

THE BEAUTY OF THE ORDINARY

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SEED

“It’s always in the last place you look.” Many people miss the humor in this statement. The reality is, once we find something we stop looking. To continue looking would be contrary to logic.

At its peak, however, art is devoid of reason. Once an idea becomes ingrained in one’s mind, other ideas soon follow, creating a whirlwind of thought. When pursuing the art of photography with love and passion, any perceived destination is never the end of the road. There is always another hill to climb or road to travel, a seemingly infinite set of creative goals and photographic tools to refine.

Every great journey has setbacks, failures, and heartbreak. For each accomplishment, numerous weaknesses reveal themselves, and I find a vast number of dead ends along the way. If the challenge of refinement and growth were to ever end, I would stop the journey and find something else to occupy my time.

The body of work I present before you can be summed up as travel photography. More precisely, this collection presents what can be found at the dead ends along the way when a traveler chooses not to accept them as failure.

GERMINATION

I can’t remember what came first, falling while strapped into a pair of ice skates or pounding my fingers incoherently on a piano. No matter how many urban purists you

might speak to, growing up in the suburbia outside of Chicago is by no stretch farm life. Fortunately, I was afforded many opportunities to retreat to my grandparent's farm in Central Illinois. It was there, while ice skating over a pig frozen deep beneath a pond, that I realized I had entered a strange and beautiful world with endless possibilities. The crisp scent of a Midwest winter and the color of fall will forever be ingrained in my soul. When I was five, my parents deemed that a more productive outlet for my unused energy was needed, and thus the first hockey stick was placed into my awkward hands. Given the suburban lifestyle chosen for me, this experience would be contained in indoor ice rinks free from frozen pigs and other incidentals. Although falling down was still frequent, a hockey stick made a rather convenient tripod for my slowly developing skill.

My life in hockey lasted a full decade, but my lust for the outdoors and vast skies never stopped. When I was 15, my skates were hung up and replaced with distance running spikes, and my hockey family was welcomed into a running clan. Ice was replaced with trees, streams and the color of Fall. Soon after I graduated from high school, I traded my running shoes for hiking boots and a pack of cigarettes. It was not until much later that a camera would be stashed in my back pack.

SEEDLING

It seems that every household in my extended family possessed a piano or parlor organ when I was growing up. This statistic is fairly staggering given the relative size of my kin. Perhaps what is more noteworthy is how many of those instruments have disappeared over the decades. The particular piano in our house was made of magic. Touching the keys and hearing a sound resonate throughout our residence was truly an amazing experience. After I had beaten on this magic machine long enough it was deemed that another productive outlet for unused energy be found. Piano lessons were a good fit. The colors and sounds made possible by a piano opened a limitless canvas for creation. The more chords I learned, the more I wanted to learn more chords. I was obsessed with

being obsessed. It didn't matter that I was terrible. Practicing little and exploring endlessly, hours would go by as I escaped into this world.

The consuming passion of music did not stop at the piano. Through my life I have actively studied guitar, cello, euphonium, tuba, string bass, electric bass, percussion, saxophone (bad idea), various electronic instruments, electronic composition, and sound engineering. By the time I was 14, I was the leader of several professional groups performing throughout Chicago, directing adults before I had a driver's license. While still in high school, I spent a great deal of time studying at colleges and immersing myself in the musical night life that opens its arms to anyone eager for its embrace.

At this stage of my development, I met Jack Mouse, a local drummer who had toured extensively for decades with many international artists and who is still recording today. Through him, I met a wide network of musicians and characters who will forever influence every moment of my life. Jack taught me how to pursue art, how to reach for new ideas that were waiting just under my fingertips to be tapped. Exposure to many great recordings introduced a vast history of music that soon became a kind of religion. I will never forget the moment when I was 15 and first heard Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue," an experience everyone should have.

Soon after I graduated from high school, suburban Chicago was traded in for the University of North Texas, a few basses, and a pack of cigarettes. It was here that I graduated with a bachelor's degree in music and a master's in jazz studies. It was not until later that a camera was stashed in my bass case.

ROOTS AND LEAVES

Jazz is a world of its own. I began to read Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and other writers from the Beat Generation. Reading about people who let go and immersed themselves in the world inspired me but also gave a warning about the dangers of excess and addiction. Sadly, I didn't listen closely enough.

In graduate school, I found solace in a limitless supply of magazines, biographies, recordings, and other sources. Through these, I encountered Herman Leonard. Although we never met face to face, as I viewed his work and saw how close he could draw a viewer into music, I became fascinated with how a new experience could be created through a lens. It was as if I were spying on family members I'd always heard of but who had passed away too early to cross my path.

Then, when I was 25, I was given my first SLR camera on Christmas morning, and the relationship was just as spiritual as the one I had with our old piano. My camera was a way of capturing each moment.

Following in the beautiful tradition of photojournalism, I had the great fortune to photograph famous musicians and subsequently became a photographer for *Chicago Jazz Magazine*, by no means an affluent publication. Though I was working in the trenches for peanuts, that seemed to make the experience more worthwhile. Meeting jazz greats in person confirmed that larger-than-life stories were derived from larger-than-life people. In experiencing the work of jazz photographer William Claxton during this period, I learned that great documentary artists can also be great portrait photographers.

Fascinated by capturing life, I transferred my lust for travel and fresh air onto awaiting negatives. My 35mm Nikon traveled everywhere I went and soon found itself panning mountain tops, snooping on foreign soil, and dissecting 49 states. Not soon after, these images would wind up in small, insignificant art galleries. Through the lens, my parallel upbringing had come together, creating a great synergy and birthing a new obsession.

PHOTOSYNTHESIS

Personal and professional growth proceeds from regimented study of a subject or field. If we are blessed as photographers, we are truly blessed by an endless supply of mentors

and learning opportunities, making it quite easy to feed the passion for travel and culture when pursuing a thorough education in photography. This is not to imply that it is an easy task to achieve competence. This endeavor involves a constant pursuit, many miles, and diligent practice. One must travel a vast walkway to achieve a proper education in the art of photography. Side trips to national parks, mountain tops and seedy jazz clubs are an effective way to supplement the itinerary.

POLLINATION

Embarking upon the path of my professional life, I was to become a well-rounded and prolific portrait and wedding photographer, following the model of most working professionals of the era. As it turned out, I was surprisingly adept at the role. In two short years, I went from hobbyist to full time pro. I was shooting 60 weddings a year as well as countless portrait sessions, plus photographing for two magazines and publishing in numerous others, and there was other freelance work. I could walk into jazz clubs in the city and sit at a front row table. Pit passes for many major venues in Chicago were mine for the taking. Life was good. My life was on track. There was only one thing left to do: start my own studio.

DORMANCY

In the midst of the good life, my priorities changed as my daughter came into this world. I knew too well what it is like to be a latchkey kid, so I decided to start my own business and spread my wings. This allowed me to create my own hours and spend more time with my family. This, I assure you, is still a work in progress. As word spread about the new photographer in town, the studio grew quickly and developed in ways that I could never have expected. Life was even better. Then, various factors outside everything you have read so far led to a new path that emerged by way of a fateful dead end.

DEATH

My studio resides in a 100-year-old building with a 100-year-old tin ceiling to match. Situated on a historic block on the historic Lincoln Highway our block is a perfect place for a florist, or more accurately, a perfect place for two florists.

The rise of economic strife and the pandemic of newly created professional photographers multiplied the stress of running the business, and stress often leads to lowered productivity. With my high energy temperament, I often get wound up and can't work. Just as hockey, running, travel, and music are an outlet to vent, regular visits to the florist became a chosen dead end, a place of refuge where stress could be diffused.

A chosen dead end became much more, and a turning point in my vision began to form. My love of nature, color, rhythm, and the scent of life crept unwittingly into my world and into my process. Escaping to photographic books, museums, and collections, I began to study Edward Weston, whose beautiful landscapes had always drawn me into his work. As with William Claxton, Weston was not bound by one genre of subject matter. Under the influence of Edward Weston's control of light and tonality, my mind began to wander. Thus, a simple hobby turned into an obsession of its own. The drive to go forward and grow in my craft became a passion once again. The rhythm and love of culture and humanity began to flow from my camera and found its way onto an awaiting canvas. Flowers were my mistress.

MEIOSIS

It seems odd to think that in such a short time, a rebirth in craft could occur, but it did. As I began to dive deeper into floral photography, a dramatic change in my lighting style and perception rapidly took shape. The details in my portraiture became more defined as did my appreciation for my subjects and the stories that lie beneath the surface of a smile. Chipping away at the nuances in my clients' personae became a specialty, and my understanding of people rose to new heights. Like people, each flower is unique and full of countless stories and emotion. The lines and curves of every new subject require a

unique skill set for its capture. The architectural nature of such a small vessel requires precision and patience if it is to be done well. These qualities do not often come naturally. Learning to control each element in the process has had a staggering impact on every facet of my craft and interactions. Few photographers solidify this concept more concretely than Joyce Tennyson. Viewing her work, I learned that personal style, color, textures, and perspective have few limitations. As it turns out, a chosen end is the greatest beginning I have experienced in photography.

FRUITION

In retrospect, I have always admired artists who could make much out of little. It is fascinating to listen to Miles Davis and realize his ideas were so simple they could be executed with only a modest refinement in craft. Plainly stated, he played the notes we could play but never thought of. Many of the most influential photographs I have experienced are of subjects and places that are easy to access, but most of us don't know where to look. Actively searching for the extraordinary is an art form within itself. This does not involve a camera or any other medium of creation. A new perspective and a creative vision drives this pursuit. The desire to be in a state of wonder illuminates each moment. In even a brief view of great photographs, it is obvious these works were created with an open mind and not a camera. The lust for creating emotion in a capture perpetuates the desire to refine my craft.

Henri Cartier-Bresson said, "The photograph itself doesn't interest me. I want only to capture a minute part of reality." If this were simple, everyone could do it.

This collection does not intend to capture the extraordinary. Rather, it is based upon a changed vantage point that allows us to capture the wonders that constantly surround us but which we take for granted.

There is not a single flower in the collection that cannot be found in a majority of states in our union. Many of the wild flowers likely grow in the fields and yards just outside the

rooms you presently occupy, so commonplace we pass them by daily with little regard. Some you may even have stepped recently on without noticing. It is my hope that these photographs reveal the beauty in the ordinary world just outside our doors. It would be a mistake to not find awe and inspiration in the little things in life. It would be a fabrication to imply that I have the faintest notion as to what the future holds for my craft. With faith and persistence I am certain that even greater things are to come.

There is a great reward waiting when we open our eyes.

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Michael Barton, M. Photog., MEI, Cr., CPP, F-PPANI, F-APPI, EA-ASP, is the owner and operator of Indigo Photographic Inc. in Batavia, IL. He holds bachelor of music and master of jazz studies degrees from the University of North Texas. Barton was the recipient of the American Society of Photographers' North Central District Regional Medallion for 2012 and has been a Professional Photographers of America Photographer of the Year six times. In 2009, Barton was awarded the Canon Par Excellence Award for Electronic Imaging at the Southeastern Professional Photographers Association Regional Competition. He gives frequent lectures and workshops and has been featured in *Professional Photographer*, *Rangefinder*, *Texas Professional Photographer*, and the *American Society of Photographers Magazine*.

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AWARDS

2007

Best of Show, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois
Kodak Gallery Award, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois

2008

Photographer of the Year, Professional Photographers of America
Electronic Imager of the Year, Professional Photographers of America
Top 10 Illinois Photographer of the Year, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois
Top 10 Photographer of the Year, Mid-America Regional Conference
Fujifilm Masterpiece Award, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois

2009

Photographer of the Year, Professional Photographers of America
Top 10 Photographer of the Year, Mid-America Regional Conference
Top 10 Illinois Photographer of the Year, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois
Canon Par Excellence Award, Southeastern Professional Photographers Association
Kodak Gallery Award, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois

2010

Photographer of the Year, Professional Photographers of America
Electronic Imager of the Year, Professional Photographers of America
Illinois Photographer of the Year, Mid-America Regional Conference
Top 10 Illinois Photographer of the Year, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois
Kodak Gallery Award, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois

2011

Photographer of the Year, Professional Photographers of America
Top 10 North Central District, Professional Photographers of America
Best of Show, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois

Top 10 Illinois Photographer of the Year, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois
Kodak Gallery Award, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois

2012

North Central District Photographer of the Year, Professional Photographers of America
North Central District Regional Medallion, American Society of Photographers
Certified Photographer Award, Professional Photographers of America
Photographer of the Year, Professional Photographers of America
Imaging Excellence Award, Professional Photographers of America

ACCOLADES

2006

Certified Professional Photographer, Professional Photographers of America

2007

Fellow, Professional Photographers Association of Northern Illinois

2008

Photographic Craftsman, Professional Photographers of America
Associate Fellow, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois

2009

Fellow, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois

2010

Master of Photography, Professional Photographers of America
Master of Electronic Imaging, Professional Photographers of America

2012

Educational Associate, American Society of Photographers

SERVICE

2007-PRES.

Board of Directors, Professional Photographers of Northern Illinois

2009-PRES.

State Representative, American Society of Photographers

2010-PRES.

Board of Directors, Associated Professional Photographers of Illinois

2011-2012

Vice President, Batavia Arts Council

2011-PRES.

Approved Affiliate Juror, Professional Photographers of America

2012

President, Professional Photographers Association of Northern Illinois

PUBLICATIONS

2007

Texas Professional Photographer - October

2009

Rangefinder - April

2010

American Society of Photographers Magazine - Spring

Professional Photographer - May

Professional Photographers of America Website Feature - May

Professional Photographer - August

2011

American Society of Photographers Magazine - Spring
American Society of Photographers Magazine - Summer
Professional Photographer - March

EXPERIENCE

2002-2006

Photographer, *Chicago Wellness Magazine*, Chicago, IL

2002-2006

Photographer, *Chicago Jazz Magazine*, Chicago, IL

2003-2004

Studio Photographer, HR Imaging, Ottawa, IL

2003-2004

Photographer, Studio One Photography, Naperville, IL

2003-2006

Adjunct Professor, Benedictine University, Lisle, IL

2004-2006

Portrait Studio Manager, Studio One Photography, Naperville, IL

2006-PRES.

Owner/Photographer, Indigo Photographic Inc., Batavia, IL

EDUCATION

1998

Bachelor of Music, Minor in Music Theory, University of North Texas, Denton, TX

2000

Master of Jazz Studies, University of North Texas, Denton, TX