

I believe photographs are spiritual metaphors that, to me, symbolize not only the beauty that resides in all things, but also the spirit that inhabits all objects and places both animate and inanimate.

Many photographers have shown us the beauty of nature and of our precious earth. I want to show that same beauty in every alley and piece of broken glass. Just as we can sense the presence of god in mountain, sky, and ocean, so too can we sense god in the common objects of our everyday existence if only we learn to see with our hearts.

This awareness of spirit of place can bring us closer to the spiritual within ourselves. Realization that god dwells inside us all we can see that we are also inside of god.

– Doug Beasley

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Doug Beasley: Balancing Teaching & Personal Photographic Projects.

My interest in photographing Sacred Sites and Sacred places started with a McKnight Photography Fellowship I received in 1991. The grant was to photograph the Sacred Sites of the Lakota Indians in the Black Hills and Badlands of South Dakota. I was also looking for a project that didn't involve people, since I was then making my living as a fashion photographer I wanted a personal project that was more

reflective of my internal state rather than the superficial and artificial world of fashion and models. As exciting as it often was to be paid for shooting beautiful women all day, my artistic spirit still longed for something deeper and more meaningful.

My interest in Lakota Sacred Sites was not in cataloging sites but in



trying to show what these places felt like rather than simply what they looked like. To help get the feel I was looking for I used Type 55 Polaroid film shot in a 4x5 wooden view camera. I made fiber prints from the washed negatives and then sepia toned these prints.

On my next grant I photographed various sacred places around the world such as Stonehenge, England,

Barobodour, Java, Tikal, Guatemala, and Balanese Temples. When it came time to print these I had a very difficult time wrestling with size and scope. In the end I decided to print very small, about 3"x 3". With everyone else's prints getting larger and larger it seemed odd going so small at first. After all, these are very grand and powerful places and I struggled with depicting their immensity. While I could not make a print large enough to make the viewer feel the power of these places, I found that the small print size gave them back some of the intimacy that a larger print lacked.

Ultimately I realized that these places, amazing construction feats that they are, are structures built by the blood and sweat of many, often slaves, over many years and I was looking for a more intimate and immediate connection to my subject. It was then that I had the opportunity to return to Guatemala to teach for Art Workshops. It was there that I learned the value of returning to the same place for a closer look. Each time I returned I felt I could see a little deeper into my own stereotypes. I also began my practice of traveling with only one camera body, one lens, and one film (Hasselblad, 80mm lens, Tri X). This combination lets me react to a photographic situation instead of trying to make choices on which lens, which film, etc. to use. This approach is

not for everybody but I see it for myself as a great visual exercise that keeps my photo instincts tuned up and makes me rely on my eye and my ability to move into a situation and engage the subject rather than relying on the equipment to put me there. It also keeps the camera bag a lot lighter! I have also applied this approach to recent trips to Cuba and Peru.

In 1998 I was able to travel to Japan, under a Jerome Travel Study Grant, to photograph how the sacred is woven into everyday life in rural Japan, especially on the small fishing village island, Innoshima, where my Mother is from. Because I wanted a large detailed neg. to print from, but wanted to keep as much mobility as possible I borrowed two rangefinder 6x7 cameras from a friend. It was quite a challenge since I had never used rangefinder cameras before, yet alone this brand and model, but it did keep life interesting (and a little stressful since I was never exactly sure if I was getting what I saw thru the viewfinder!). This work will be soon available as my first book "Japan; A Nisei's First Visit".

It is my love of experiencing new people and different cultures, then exploring how they express their spirituality, their connection to the divine, that keeps me traveling and searching for that next photo opportunity.

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RN: Doug, You've described several projects above. What is your current project and how does it work into your position as a workshop instructor?

DB: One of the main things I am trying to work on is printing some of the many negatives made on all these trips.

One personal ongoing project is "Personal Expressions of Devotion" which is a response to all of this work in sacred places. It has made me more interested in how people personally express themselves spiritually rather than the more grand public monuments to organized religion.

I recently had/have an exhibit on my work in Peru and Bolivia at the Icebox Gallery in Minneapolis. I had just returned from the trip (where I taught photo workshop) in July when the gallery owner, Howard Christoferson, asked me to show the work there. The unprocessed film was still sitting on my desk when I agreed to exhibit it. The pressure was really on! And I still had no idea how the film looked. That is the quickest I have ever gone from taking pictures to exhibiting them.

What was great about the experience is that the moment of exposure and my connection to the subject, was still fresh in my mind and I could see how I did or did not photograph what I thought I put on the film.

RN: Doug, How do you instill motivation in your students to work on personal photographic projects?

DB: By showing numerous examples of the work of other photographers. I show them books, magazines, tear sheets, promo pieces: anything that may jar their sensibilities or inspire them or get them to think and feel.

Working on their own projects is a chance for them to look deeper and see where that further investigation may lead – which is often different from where they thought they were going to take it.

It is all about how they explore their own connection to their subject. I believe in using photography as a means of connecting to the world rather than separating ourselves from that which is in front of us. It is a way of paying attention by honoring and honoring by paying attention.

RN: Give me a quick overview of how working on personal projects improves your insight into your students work?

DB: By experiencing many of the same problems that they find and coming up against the same roadblocks to creativity that they do. It allows me to see how we often get in our own way. I can offer my insight into how I deal with these problems because they do recur in my own work and I have developed methods for dealing with it.

Working on my own projects also keeps my connection to the creative process fresh. I don't retreat into the insulated world where you teach but you don't do anymore. That would be creative suicide.

