstein and what I realized was how

important light was in the picture. The bridge was sunlit and basically I was photographing light with a bridge in the way.

7. Modern day photography, to quite an extent is greatly influenced by Photoshop. How much of it influences your images?

Not at all. I still work from film and all my prints are made in a traditional darkroom. You see I still love the darkroom process. I think this is a very important aspect of what I do and why I produce. I love the fact that each print I make is individual and hand crafted and not a clone of the one before which is basically what happens when you finish it off in photoshop. To me your changes are determined by Photoshop's menu, not what you feel in your heart or are capable of yourself.

Once I have made a print I will usually scan the image into the computer to use in articles or for presentations that I do. I love that aspect of the new technology, the freedom it allows you to put together a show.

8. What are the most crucial elements in Black and White Photography?

I once read this bizaar statement to a question not disimilar to this one. It was: "the tones that matters fall between the papers white and its black". I laughed about that for awhile and usually quote it at workshops I teach. I think whoever wrote it had been in the darkroom too long. But seriously there is no doubt that tonal separation in the mid tones and local contrast are critical elements in a black and white print. The concentration of light and how that light is dealt with in a finished print. If you don't achieve these things I think your images can struggle. Negative size, especially when you enlarge, is a critical factor also because it allows you to achieve the things I mentioned a little easier. The two size negatives I use are 4" x 5" in large format and 6cm x 7cm in medium format. Both of these give good tonal separation especially through the mid tones. I think this is very important and adds a lot of depth to the photograph.

9. Name us some photographers, whose works have left a lasting impact on you?

Early in my career when colour was a big thing with me Galen Rowel was very influential, but as I became more and more interested in black and white Ansel Adams, Bill Brandt, some of Edward Weston's work were influential, but I think the two most influential photographers have been Brett Weston, Edward's son and Bruce Barnbaum. Both Americans. There are of course many others whose work I love, but they don't seem to have the holding power for me of Weston and Barnbaum.

10. Quoting you Richard, "Some pop musicians however good they are, cannot perform live. Their music and voice needs a lot of correction prior to release". Some photographers hate to reveal this same correction or distortion of truth they implement in their images. Is this a new relationship between Integrity and photography?

Yes and no. This sort of thing has been going on for ages, but I don't think to the degree it is now. It is so much easier now for Joe Average to do this sort of thing at home.

I know of photographers who change, clean up, add, subtract things from their photographs and say nothing. They put them out into the world as if it is a real shot. This aspect of photography I am very much against. I know that black and white photography is a departure from reality just because of the fact you have used monochrome film but, certainly in my case, you can always trace the direct lineage of the image back to reality.

I am not against "playing" with an image, but I think this should be stated if you do so. I like to be able to believe a photograph. I hate deception in this business and I think the more photoshop takes hold the more it will happen.

11. Tell us what goes into your photograph, your approach to it. right from the moment when you conceive it, to the time when you hold it in your hands?

When I decide to go out and photograph usually the only thing I think about first is the area or place I may go. I begin to prepare my mind. Then I just go and wait for my eyes to discover things. I may see something that starts me thinking of what I may want from that image. Sometimes light dictates what you take and sometimes subject matter does and sometimes it is a combination of both.

When I see something it seems that without hesitation I start to print it in my mind. I look to see what I would have to do if I took the picture. Let's say that I find a scene that draws me in, but in a couple of places there are a couple of hot spots that draw me away from the essence of the picture. I know immediately that when printing I will need to tone those areas down so as they don't distract. Also maybe a shadow area is a little dark so I know that it will require some holding back so detail is visible. Things like that go through my head. It sort of all just happens at once. Years ago I use to think about it as a process, now it just happens. Some call it pre-visualization, to me now it's just what you need to do. It's intuitive.

The next step is to implement those steps when you're in the darkroom. You may see other things that need to be done at that time as well, but if you recall what you were thinking about at the time you made the picture, (it pays to write down little things when your in the field) then I guess you're halfway there.

I think the whole object of the exercise is firstly to be excited by what you see, capture it and print it and still be excited by the print. If someone else likes it and responds to it then I think that's a bonus. And usually they will like it if they stay with the photograph, they wander through it. Part of the success of an image is holding the interest within the picture. It must be printed properly. The final print must have impact, interest, mystery, romance and probably lots of other things.

The viewer is relying on the photographer to engage them. It's not always easy.

12. Landscape photography needs a lot of traveling. What is the necessary equipment and points that one should keep in mind while on the prowl?

I think when you set off on a journey to photograph it is important to prepare your mind and start to think about the sort of images you may find. For example if I am

heading off into the mountains then I don't start thinking of alleyways or tall buildings in a city.

Don't compromise on the equipment you take with you. The lens you leave behind because you are hoping to cut down on weight will be the one you want. Carry a tripod that suits the camera, not one that suits you. Work out how much film you think you will need for the time you are going then take 25% more. I would rather come home with film than run out on the last (and probably the best) morning.

The images I get on the way to the destination is what is important, not getting to the destination.

And the final and most important thing. Make images from your heart with technical information from your head.

13. There are two kinds of belief that runs amongst photographers. Some go by the sheer beauty of an image and some by what it communicates. Do you believe an image speaks?

Absolutely yes. And some speak much louder than others. Some particular images will always strike a chord with some people and not with others. This is just how it is. Whenever I have an exhibition I always hope the former people come.

I think when we take a picture when we are out in the field for whatever reason the scene before us has spoken to us. We develop our film and make a contact print and sometimes that particular image has nothing more to say. But if it does then we go a step further and make a print. We then display that print and people either respond or they don't. This is the mystery. Why should one photograph more than another touch a chord with a particular person?

Sometimes I have felt that I have got to close to an image and after awhile I can't see the true value of it. It just takes one person to verbally respond to that image before my eyes are opened again. It's a funny thing, but it has happened to me on a few occasions.

14. Your workshops are said to be very selective. In your workshops what are the topics that you most highlight on?

I have never thought of my workshops as being selective. I have tried to keep them as open as possible to cater for people with different levels and styles. I know we place a big emphasis on composition and the reason behind why the photograph was made. I am always trying to get to the essence of origin of the image. Try to make people think why they took the picture in the first place. Photographs say something quite often because they reflect the photographer's view of the world and that view is born out of how they have lived or what influences they have had in their life.

I think if you can identify what it is within you that somehow manifests itself through your photographs, then you often have an intriguing and compelling photograph.