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# Michael Kenna: I am privileged to witness amazing things

Seorang bijak pernah berkata, fotografer dapat dikatakan sebagai orang besar bukan sekedar karena karyanya yang mempesona. Tapi juga pemikirannya. Banyak orang bahkan tanpa title fotografer sekalipun pernah menghasilkan foto yang begitu mempesona, namun fotografer besar selain membuat karya-karya “besar” juga terlihat “kebesaran” dan “kedalaman” kualitasnya lewat kata-kata dan pemikirannya. Setelah puluhan fotografer yang telah terbukti kualitasnya kami hadirkan di sini, satu lagi kami menemukan seorang yang membuat semua yang mendengar pemikirannya menjadi merasa tidak mengerti apa-apa, merasa bukan siapa-siapa. Adalah Michael Kenna, seorang fotografer kelahiran Inggris yang selain memiliki karya yang begitu mempesona, namun juga memiliki pemikiran yang luar biasa. Tanpa perlu berpanjang lebar, berikut cuplikan pembicaraan kami dengannya.

## **How did you know photography? Tell us from the beginning.**

I was born in 1953 in Widnes, Lancashire, England, The youngest of six children in a working class, Irish-Catholic family. There was certainly no tradition of art among my family at the time. Growing up I was highly impressed by the Catholic Church and just before I became 11 years old, I entered a seminary school to train to become a priest. I left the school when I was 17. Art had been one of my strongest subjects and I went on to study at the Banbury School of Art in Oxfordshire. Photography was one of many art mediums that I was exposed to as part of the

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photojournalism, etc., and did not know about the rich tradition of landscape photography. Later on, I saw the works of such luminaries as Bill Brandt, Josef Sudek, Eugene Atget, and Alfred Steigliz. They were profoundly impressive and influential. I had studied the history of art in other courses and I was particularly entranced by the painters Casper David Friedrich, John Constable and Joseph Turner. But who knows where influences come from. I am sure that there have been thousands of painters, sculptors, photographers, writers, musicians, poets, etc., who have greatly influenced me. The list would be very long.

After graduating, I did some assisting and printing for an advertising photographer, Anthony Blake. Landscape photography became my hobby and

course-work. I made images of my surroundings. It was very exciting. I think I took pictures in my mind from when I was a child, but my first serious efforts were made at this time.

I later went onto the London College of Printing, where I studied photography for three years. Initially I studied more commercial aspects of the medium; fashion, advertising, sports, still lives,

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passion which I did in the mornings, evenings and on the weekend when I wasn't “working”. It was really only when I went to the USA in the mid seventies that I considered the possibility of making a living in the fine arts. There were photography galleries in New York and there seemed to be a higher acceptance of photography as an art form. I decided to base myself in San Francisco, and subsequently lived there for many years, before moving North to Portland, Oregon in 2004, and then Seattle, Washington in 2007, where I currently live.

**What interest you on photography?**

Imagine being out at night, alone, under starry skies, listening to silence, watching the world slowly move, all senses alive, thinking, imagining, and dreaming. The camera is recording, creating, documenting, seeing what the eye cannot see - cumulative time. Or imagine the sensation of being in a field as the snow falls on a single, exquisite tree. White all around. Just the sound of snow falling. Or again, the crashing of angry waves, pre dawn, against white sand, clouds in the sky, a glow on the horizon from the slowly wakening sun. Then call that “work”. There are moments when the elements

of life come together magically; conditions, places, subject matter, inner connections; moments that are singular and very special. It is a privilege to be present at such times and to have the possibility to integrate into the scene and subjectively interpret. It is an experience that defies description, at least from me. These experiences drive my photography. I think it is a wonderful way to go through life. I love almost all aspects of the photographic process; planning, traveling, searching, image making, seeing the first contact sheets, printing, exhibiting, making books, everything. I am a very lucky person to have found this path and am extremely content.

**It seems that you love doing black & white photography, Please explain why.**

I believe black and white is immediately more mysterious because we see in color all the time. It is also more subjective. I think it is quieter and more calm than color. I like to print all my own work and I can interpret black and white very subjectively in the darkroom. It is a personal preference.

**Everybody shoot landscape. But only selected create some good**

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**ones. What did they missed to make it good?**

Art, in all forms, is immensely subjective. I don't know if anybody can give universal reasons why something should be categorized as "good" or "bad". I certainly do not have that understanding. Some photographs touch us emotionally, more deeply than others. There are many reasons why this could be, including; choice of subject matter, technical excellence, aesthetic pleasure, personal resonance, intellec-

tual curiosity, etc.

**You do very intense personal project and also commercial project. What interesting for us is both project output have the same style and the same character. While some photographer do a very different style & character of output when shooting for personal & commercial project. What do you think about this? Why can't they do the same?**

I am very fortunate and due to the

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success of my landscape work, I have been able to accept commercial work which allows me to use my personal style of photographing. There would really be no reason for anybody to commission me if they didn't want the resulting images to be in my style. I am also not sure I could photograph very well in any other way. Practically speaking, most photographers are not in a position to turn down work and it is necessary for them to adapt their style

and technique to the client's needs and wishes. I would certainly do the same if my fine art work did not give me any income!

**Mention one word that describe your photos**

Sorry, I cant :) I will leave that answer for somebody else

**What kind of picture deserve labeled as "the great one"?**





I think a book could be written on this subject! In fact, many have been. I believe a "great" photograph is in the mind, heart, soul and spirit of the beholder. Some photographs may be considered "great" by consensus, others by single individuals. There are "great" photographs by ordinary photographers, and ordinary photographs by "great" photographers. Ultimately, "great" is a label, subjectively applied.

**You regularly do exhibition. Do you think all photographers should do exhibitions regularly? How often? And please explain the reasons.**

I cannot speak for other photographers. For myself, I think it is important to share images, whether it is through exhibitions, web sites, books, calendars, posters, notecards, etc. I think one of the prime reasons to be a photographer is the willingness and even necessity to exhibit what is created. Being a photographer means that I hunt for experiences. I am privileged to witness amazing things. I try to record and interpret them. I don't believe I should hoard the results. I like to think that I am a medium for others to see things they might not otherwise have the opportunity to see. I think that I am really a guide.

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Practically, exhibitions give me deadlines to finish prints. They help me to survey a body of work objectively, and I am always interested in the viewers reactions and responses. Exhibitions also enable me to survive because my livelihood is very much based in print sales.

**If there is some kind of checklist to achieved before you press the shutter release, what aspect/point should be on the list?**

I would suggest that there is some sort of resonance, connection or personal response with the subject matter. But it is different for everybody. Sometimes, it is a form of therapy just to wander and photograph. The results may not even matter. Sometimes it helps to see, understand and connect us the world. Sometimes, it does precisely the opposite and rather than experience the world itself we hide behind the camera. I like to think that I am having a conversation with whatever I photograph. I try not to steal an image, but rather acknowledge that a photograph is being made.

I look for an interesting composition, an arrangement of shapes and tonalities. I am drawn to certain lighting





conditions and atmospheres. But it is all so personal. For example I've always liked to photograph in "conditions"; mist, rain, snow, etc., where distracting backgrounds are eliminated or subdued. Sunshine and blue sky has never appealed to me. Too much light tends to reveal all the details of a scene and I am not interested in a perfect photocopy. I prefer suggestion over description. I like to use the analogy of haiku poetry where just a few elements act as catalysts for one's imagination. Often I make long time exposures so that detailed water becomes floating mist, clouds in the sky become blurred masses of tonality and a populated scene becomes empty. The world is pretty chaotic, seemingly always speeding up and getting louder and more visually dense. I am interested in finding and/or creating calm shelters from the storm, places where quiet solitude is encouraged and inner contemplation is possible. I think we could all use a break from time to time...

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