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DENNIS MECHAM

THE GREAT SALT DENNIS

The late novelist, Edward Abbey, was known for his rhapsodic prose about the austere beauty of the American Southwest. Photographer Dennis Mecham was born and raised in Salt Lake City. Both the austerity and beauty of that environment are reflected in his images. That influence has obviously struck a chord with collectors around the world who have made him among the most sought-after artists currently working in the medium. Meri DeCaria of Salt Lake City's Phillips Gallery assessed Mecham's work in this way, "Dennis Mecham is a dedicated and accomplished artist whose career has potential for much greater acclaim. We know him as an artist with meticulous standards to whom many a fellow artist turns to for his technical expertise."

When you were growing up, how did your surroundings influence you as an artist?

I was influenced by the natural environment and the wonderful light of the West. I was more drawn to the Great Salt Lake and the southern Utah environments because of their spiritual and mysterious qualities. Even as a child I was always aware of what I now describe as the "unseen." I may also have been influenced from being around Catholic churches. I went to a parochial school as a child and so was taken to Mass often. The Mass I went to was the pre-Vatican II version where the entire service was in Latin and the music was Gregorian Chant. This had a profound effect on me as I was taken out of the domestic sphere of consciousness and brought into a world of mystery and beauty through sight and sound. It was not so much a religious experience as a spiritual one. I don't consider myself a religious person but this spiritual awareness is a keystone to my life. I think this is why some of my subjects are churches and cemeteries. The purpose of their design is to take one's consciousness into the spiritual dimension. This spiritual awareness

cannot be separated from beauty. The beauty of a place, space or a person.

Were you considered artistic as a child?

I have no memories of not spending many hours drawing. I think there was little I valued more than a pad of paper and pencils. I didn't realize it at the time, but it allowed me to spend much of my childhood in a timeless space of exploration and wonder.

Were your parents artistic and did they support your budding artistry?

My parents were not artistic in any media, but they always encouraged and supported my artistic endeavors whether in art or music. It is one of the greatest things a parent can do for their child I, think.

When did you first pick up a camera?

I first picked up a camera when I was in high school. The side of me which likes integrating the artistic sense with the craft of photography clicked. It is still clicking.

Did you attend a photography school or are you self-taught?

I am, for the most part, self-taught. I can be very focused and can be very patient. I have a strong sense of perseverance which has helped immensely. The art form in which I had more formal training was music. I have found it to be a great asset in the photographic journey. Music requires a devotion and discipline which helps me daily in my photography. Music, too, requires the merging of artistic expression and musical craft. You have to be both an artist and a technician. Photographers have a distinct advantage over musicians. If you don't practice your instrument every day, your skills can diminish noticeably. That doesn't happen if you don't take photographs for a few days. Because of the necessity for that mind/body interface, music is more demanding.

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LAKE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

MECHAM

CHRISTOPHER KEY



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I remember one evening when I was holding an Open House at my studio, Joseph Silverstein, the great violinist who was then the conductor of the Utah Symphony, walked into my space. He is a wonderful human being and very cordial. He told me that as artists we are all trying to express unseen emotion in our work. To bring the formless into form. Our ability to do this is limited by our technique and craft, and that is the thread which connects the two worlds and by which we may communicate

this to others. I have found this to be true. It has been my observation that the melding of the spiritual sense and the artistic craft are always present.

Do you have any regrets about pursuing photography rather than music?

No, I'm still expressing what I feel. If I was doing something that was not creative, I'd probably be depressed. And I am still keeping my fingers in music to a certain extent.

Were you influenced by other photographers?

I was influenced mostly by painters and sculptors. My mother is Italian and I grew up around Leonardo and Michelangelo, as well as other classic artists. I was also greatly influenced by the work of Maxfield Parrish as he seemed to express the surreal experience of people and place that I immediately identified with. I have been told that his painting, *Daybreak*, is the most reproduced image in history. I don't know if that is true

but it wouldn't surprise me. There may not be another work of art with which I more strongly identify with, emotionally and spiritually. Another was the French painter Bouguereau, as well as Edward Hopper and Magritte. For me they embody the same surreal and romantic beauty of their respective experiences. The first photographers to influence me were Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. They were the first ones who saw photography as art. Others were Imogene Cunningham, Henri

Cartier-Bresson, Josef Karsh, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Robert Mapplethorpe, Joyce Tenneson and Herman Leonard. I have always seen art deco as an interesting reflection of the eternal in humanity. That style is so universal in appeal that it was used by both Roosevelt and Hitler to promote their ideas. You see that art deco influence in both Bourke-White and Mapplethorpe.

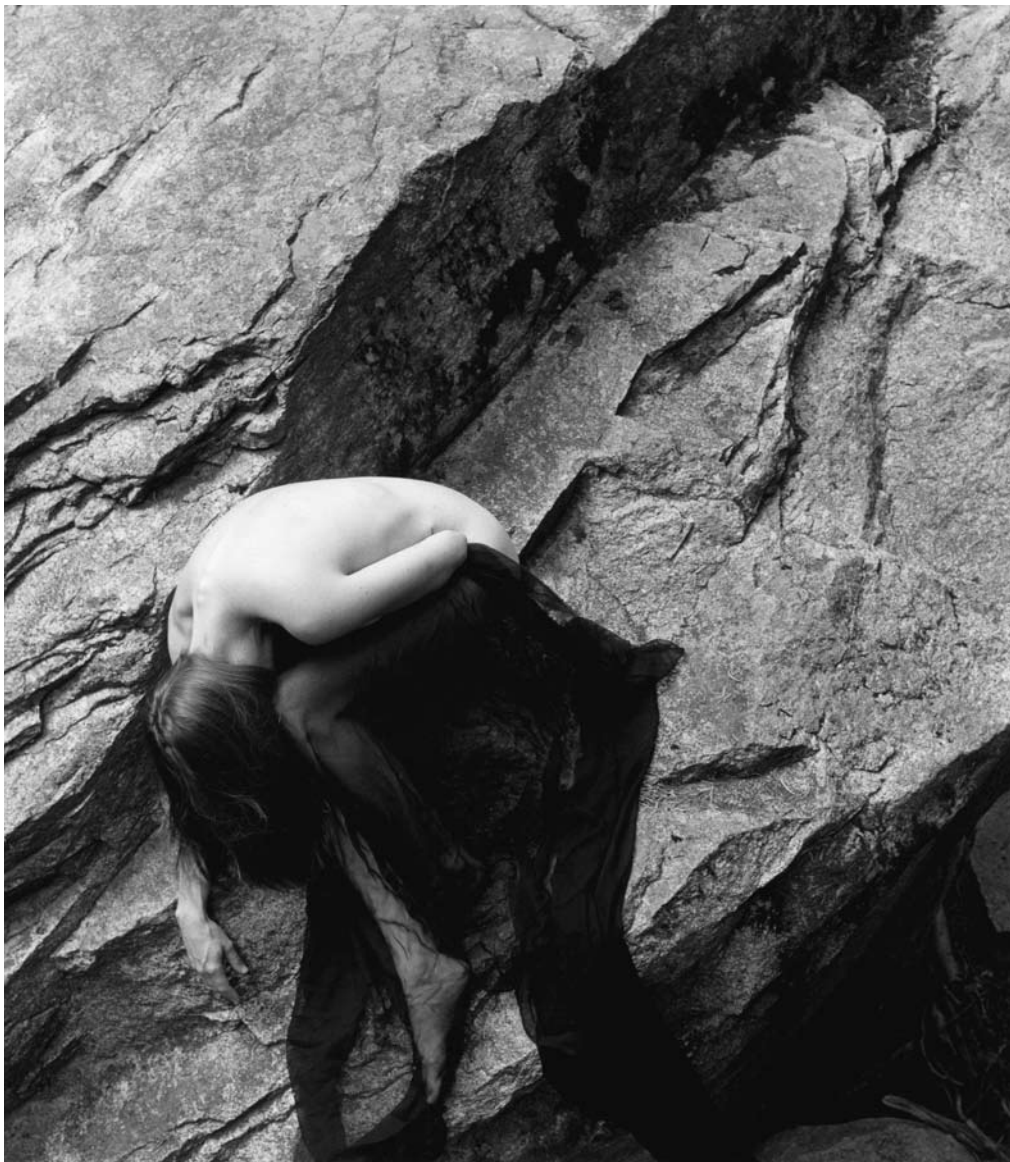
How long have you been practicing

photography?

I've been a full time photographer for about 15 years now. After I graduated from music school I was a music editor for a company named Soundstream, which was the creator of digital recording. I had a wonderful time editing classical recordings of many great musical artists. It was a great job. After that, I decided to go back to the visual art of photography full-time. Most of the commercial work I photograph is architecture because I love it



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so. Fine architecture works with the design of space which creates a spiritual experience by simply being there. I would like to expand into other areas as long as they are expressive with a great sense of design and emotion. There is no reason a commercial image cannot be artistic. I also love to teach workshops both in the darkroom and the creation of photographic images. I've always found teaching to be a very rewarding experience.

Has the Internet changed the way you market your work?

The Internet is a great tool for staying visible, for keeping me out there. Of course, the image quality isn't very good. But it enables me to be global inexpensively. I get more response from photography magazines, though, because they are more targeted. People read them because they love the art form. It's a natural process to gravitate toward that which gives us the most pleasure. It's all about passion.

Would you agree that there is an aura of spirituality permeating your work, such as the haloes that frequently appear in your nudes?

I think this aura of spirituality, as you say, is just the expression of my experience of this unseen world. The visible world in which we live, which we experience through our five senses, is very shadowy and transitory. My hope is to express the greater field of consciousness of which this world is an expression. I am compelled to photograph whoever, whatever or wherever I experience this "light." This is only a reflection of my experience which is very limited, but that is all that I know. I have no idea what others experience, so it's very personal. I have found that it is in great architectural spaces, like cathedrals and cemeteries, that we create places which reflect this awareness of life. These places make up such a small part of our experience I wonder what that says about

human consciousness. We have created some of our most inspiring spaces in places where we spend so little time. Why don't we create inspiring places in which we spend most our time? As for the nude, I've experienced that beauty is a vehicle to truth. The women I photograph possess this quality. I find them all to be women of great depth and passion. Their beauty is an inner beauty. Without this inner beauty it would be difficult to proceed. Several are artists as well, and we love the creative process of collaboration. This adventure of photographing the nude has been the greatest emotional and spiritual journey of my life.

Do you prefer black and white over color?

I did nothing but color for 15 years. Now, I'm doing black and white. It's all part of my growth as an artist. I may go back to color at some point.

Some artists claim to do their best work when unhappy or discontented. Is that true for you?

I do my best work when happy. I'm an upbeat person. I think that comes from doing what I love. That doesn't mean I don't spend time in a state of confusion about my life and work, but I would have to say that it's when I feel most connected to this unseen world that I am the most creative. And a by-product of this place is joy.

What words would you use to describe your work?

Describing my work through words seems rather crude compared to images. Words always qualify an experience that always falls short, with the exception of poetry. I think my work expresses what we are all doing. Finding our place in this life and to experience it on the fullest level possible. We are all searching to discover who we are, which I believe is the main purpose of existence.

In what manner do you make your prints?

I have two printing techniques. All my color work is printed on Ilfochrome using a contrast mask. My other technique is printing selenium toned black and white fiber-base prints. I love the darkroom and it's such an integral part of the process of photography. I love hand crafting my work and will spend many days refining each print.

What camera formats have you used and still work with?

I have two cameras I work with. My 4 x 5 is a



Linhof Technikardan and my medium format is a Rolleiflex 3.5 F twin lens. All my color work is created with the 4 x 5 and the black and white work is about a 50/50 split between the Linhof and the Rollei.

How do you feel about digital photography? Digital is not really a medium I work with. Some commercial clients need digital files, and that makes sense in their world. So I scan my film to fill that need to provide digital files. In my personal and art work, I use exclusively film and hand-crafted prints.

Are there artists in other media who interest you?

I would have to say the artists who move me most in other media are film composers like James Horner, Hans Zimmer, John Morris and others. Cinema is the closest art form to my heart. I love composing music for film and would love to be a cinematographer were the opportunity to arise. Many of my images have a cinematic approach to their creation.

When you approach a photography session,

do you already have a vision of the finished work?

I always feel that I accomplish more when I have an idea of what I want to express and will often conceive, and even design, images before I photograph. It's part of what Adams called "pre-visualization" and it is a tool that works well for me. I always leave room for spontaneity and surprise, though. Sometimes the greatest opportunities come by leaving space for the unexpected. But I have found that knowing what I am trying to achieve adds enormously to whatever I'm trying to do. A by-product of this approach is that I use very little film. Often times a 12-exposure roll of 120 film is more than I need. I'm more process-oriented than goal-oriented. That comes from being in the moment, which is nothing but process.

Any advice for other photographers?

Be true to yourself. Photograph what you love. It is critically important to have passion about what you do. The one thing I observe in the greatest artwork is sincerity and genuineness of experience. The truth is

within, not without. Be true to your feelings and experiences and take risks to explore and express your personal truth.

What prints will you be selling at the Focus Magazine booth this year at Photo San Francisco?

I'll be bringing *The Lake* - 16 x 20, *Dancer* - 16 x 18, *Parasol #1* - 12 x 20, *Parasol #2* - 16 x 20, *Parasol #3* - 12 x 20, *Jodi* - 16 x 16, *Masonic* - 16 x 20. In color, I'll be selling *Gargoyle* - 20 x 24 (seen on the cover of Issue #4 of *Focus*), *Megan* - 16 x 20 and *Crucifixion* - 16 x 16.

Dennis Mecham's prints are included in many private, as well as corporate collections. He has received an Ilford Black & White Spider Award of Excellence for 2004. Dennis Mecham's work can be seen at www.dennismecham.com.

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