

DEEP INTO THE CANYON



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CHRIS BROWN

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There is potency in seeing images of places where we may never go, especially when those images are taken from the perspective of a native who lives, breathes and understands the intricacies of a place. Although numerous Native American tribes, Spanish conquistadors and American miners have lived in the area at various times throughout history, the Grand Canyon itself is primarily unpopulated, allowing nature to reign. Yet the majestic space may have found a conduit for its voice in photographer Chris Brown and the images he has spent the last 30 years creating.

Brown is no visitor to the Grand Canyon; rather, he is a patient and longtime friend, who knows the temperament of the rivers, the echoes off the rock walls and the details that make the Grand Canyon one of the most breathtaking natural wonders in the world—from its broad vistas to its calm pools.

Looking at Brown's images and conversing with him are exercises in the sublime and unexpected. He has a way of simplifying complex concepts with unadorned language, to reveal brief elements of beauty that go far down enough to describe the intricacies of something

as immense as the Grand Canyon.

Growing up in the San Francisco Bay Area of California, Brown was surrounded not only by national parks, mountains, red-wood forests and ocean bluffs, but inspired

by the work of area photographers such as Ansel Adams, Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham. Influenced in his youth by his grandmother, who was a photographer, and his father, who always had a camera around, it was only natural that Brown was hooked on the lens at an early age. Pair that with family trips to the mountains of the Sierra Nevada in the summers of his youth, and you'll find the makings of a lifelong landscape photographer. Being connected to the natural environment around him and aware of the great photographers that preceded him, Brown started to pursue photography more seriously. "I admired the landscape photography of people like Ansel Adams and I figured I'd never be able to afford to buy his prints," he says with a laugh. "So I figured if I wanted stuff like that, I would have to learn to take photographs myself. That's one of the things that got me started."

Brown moved to Colorado and worked as a guide in the rivers and mountains of the Colorado Plateau for 40 years. Constant saturation with the local natural world allowed Brown to gain a new perspective on nature that differed from the forests and mountains of his youth, which meant his photography had to evolve. "For me, landscape photography is photographing where I live. I'm not so much a visitor to the mountains. I've spent the better part of my life sleeping on the ground and hik-



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ing in the mountains and the canyons and running rivers,” he explains. “I got to a lot of cool places and I had my camera with me to try and document where I was. I like to think that I’ve developed a familiarity and an intimacy with the natural landscape from living there that comes through in my photographs. I think I see it differently than people who just go visit there for a few weeks out of the year.”

Following in the footsteps of his idols, Brown picked up a view camera, a dark cloth and sheet film, and began to document the world around him. He started with black and white working in the darkroom to create his own penetrating landscapes, but felt something was missing as compared to the world he saw. “At some point it struck me that the Southwest is about color,” says Brown. “I have been studying and teaching myself color ever since. It’s hard. It’s subtle. It’s elusive.”

Once he started in color, there was no alternative and no turning back for Brown. His migration to color photography was a natural evolution; while the mountains of his

youth lent themselves beautifully to black-and-white rendering, it was the varied hues, stark contrasts and subtle gradations that defined his adopted, and now wonderfully familiar, Colorado Plateau landscapes.

The familiarity that he has earned is clearly evident in the images he brings back. Having made numerous expeditions into the Grand Canyon, Brown has amassed a body of work that describes this well known landmark with intimate details, bold colors and humbling variety. The resulting images speak to the photographer’s patience. Each trip down is a major journey requiring preparations, food and equipment to last for two to three weeks. In this place, nature must be honored and respected; the rivers have dangerous rapids, the canyons can become sweltering and the rock faces can be slippery. To add an additional complication, Brown chooses to set out with a bulky, 30-pound pack containing his 4x5 view-camera system. But the images he returns with are well worth the effort. They are luminous, meditative and enlightening, and demonstrate a vast wilderness in the

heart of the Southwest that is thriving and vibrant.

Capturing every element of the Grand Canyon on film isn’t Brown’s motivation, but rather, it’s seeking out new photographic challenges that he can document and share with the world. Each time out Brown seeks out new locations and follows his instincts in the hopes of capturing another great image. “I’ve been down the Canyon about 35 times and there are still places I haven’t seen. Usually, each trip I try to camp in a couple of places I’ve never camped at before and visit side canyons that I’ve never been in.”

As he explores the beauties that the Grand Canyon has to offer, Brown is also highly cognizant of the process of active awareness. To him, photography is the art of seeing, of paying attention to the elements around us. But he goes beyond merely scanning the horizon, believing that really giving your full attention to a subject allows you to see things more clearly and appreciate the immense visual experience of our lives. As Brown explains, “When I’m in the right mood and the right place, things become more interesting and dynamic and I see things much more deeply than one normally does. It’s a process of going to a place where I want to be and trying to be totally present where I am. It’s about not having any expectations and just being alert and paying attention to what’s around me.” So even though he has been down the same river runs and climbed the same boulders dozens of times, the alertness with which Brown evaluates his surroundings allows him to truly see what’s in front of him without preconceived notions, and find something new and unexpected.

Brown’s concept of learning to open both your eyes and mind when viewing the world is a fascination he explored when writing the manuscript for his first book, *Path of Beauty: Photographic Adventures in the Grand Canyon*. It is a phenomenon he terms “first sight”—one that allows the photographic experience to be meditative and enlightening, no matter how many times you have been down the same trails.

Brown’s approach to photography, to seeing, is illustrated by his continued use of the view camera. The bulky apparatus, with its inverted image on the ground glass and the requisite dark cloth thrown over the photographer and bellows, forces the process into methodical preciseness. Because

this method uses film holders loaded with sheet film, there is an inherent limitation to how many shots can be accomplished. Although Brown does bring a changing bag down to the Canyon floor, actually using it is an epic process of creating a clean, sand-free environment, cleaning out all of the film holders and exchanging exposed film for new sheets. But it is a process that he doesn't mind, so long as his expedition companions don't take the opportunity to harass him while his arms are stuck inside the changing bag.

Brown takes the well known quote from Ansel Adams to heart: "The negative is the score and the print is the performance." He bears in mind the concept that the print is the ultimate expression of the photograph. He prides himself on working diligently not only to create his original images, but to carefully scan each piece of sheet film and work with the resulting image in Photoshop to create the ideal rendition of his vision. "It's handmade, one at a time, not mass-produced by a machine," he says. "I

think there's less and less of that going on in our world, and it's a real lack. I think it's really important that the arts continue to be an opportunity for people to experience and observe what craftsmanship and hand-made things are all about."

Brown admits that he never prints more than a few of a single image at one time, knowing that he will think differently of the shot in a year or two, maybe wanting less red or more blue. He certainly devotes much of his time away from photographing in the field to working with his images over time and eventually revealing something essential about the landscape. That element of craft is important to Brown, and he embraces the freedom of expression that his hybrid process enables. With the exception of the printing of the book, which he is thrilled with, he produces all of his own images in a modest studio that he and his wife built as a second story in their house. Once a year, he uses it as a small gallery as well, freely sharing knowledge with anyone who wants to learn about his process, either

photographic or philosophical, or merely talk about imagery.

In the end, Brown wants his images to be reminiscent of the feelings he had while experiencing the Grand Canyon firsthand. He encourages everyone to bring their own influences and knowledge to the viewing of his images, and relishes discussions with friends and patrons, always excited when someone sees something in his image that he has never observed before. "My goal is to try and carry some of the essence of the subject through to the print. In a sense, a really good image transcends what its literal, physical subject is and becomes an aesthetic or emotional experience. It's not necessarily about a tree, it's about a the visual experience you can have with a tree."



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