

Images by Intent

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF KERON PSILLAS

By Nancy McKeithen



Three Sycamores

To look at the photographs of Keron Psillas is to experience them—their rhythm and spirit, their stories. They make you question. They make you look at them over and over. And when you do, you see more than the photographs themselves; you see into eye of the photographer.

In what Psillas calls “the marvelous ways of the universe,” she landed in a nature photography workshop in 2005 taught by internationally known photographer and author Art Wolfe. She terms it a “complete and utter disaster” that later led to a dream job for a photographer: managing his studio photography center in Seattle. As the person whose primary role was to bring world-famous photographers to the center to teach one-week intensive classes, Psillas got an education in photography from people at the top of their profession. “I had the privilege to sit beside them for weeks at a time and learn,” she says.

After a second workshop later that year, this one in Maine with now retired National Geographic photographer Sam Abell, who is also her mentor, Psillas decided to make photography her new career. And in early 2006, she went to Europe “to make myself a photographer.

“I had this idea that I had to be someplace foreign, someplace where I didn’t speak the language, someplace where everything was unknown to me, to make it as difficult as possible without being on Mt Everest or something like that.” She went to Paris.

After a month of walking the streets of the city each day trying to make photographs and burgeoning thoughts of “what have you done, this is a fantasy,” she was miserable. And then the moment happened. “At

9 o’clock that night, I decided to just go make some photographs again, and I walked outside my apartment”—it was near Notre Dame, across the Seine. “I went down along the river and I saw a photograph walking toward me. And in that instant, I knew I was a photographer,” she says, slowing her words, widening the space between them, as if to confirm them to herself. “Because I saw it before it happened. I knew it was coming. I knew when the moment was.”

Psillas calls it a gift: “If you’re out working dilligently, sincerely, then you’re given gifts like that. It keeps me looking for other photographs.

Once, on one of her frequent trips back to her hometown, Shepherdstown, West Virginia, she began thinking there was nothing in the area to photograph. It was after a trip to Europe and a stint working in Alaska. “I was being a brat,” she says. The words of Ernst Haas—she calls him “probably the greatest color photographer in history”—brought her out of her rut: “I am not interested to see new things. I am interested to see things new.”

“I kicked my own butt,” she says.

Photography wasn’t her first career, but she may have unknowingly been training herself for it as a collector of oil paintings. “I know that for 25 years, I was feeding my brain with imagery—form, shape, color, light—all the things that a photographer must be aware of.” And all the things she wants in her own photographs, plus an ethereal quality and subtlety. “I hope my photographs aren’t shouting.”

Feeding that awareness creates a better photographer, she says. “Awareness is a gift of consciousness we

can give ourselves.” It’s something she covers in the workshops she now teaches at the Pacific Northwest Arts Center on Washington’s Whidby Island, along with how awareness relates to intent—knowing what she wants her photographs to communicate.

If Psillas is known at all as a photographer—and she is, for her photographs in both U.S. and European magazines and in Brazil—it’s because of her work with horses. Most often, she photographs a type of horse from Portugal—the Lusitano, known as the “horse of kings” because “in van Dyck paintings and the Old Masters, kings are sitting on Lusitanos.”

But she also likes to photograph historical subjects: ancient and sacred landscapes, old cathedrals and architecture. And she would like to be known “as something other than an equine photographer,” to be as accomplished in other photographic dimensions. Currently, she’s focused on a project in the Czech Republic and Poland about the Holocaust.

Finding more time to photograph is her nemesis. “These days, photography—for photographers—maybe makes up 10 percent of the time we have available. The rest of it’s marketing and self-promotion,” she says. What she doesn’t say is travel time, teaching and downtime.

Digital has helped. Being able to make several thousand pictures in a day, unconstrained by processing delays and film supplies, has upped her production and lowered the length of the learning curve.

Psillas shoots with a top-of-the-line Canon and their professional-quality lenses along with a Zeiss lens for shooting right angle. “I so don’t care about equipment,” she admits, although she appreciates others’ interest in it, especially when it’s about image fidelity. She never uses flash. “It’s a really bad idea using flash with horses, and I prefer natural light—to be ‘in tune’ with what’s there.”

As to choosing color versus B&W, “both,” she says. “Some images will tell you which.

“I see black-and-white images when I’m working... but more often I see shapes.” While she’s never shot with a square-format camera, she sees things in squares, and justifies cropping an image that way. “Three Sycamores” (page 18) is one of those photographs. Her mentor (who shoots in a 35-mm frame and never crops) agrees about cropping as long as that’s how she visualizes an image. “Sam encourages me to take advantage of every millimeter of the frame,” says Psillas.

It’s about being aware. [fluent](#)

Keron Psillas’ blog, “We Photograph as We Are”:
keronpsillas.com

Favorite blog to read, “The New York Times Lens”:
lens.blogs.nytimes.com

Quote she shares: “To become a better photographer, you must become a more interesting person.” —Jay Maisel











Reflection Speak to me of your time in the mountains ~
tell me your adventures, your stories
of companions and languorous days in the forest,
of the earth and her glories.

There is such beauty in your eyes,
the sacred spark leaps
your essence, your life is reflected
as the fire awakens.

This glowing fire abides now
in my favorite space.
A space of warm, bright, encompassing love ~
the reflection in our eyes.

Keron Psillas

