

Tales of shores and waters

Text and photos by Vladimir Kabelik



Tricycle

It is amazing how much significance little, fragile moments resonate in one's psyche and future development. When I arrived with my young family in Canada in the early eighties, my mind was set on nothing else but sheer survival. My days were busy job-hunting and my nights were often interrupted by a typical emigrant's dream: I'm back in communist Czechoslovakia, looking for something as insignificant as a toothbrush – but everybody is watching me, and it is only a matter of time before the police knock on my door... In the morning, I sometimes felt like I never wanted to venture outside again.



White fence

People of a similar background probably find nothing new in these lines. They too have had to deal with their own nightmares and unwanted challenges. Luckily, I soon discovered a powerful remedy for such difficult times – walking along the endless shores of Canadian lakes and rivers. The empty piers, the misty air and the pristine sounds of water became my powerful healers. It is only now that I fully understand how these moments of comforting balance, delivered in the form of subtle shades, reflections and shadows, have helped me to become the person I am today.

As is the case for many newcomers, time passed very quickly for me while I looked for new jobs and new friends. Nonetheless, working night shift in the film lab left me enough daylight for my film and photo adventures. In 1984 I introduced my European work in my first Canadian solo exhibit, "Niches" (Ontario Arts Council grant, Limelight Dinner Theatre, Toronto). However, it took a few more years and many more quiet walks along the shorelines before I realized the full potential of the "water"

theme. In "Black & White Blues" (Eight Elm Street Gallery, Toronto) I started developing this subject further. Since then, I have painstakingly collected images and data about the healing spots of my life. Lately, I even decided not to include the water scenes in my recent showings, "Memories" (Cannington House Gallery, Oakville), in order to pay them a photographic tribute in the form of a tightly focused exhibition.

While noble ideas are surely important for our further development, more practical issues usually hijack our time and space. Teaching, filmmaking and commercial photography have fed my family since our early days in Ontario (I can't complain; the bills were always paid on time). Nevertheless, the creative mind is also very good at upsetting the daily routine by staging some unexpected rebellions. The inner voice keeps talking and arguing until one finally gives up and follows the orders. In this very fashion "Tales of Shores and Waters" has slowly become my obsession.

Although I'm not the typical camera-carrying type, I never leave home without it when heading for a trip where some



Lake Michigan



The cross

water might be found. I have to admit, sometimes I even gently influence my business itineraries to get the shots I want.

Shooting water surfaces, reflections, fog and clouds is a moody, almost spiritual experience, aside from the cold, mud and mosquitoes. The biggest problem seems to be a high contrast, the scenery usually being brighter than a low speed film can safely handle. The subsequent hours spent in my darkroom used to be what purgatory means to a religious crowd. And because my darkroom was also my wife's laundry room, some hellish experiences occurred there on more than one occasion. Thus, after years of hesitation, I was finally forced to jump into the world of digital (see "Discovering Piezography," *PhotoEd Magazine*, Winter 2002, or www.luminous-landscape.com/reviews/printers/piezo.shtml).

Despite the digital revolution, I continue shooting film, preferably medium format. Obviously, I also constantly monitor the development of digital cameras. Yet, in spite of their great progress, they are for me still either of insufficient quality or a very prohibitive price.

Once the film is developed, I scan the selected negatives or slides and output them as carbon pigment prints. To achieve the desirable tonal range, shade and archival quality, I often use Hahnemuehle mould-made papers. Adobe Photoshop only replaces the wet darkroom tricks and retouching. One has to be able to overcome the temptation and restrain from digital black magic. Remember, this rule must never be broken!

From time to time, I still hear people arguing about whether digital printing deserves the same level of respect as the traditional silver-based process. Their usual comment is: "Digital prints are nothing more than glorified posters." In my view, this easy-way-out position immediately suggests little knowledge and no hands-on experience with giclée printing specifically and the digital process in general.

As a peace-loving Canadian citizen now, I would be willing to accept their statement with regards to commercial printing, but with respect to true digital photography they are fundamentally wrong. I do not recall a single print that I did not alter several times before delivering it to a client or a gallery. The reason is crystal clear: our mind changes continuously and with every bit of new experience we are more critical and less inclined to

compromise the quality. Also, visual artists established the system of limited editions (20 prints per edition in my case) long before our time. Unless one decides to waste horrendous amounts of money on senseless printing, digital photographs should differ from one another to the same degree as traditional silver based prints. To further my point, one should also note that lately even the more conservative galleries are willing to accept archival giclée prints as equal to other traditional forms of graphic arts (which could be a good topic for an entirely different article).

When people see the "Tales of Shores and Waters" collection, sometimes they ask how I feel about these new images of places I first visited more than twenty years ago. As we all know, describing or evaluating our own work is a very problematic task. Still, in this specific case, I do not hesitate with my answer. The photographs mirror truthfully what I had felt when I was visiting those places as a much younger man. They reflect the absence of what I was longing for, and the presence of what I now carry inside of me – an inner peace, a balance and the sense that our decision was risky but correct without reservation.

Not unlike a good medicine, the simply designed lens, so primitive when compared to the sophistication and quality of the human eye, was nonetheless capable of registering the fleeting moments of time, rarely permitted by our selective mind, and allowing them to be remembered at will. For this and other soothing qualities, photography should be accepted and available through local pharmacies as one of the most potent healing remedies.

Vladimir Kabelik graduated from the Academy of Film and Television Arts in Prague, Czechoslovakia. He has produced documentaries for Czechoslovak film and television, many of them dealing with photographic subjects, and was awarded the Silver Pin distinction by the Guild of Czech Photographers. He has published extensively in Czechoslovakia, Switzerland and Canada, and continues to produce documentary films for CBC and Vision TV. Currently a professor with Sheridan Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning, Vladimir can be reached through www.kabelik.com and vladimir@kabelik.com



On the farm