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A Painter Takes Pictures

Dan Berkeland





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Introduction

I bought my first digital camera in 2002. I paid about 500,000 lire for it in a photography shop in the tourist center of Florence, Italy. That was about \$300 at the time. It was a crummy low resolution camera. All automatic. A worthless digital zoom feature. That thing never could focus itself. None of that mattered to me, though. I had no intention of using it for photography. All that mattered to me was that the camera was small enough to tuck discreetly into the palm of my hand. I spent that summer wandering the town clicking blurry, lopsided shots from the hip of all kinds of people in all kinds of everyday situations. They never knew I was there, much less the camera. I was building a file of images that would never be shown as photos, but that I would use instead as reference images for future paintings.

What a wonderful tool that camera turned out to be. I'd load those images into the computer and start flipping them around. Rotating them. Cropping them. Bumping up the saturation. In just a few seconds with just a few

mouse clicks I could discover color ideas that would have taken weeks and a lot of wasted paint to find the old fashioned way. Still, the end result was not photography. I was merely using the camera and the computer as a tool to build different color vocabularies that I would use in future paintings.

Eventually I shelled out enough money to get a good digital camera. One that I could control. One that zoomed optically and had a few more megapixels. The only problem was that it no longer fit into the palm of my hand. I could still shoot from the hip but it wasn't as clandestine as it once was. I even found myself looking through the viewfinder from time to time. Still, I was not a photographer. I always saw photography as the easy way out. Too instant. Art required sweat and time. So I continued snapping shots that were meant to inspire future paintings.

In 2006 I opened my own studio/gallery in Morro Bay, CA. I filled the place with large paintings inspired by time I spent in Italy and Greece and San Francisco. These things were huge and they filled every wall and every corner of the space. On a wall behind my drawing table, a taped up a few 5x7 snap shots I had taken. A picture of my wife. My nieces. And a sunset photo I had taken of the local hills that I used as reference for a painting. I could not have predicted that visitor upon visitor to my shop, after perusing the gallery for a bit, would inevitably end up marveling at that hillside sunset photo. A photo! They'd say, "Oh, you're a photographer, too!"

This book came about as a result of me going back

through all of those years worth of reference photos and finding the ones that looked to me like they could stand alone as photography. I was surprised to find quite a few that I liked. I was even more satisfied when I started paring them up and stringing them together into what felt like a visual story of my artistic adventure over those years. What a rush it has been to build this book and tell my story through this process using material that was always meant for other things. For me, personally, it became a very emotional composition as I condensed punctuating images spanning many years of my life into the pages of this book.

So with some nervousness and slight apprehension, I suppose I am ready to say that with the making of this book, I am ready to come out ... as a photographer!

- Dan Berkeland





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Above: Tuk-tuk ride (Bangkok, Thailand 2006)

Right: climbing Angkor Wat (Angkor Wat, Cambodia 2006)

