

DOUG ETHRIDGE - PRIMORDIAL SEAS

By Susan Burnstine



"Grace 29"

Can you tell us a little about your beginnings as a photographer and what led you to being a fine art photographer?

As a kid in the 1960's, I usually had one of those crappy little Instamatics in my hand whenever we went on a road trip. I used it like a notebook and made little slide shows to entertain my friends. But photography was just the means to tell the story. It wasn't until much later that I became serious about making images that were interesting in and of themselves. And I guess that came mostly from getting derailed as a musician and looking for some other creative outlet.

Prior to photographing Primordial Seas, you were primarily known as a black and white street shooter. What inspired the leap to abstractions shot in color?

Actually, Primordial Seas reaches back to my roots in the early 70's, when I first saw Pete Turner's jazz album covers and the motion work of Ernst Haas. Kodachrome printed on Cibachrome became my tool kit and it really wasn't until the mid-1990's that b&w and street work came back into my life.

Beyond the technical shift from B&W to color, did you have a personal inspiration or motivation for this series?

Yes, this series had a very clear motivation. 20 years ago, when we were running two very intense creative firms, my wife and I built a vacation home on a saltwater fjord called Hood Canal. No matter the insanity or deadlines, within hours of arriving at the cabin, our stress would magically vanish. Over time it became obvious that the movement of the water was the only explanation, and I wanted to capture that emotional force to calm, to inspire, to reinvigorate.

These images have the distinct feeling as if they are movements within a symphony. You have a background as a musician. Did your training as a musician play any part in this series?

I think musically every living moment of the day. It is still a much more profound part of my being than photography. Every image I make has a soundtrack, and when a body of work begins to coalesce like this one has, it naturally falls out into symphonic movements. I'm always thinking of tempo and rhythm and how one thing leads into the next. A dear friend of mine has composed a wonderful piece of music for this series. I haven't had time to marry the images with the music, but it's on the list.

You shot this entire series in your backyard, literally. Can you discuss any challenges you may have incurred creatively due to the nature of proximity between your art and home?

Yeah, I often set very tight boundaries for myself. This entire series is shot within 100 yards of my back porch, which is basically a bulkhead on the water. Having the raw material in front of me 24/7 allows me to study patterns and lighting whenever I care to pay attention, and shoot only when I'm seeing something new. But familiarity does breed contempt and sometimes I'm just too

lazy to do anything but watch the seals and the loons.

Much like the nature of the title, there is a primal, very real nature to all these photographs. But the emotion they convey is one of a sublime yet surreal mood, suspended in time. Can you discuss the overall mood and style captured in these photographs?

I really love images that suspend time; I think that's one thing photography does so remarkably well. The mood(s) I had hoped to capture were those of our own emotional experience living on the water. A clear, tranquil, yet energized calm in the presence of an unstoppable primal force. What I find interesting is the wide diversity in the way people respond to the work: some folks completely dive in and embrace the images, others dismiss them as "too pretty," and a few are truly frightened. A mirror on the soul perhaps.

You used a Nikon D200 to shoot this entire series? Can you discuss some of the technical aspects to shooting water and how you were able to capture such exquisite patterns and colors? Were the results based in intuition or did you know exactly what you were going for?

Yes, I had a general idea of the methodology that was going to get me where I wanted to go. Technically, each image is a unique combination of sky color reflection, water velocity over the ground, speed of the tidal shift, vertical movement of the wave, slowish shutter speed and some camera movement. Changing any variable has a huge impact and the digital camera (various D-series Nikons) acts like a polaroid to help tune me into a specific result for a specific set of variables.

Do you have a favorite image in this series? If so, what is the title and why is it the image that speaks to you most?

My favorite changes with my mood, but probably the best story is Grace 29. The canal had literally frozen over and there was several feet of snow on our deck. I wake up to this unbelievable orange sherbet and lavender sunrise and realize the frozen water is rolling with huge slow waves and the color is astounding. I leap out of bed and within minutes I am up to my bare ankles in snow, running two still cameras and a video camera, racing back and forth across the deck with my robe flapping behind me like a madman. Absolutely sublime, and within 20 minutes, nothing but a memory.

How long did this series take to complete? And what years was it shot?

I worked intensively on this series from 2005 to 2007. I cycle back to these every now and again, adding new things as the muse returns.

What are you working on now?

I'm working on a monochrome series that started out being about childhood memories and road trips, and has evolved past that into something I haven't quite figured out yet. A solo show of this work, called WAYPOINTS, will be at Camerawork Gallery in Portland, Oregon from January 30-February 25.

To see more of Doug Ethridge's work:
www.douglasethridge.com

Susan Burnstine is an award winning fine art and commercial photographer originally from Chicago now based in Los Angeles. Susan is represented in galleries across the world, widely

published throughout the globe and has also written for several photography magazines, including a monthly column for Black & White Photography (UK). Nominated for the 2009 Santa Fe Prize for Photography and winner of B&W Magazine's 2008 Portfolio Spotlight Award.
www.susanburnstine.com

