



LENSWORK

Photography and the Creative Process • Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

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Interviews

Alfred Currier • Don Kirby

Portfolios

Paul Kenny • Don Kirby • Richard Newman

EndNotes by Bill Jay

LENSWORK

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Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

Editors

Brooks Jensen
Maureen Gallagher

In this issue

Article by

Interviews with
Alfred Currier
Don Kirby

Portfolios by
Paul Kenny
Don Kirby
Richard Newman

EndNotes by **Bill Jay**

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EDITOR'S COMMENTS



The Importance Of Partnering

Photography tends to be a solitary activity. It's not necessary, of course, but it often becomes so, particularly for the fine art photographer. Photographing is usually a slow, methodical, non-spectator sport. It's truly one of the best tests of spousal fidelity: if you doubt this take your spouse with you the next time you head out with your 8x10 camera into the grand landscape. Darkroom work, likewise, is also often solitary. Most photographers prefer to develop their own film, make their own prints, and even cut their own mat boards and frame the photographs themselves. Some assistance is acceptable, particularly if they're paid employees or apprentices. But, somehow, sending one's work out to a lab feels just a bit like cheating, or perhaps a bit too *commercial*.

There is the cult of the rugged individualist, the solitary artist, the photographer who mixes their own chemistry and spends the vast majority of their life with brown-stained fingernails. It is the image we have of Edward Weston, of Ansel Adams, standing alone in the grand

landscape, heads cocked high, peering down at the f/stop numbers on their view camera lenses, perched on the edge of some precipice overlooking a landscape of incomparable beauty. It is a seductive image. It is, far too often, a myth that leads one astray. The truth is that most photographers will find themselves more productive, more creative, more effective, and better photographers by recognizing the importance of partnering.

Partnering with other artists

Let me ask this question: Do you remember the movie *Dances with Wolves*? Who's movie was that? Movie fans and those with good memories will immediately say, "It was Kevin Costner's movie." But in fact it wasn't *just* Kevin Costner's movie. He partnered with literally hundreds of people. There were financiers, actors, production assistants, sound engineers, caterers, costume designers, promotion and marketing people, historians, landowners, and the list goes on. But, *who's movie was it?* It was Kevin Costner's movie! And we say so because it was Kevin Costner's *vision*, Kevin Costner's

will, and Kevin Costner's *leadership* that brought this artistic idea into tangible form for all of us see.

So why can't the same partnering be applied in fine art photography? Commercial photographers recognize this advantage and partner every day. Art directors, assistants, lighting specialists, photo labs, equipment rental businesses, and location and set designers are often a part of commercial photographic assignments. So why is it that fine art photographers almost insist on working alone? Is it necessary, or is it *a habit*?

I interviewed Huntington Witherill about his *Botanical Series* and the question of partnering came up. His *Botanicals Series* are all still life photographs of dried, pressed flowers arranged carefully on backdrops that were themselves paintings, watercolors, or parts thereof. He told me that he began this project by making contact with a woman whose business was providing dried, pressed flowers. He discussed his photographic idea with her and developed a partnership (i. e., an exchange of flowers for photographs) that used her expertise in growing, gathering, and pressing flowers that made beautiful photogenic objects. He also partnered with a painter who provided backdrops of watercolor paintings and oil paintings which he used at will in his still life

photography. Eventually he even partnered with *LensWork* to publish these images in issue #26 and to also create a multimedia presentation on CD. It was his openness to partnering that made this project easier, and made this project more visible.

His comments led me to an exercise with a photographic project that I was just beginning. I asked myself an interesting series of questions: Who could help me with this? Why would they be interested in helping me with this? Who's expertise might be useful? What am I missing that would make this project easier? Where do I find the answers I need? How do I gain their cooperation? What aspects of the project am I willing to give up in order to more successfully achieve the ultimate end? The more I thought about this idea of partnering the more I realized that it was not only a key to success, but *had been* the key to success on all the projects I'd ever done that *had* become visible, meaningful, important, and were not stuck either in my head or on the top shelf of my storage closet.

When interviewing another photographer, David Grant Best, he posed a related question that he finds useful in his work. He often asks himself, "How far can I take this game?" He tends to think of everything he does as though it's a game - not

in the trivial sense, not in the competitive sense, but rather in the *playful* sense. The minute one asks *How far can I take this game?* it seems to apply a second question which is, “How far can I take it if I get someone else involved?” My dad used to say that “two heads were better than one, even if one of them was a cabbage head.” If you want to explore an idea fully, deeply, perhaps it’s best not to work in a vacuum. It seems perfectly reasonable that two people or three people might have, collectively, more creative ideas than one person working all alone.

Several years ago I worked on a photography project called *Made of Steel*. In its final form it consisted of a triplet of handmade artist books, each with five photographs. Text was printed in the emulsion of the photographs, and a separate text-only signature printed and sewn into a letter-press crafted binder. This project had originally started as a photography-only project. As I applied the partnering idea in combination with the question “How far can I take this game?” the idea grew into something much bigger than a mere photograph stuck in a Nielsen frame. By partnering with an artist whose expertise was bookmaking, I was able to create an extension of my creative and photographic vision. The resulting handmade artist book exceeded what either one of us might have produced in isolation.

Partnering with other ideas

There is one other idea that comes into play in this line of thought. This idea comes from unexpected quarters – *comedy theory*. I remember once hearing a comedian explain that the fundamental basis for comedy is to break an expected pattern of events. 1.) Establish the premise for the sequence; 2.) Move the audience along an expected direction; finally, C.) Trip them up with something unexpected! The humor is in the unexpected.

In a related way, the same idea can be used in creative photography – at least the idea of the *unanticipated thought pattern*. One of the most interesting ways to create new ideas is to *combine things that don’t look like they should go together*. What do you get if you cross a used car salesman with a post-modernist? It sounds like a joke (and in fact is a funny one) but it’s also a useful exercise in creativity. Taking disparate objects and thinking how they might combine in unexpected ways can be a creative exercise that leads to some fascinating new ideas – ideas that may remain hidden unless such an exercise in partnering is employed.

Each one of us has a variety of experiences that make up our accumulated memory of life. We have knowledge from a variety of different places, perhaps sports, cooking, business, travel, education, literature – an

almost endless list. What happens if elements from one area of your life sneaks over and become useful in another area? What if you mix your interest in sports with your interest in cooking with your interest in photography? (I suppose you'd photographically document a food fight!) This partnering of ideas can be used in simple thought-experiments to ask "What if ... ?" or perhaps in more tangible projects that are engaged with enthusiasm. It's often been said that there are no new ideas, there are just new ways to *use* the old ideas. Just as in partnering with other people, a partnering of ideas can be just as

unpredictably productive. The key idea here is the ECRS – eliminate, combine, rearrange, and simplify. I first heard this formula thirty years ago in a business seminar. I find it just as instructive today when thinking about artwork.

The punch line is, by the way, "An offer you can't understand!"

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bruce". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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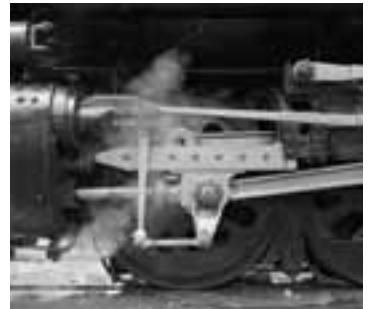
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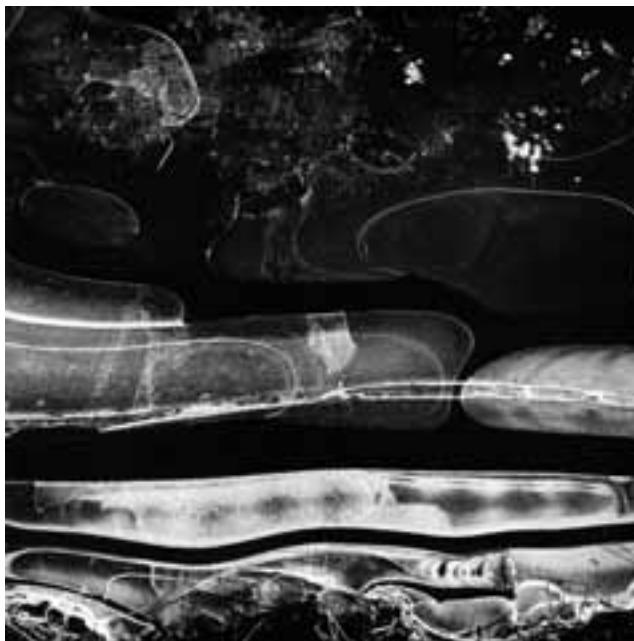
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ICE FORMS



by

Paul Kenny

Paul Kenny

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in the LensWork MultiMedia Library. Online preview at www.lenswork.com.*







A PAINTER LOOKS AT PHOTOGRAPHY

An Interview with Alfred Currier

Alfred Currier is a successful, nationally-known fine art painter. He is also a long-time subscriber to *LensWork* and a student of the creative process in art. He has written about the creative process in art-making. I interviewed Al in 1998 and asked him to look at photography from *outside* the photographic medium.

Brooks Jensen: First, tell us a little about your relationship to painting, how you got started, and a bit about your career so the readers of *LensWork* can know the context from which your ideas come.

Alfred Currier: I've had an interest in art my whole life. I was drawing as far back as I can remember. I went on to art school after I graduated from high school, which was more years ago than I care to remember! I went to Columbus College of Art & Design for a couple of years, I attended the American Academy of Art in Chicago where I got my degree in fine art. After school, I started painting and doing other things until I was able to support myself full time, which took until 1985.



DIARY



by

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Newman', written in a cursive style.

Richard Newman





INTERVIEW WITH DON KIRBY

Brooks Jensen: Let me start, Don, by asking you about your long photographic career. You have been involved in photography for some fifty years or so in one form or another.

Don Kirby: Seriously doing my own work – my own printing and that sort of thing – this is my twenty-sixth year. I was interested in photography as a child and made prints with a very primitive camera when I was eight years old, sending them off to be commercially processed. I still have a few of those images laying around! I printed a little in college, too. I had a friend who always had a darkroom. So, it *has* been a long time.

BJ: How did you decided to get *serious* in photography? I'm always fascinated by this. A lot of us picked up a camera in our youth, but something happens usually in someone's life where they say '*you know, this is my life.*' Do you remember how that happened for you?

DK: Oh, very clearly. And it *is* a mystery. I had to, in some way, provide some sanity in my life and relief from my day job. I got very interested in outdoor activities. I became a mountain climber, a river runner, a rock climber, a winter mountaineer and backpacker, and a canyon explorer. I'd always carried a slide camera with me – more or less to record the spectacular places I was and the activities I was involved in. On a trip up the coast of California in 1974, a slide camera in hand, I put in a roll of black and white film for reasons of which I have no recollection why. I did so and started photographing totally different subject matter – much more abstract, much more *form and pattern* oriented which obviously had a different purpose. I didn't like the commercial renditions of those prints. I thought I could do better than that so I built a darkroom. And I purchased the original Ansel Adams books on technique and started teaching myself to do my own printing. That's how it all started. The more I got involved –

WHEAT COUNTRY



by

Don Kirby

Don Kirby

*Hear an audio interview with Don Kirby and see more of his images
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