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Bigwood

I made the mistake of asking Richard White how he saw his photography developing in the future and, being a photographer and being more wide awake than I, he replied, “in Dektol”. Unfortunately I was doing this interview at long distance so I could not see the twinkle that I am sure was in his eye.

I would have much preferred to be talking to Richard in his studio in the foothills of the High Country of the Australian Alps in northeast Victoria where I could see the landscape that inspires so many of his fine photographs. Many of these end up in his calendar, one of which graces my wall in London.

Richard White’s prints are exhibited and collected Australia – wide. He also runs Photographic Workshops from his studio and around Australia and has worked in further education with various colleges. He also writes regularly for a photographic magazine in Australia.

Of course I asked him when he became interested in photography.

“I think I was always interested by the process, but got serious about it when I bought my first camera at age 17. it was a Practica. I was into motor racing, doing some marshalling and wanted to get photographs that most wouldn’t be able to”.

That was a surprise. The images that I know as being made by Richard are so far removed from the noise and hype of the motor track for the two to be unconnected in my mind. So I asked what his favourite type of shots are now and was mollified to hear that expressive landscapes and portraits that convey something of the person were what he liked at present.

As with many successful photographers, Richard is basically self-taught.

“The big change for me came in 1991 when I was visiting a dying friend in the USA. Whilst I was there I saw an exhibition of prints by Edward Weston and one in particular, Pepper #30, just blew me away, because of its unbelievable print quality. It glowed. I had never seen quality like it. I was transfixed. I looked at that print for maybe half an hour. I came away wanting that quality. My friend gave me all his camera gear and said to sell it if I can’t use it. I kept what I could use and sold the rest. With the money I bought another ticket back to the USA (3 years later) and enrolled in a workshop with John Sexton. Up until then I did what I could. I had been buying every book I could, going to every local workshop I could, reading every article I could just to learn the smallest amount of information.

“I practised heaps and virtually dedicated myself to the task of print quality and everything that surrounded it. It’s fair to say I became obsessed with photography. Now it is just a part of my life and I love it.

“ Three and half years ago I was back in the States for another reason and I squeezed in a workshop with Bruce Barnbaum. I had admired his work for a long time and he was going to be at Glacier National Park, a place I’d always wanted to visit, but was never

there at the right time; it closes in winter. I learnt at that workshop also. I think there is no end to learning. For me now it's an ongoing process. I know there's more to learn and I'm just going to keep on doing it. I don't see the point of sitting back thinking you know all there is to know. To me that is not slow progress, but backward progress. I love the process of learning and then applying, because you find it leads on to something else. Although I teach workshops myself I have no problem going to others to get even the smallest amount of information".

And in the future? That was when I made the mistake of asking about the development of his photography! Richard did apologise and added, "couldn't resist that one". He then went on to say, "that's an interesting question that I find hard to answer. I'm happy doing what I am doing at present, but where it goes, who knows. I'm starting to get interested and read about alternative processes. Maybe I'll follow that path. Who knows?" "I am in the middle or at the beginning of, I'm not sure which, a project of photographing interesting people who live in my town. They are people who have contributed to the make-up of the town at present or in the past and also "characters" of the town. I live amongst a farming community that also doubles as a tourist town".

I then talked with Richard about the making of his photographs and began by asking what he looked for. "Something that stirs me internally. Something that I react to because of its unusualness or its beauty. Hopefully a photograph I make from my heart with technical information from my head".

"And what about composition?", I asked. "Are you conscious of composition or does it come naturally to you?"

"I have to say I'm aware of the so rules of composition, but I do things instinctively and intuitively. Basically, if it looks good in a certain position, I'll photograph it like that".

I found out that Richard uses mostly a Linhof Technika 5 4 x 5" camera. He also has a Bronica 6 x 7cm.

"Okay, you've found your picture that stirs you, now what do you do?"

"With the camera on a tripod, I look for what I think is the best height, angle etcetera and then, using a spot meter, look at the low and high values within the scene and their relationship to other tones around them. I consider whether using a filter will enhance the picture or not and then make a decision on exposure and development and what I may have to do in the final print.

"When calculating exposure I'm really thinking what is the best exposure for the shadows and will normal development best suit the high values or should I expand the development to increase the contrast or vice versa. Sounds a bit like the Zone System, doesn't it?"

"A technique I find useful is to view the scene I responded to initially using a piece of mount board cut out to 4 x 5" and then walking around to see if I can improve on the original view point."

Richard's prints are sold through a couple of galleries and his high quality calendar is also a show case for his images.

When talking to professional photographers, I always like to find out if they shoot pictures for their own satisfaction, i.e. are they also amateurs. To Richard, his work and his hobby are one and the same.

“I think photography is integrated into every aspect of my life. I just love it! It’s a medium that you can become obsessed by. If you are involved with it as I am it can consume you and eventually it becomes a part of you. You photograph because you have to.

“ I would say that 85 % of the work I do is instigated by myself. I photograph things that I like and I respond to. If they are enjoyed by others and sell I consider it a bonus, but it’s certainly not the reason I go out to photograph.

“ I’m aware that I have to obtain images for my calendar, but I still only photograph things I like rather than what I think others might like. I find little excitement and very little merit in making a picture that doesn’t move me”.

And does he have any tips?

“ Probably best illustrated by the story of the man walking down a New York street and he stops a passer-by and asks him “Can you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?” His reply comes back. “ Practice, practice, practice”.

“Read, look at picture books and let the medium consume you. Don’t fall into the trap of letting the camera take the photograph. Let your heart take the photograph and then you will be enthusiastic about what you do!”

Richard does not use a computer to manipulate or print his pictures. “Never’ was his reply when I asked. So I asked about his darkroom work instead.

He shoots on Kodak TRI-X developed in Kodak HC110 for his 4 x 5” and on T-Max for his 120 camera. He uses three LPL enlargers which he thinks are “ just fantastic!”

“ I’ve used Kodak Polymax Fine Art FB paper since it was introduced and sometimes use Forte Polygrade and forte Warmtone FB. I develop in Kodak Dektol 1:3 and occasionally, Agfa Neutol.

When I am printing new negatives, my aim is to print two new ones in a day. I usually work everything out on an 8 x 10” and then go to the size I think the picture should be. I spend a lot of time on an image in the darkroom because I want it to be the best I can put out. Believe it or not I actually like the darkroom and the process of producing prints. I’m sure the same stimulation couldn’t be achieved by doing it on the computer. To me there would be a vital element missing. I’m going to stay in the dark for as long as possible”

Richard has won numerous awards for his photography. He is an Associate of the Australian Institute of Professional Photography and a Master of Photography with that organization also. But he says, “ It doesn’t make my next photograph a great or good one. The greatest honour I have is when I show a photograph to someone and they say, ‘ I wish I’d taken that’ ”.

There speaks Richard White, a true photographer, a Master Photographer.