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The Unknown Interview...

I really enjoyed reading your book. You mention that you were originally on a path to become an athlete, but injuries sidelined you. What sport(s) were you playing? How much of a part of your life are athletics these days?

> I grew up a bit of a tomboy playing soccer and tennis when I was young. Then I hit middle-school (or Jr high) and I grew so fast that I lost any coordination that I had. I didn't make the "C" team in volleyball in 7th grade, but by my freshman year, I made varsity. We played year round – and were very successful. I also played in college, but my parents wanted me to concentrate more on academics (and in hindsight, I see their point!) I remain active trying to exercise regularly, although I find it quite difficult when I'm on the road. I've run a few marathons in the past, typically when I'm having some kind of crisis. I think for neurotic people like me, being active helps wear out the body so the mind can rest. Which is good, otherwise my mind is racing all the time!

1992 was the same time I got involved with Photoshop too. Back then, when it took forever just to apply unsharp mask, did you ever think Photoshop world would get SO big?

> Well, I knew that until the ability to produce photographic prints rivaled those created traditionally, Photoshop would have a hard time in the photographic community. The design community adopted it much earlier because the rest of their workflow was already digital. For photographers, as soon as the quality met (or exceeded) expectations, the speed and convenience that Photoshop offered made it inevitable for their workflow.

> What I find interesting is that some people look to use Photoshop to mimic what they've always done traditionally while others approach it as a tool to expand their vision and take their imaging to a different level. I find it exciting that Photoshop can help people to create what they see in their minds.

> The early days of Photoshop were also the days when you really had to plan a bit more. You had to calculate and measure, and then apply the filter/rotation/resize, etc. while you go eat lunch (or dinner, or have grand kids) and when you came back, see the results of what you applied. If it was wrong, you had to apply it all over again. Photoshop is FAR more "interactive" now.

> There were work-arounds, of course. You could resize the image to a smaller version, apply an adjusted version to it, and once you were satisfied with the results, apply it to the larger version. Now I tend to take more time thinking about what I want to do next. These days, Photoshop is waiting for me.

> The growth of Photoshop happens along a very intentional path. There are many features that could be added to the product, but – even with machines as fast as they are – some of those functions could take a minute (literally) to apply. People are getting used to more and more immediate results. At the end of the day, Photoshop allows people to get things done and features need to adhere to that rule.

> It's important to point out, that in my personal work, I am willing to wait. When my demands on Photoshop are creativity-driven (as opposed to production-driven), I have learned to be patient. Nothing that I do is created in one moment or by one feature. I often hear that a photographer takes or makes an image in 1/250th of a second. Everything that I produce has taken years. Every idea and every image is a culmination of my experiences. Whatever I do, wherever I go and everything that I know (and even what I don't know) is evident in a piece of work, an image, my art. For me the challenge is deciding when a piece is finished. You can add filters, composite layers, apply effects endlessly in Photoshop, but if you aren't out to make a point, to communicate a message, then you may never know when you're done.

You mentioned taking pictures with your parents that were both artists. When did you first start working with the Mac? Or were you a computer person before that?

My parents bought me a computer my first year in college; just about $3000 for a Mac SE30 with a dot-matrix printer. They bought it primarily for me to write papers, but I was fascinated with a program called "Digital Darkroom". I was hooked. It's funny that you should ask if I was a computer person, I don't – to this day – consider myself a computer person. I'm not excessively technical by nature, nor am I driven towards it. But I know that it takes a balance – a combination of both the technical and the creative side of the brain to make images that are both mechanically sound as well as expressive of an idea or concept. It's that balance between the technical and the aesthetic that pushes me to learn the tools so that they become an asset to my ultimate goal. I want to know how a computer works only to get where I want to go.

When you first sat down to work with Photoshop, were you immediately blown away, or did you resist it for a while?

Loved it, hated it, and loved it again. I certainly saw the potential in Photoshop, but hated it when it became an obstacle . These days, there are very few times when I can't successfully achieve (at least technically) what I set out to do. Yes, I have a lot invested it Photoshop as a tool, but I wouldn't trade it for anything. You have to know your tools if you want them to work for you. It would be like being a pastry chef with out knowing the basics of gluten. There is, however, a limit. A pastry chef doesn't need to necessarily know how to fix (or build) an oven, just how to use one.

I am constantly blown away by the Photoshop team. If you think about it, I only know how I use the product – they understand the math behind it!

Now that you are fully entrenched in Photoshop, what do you think when you meet people that still resist the digital world?

Resistance to change is certainly not a new phenomenon. I'm sure the transition from horse-drawn carriages to automobiles was not a smooth one, from turntables to CD's, and from a film-based photographic workflow to a digital one have many similarities. There are, in all cases, trade-offs; what you lose in "organic-ness" from the previous method, you tend to gain in flexibility.

I think of people learning about photography now, and though many of the concepts are the same (shutter speed, f-stop, aesthetics, lighting etc.) many have changed and others have been added. New technology is being introduced at such a rapid pace that it's difficult to stay on top of things. For some (myself included), it's daunting having to redefine what you know about technology every 2-5 years.

For me, it's amazing to think that we used to shoot images – 36 or so at a time – and then waited at least an hour to see the results. Now, the results of the decisions you make are instantly displayed on the back of your camera.

With that said, there are photographers that are perfectly happy (and prefer) working with film. What they're doing works for them and, if it's not broken, there's no reason to fix it.

I really enjoyed what you said about clients and asking for what you are worth. With all the stock photography agencies selling dirt cheap stock, consisting of photos taken by amateurs (and consequently, the price of stock AND assigned photos going down), do you see this trend getting better or worse?

This is probably the change in the industry I struggle with the most. The shear economics of it leads me to believe that there will be less "middle ground" in the market for photos. What's happening now reminds me of what happened to the typeface business. Companies would put 300 fonts on a disc for $19.00. People who wanted diversity, rather than quality, bought these up like crazy. However, ad agencies, graphic designers, etc. always understood the value of the real thing.

All I know is, I'm not going to compromise my vision. I know change is inevitable and constant, especially with digital, so we, as an industry must be able to adapt. And if we look at history, we can see that industries across all disciplines (and the people involved) have had to reinvent themselves. They had to look at the world in new ways, from different angles, through different eyes. The economy of their business had changed, and they needed to as well.

Is this asking too much of photographers? Are they any different? I don't think so. Photographers are artists. We see things in ways NO ONE else does. This is what we bring to the table. Now, more than ever we must realize that our individual vision is what matters the most. Every time I create an image, I make it with my own ideas, my own imagination, and with my own sight. No one else has that. It is mine, and it is worth what I make it. It might even be too early for some to accept it. That fact is why stock photography will never be able to cover the entire market. There will always be clients will always be on the lookout to define a visual identity to their product.

I also really liked your concept of visualization. The masters (Weston, Adams, etc) always used to talk about this when making photographs, but they were only talking about exposure, development and printing. I always try to get this across to people I teach as well, sometimes more successfully than others. How long do you think it took your own work with Photoshop to finally get to this point?

> You assume I've "gotten it"! (laughs) Visualization is probably more challenging now than ever before. Not just because of digital photography, but with all of the ramifications of a digital workflow. For example, working in HDR means that you can sample exposures from several different shots creating what is essentially an "impossible" (or at least impractical) shot with film. The IMAGES could have been taken before, but it's only practical to combine them and control the results digitally. With my digital illustrations, I can reach out and blur the distinction between a single moment and a span of time. In fact, I can go back and forth in time, and not even break continuity. I can make the old look new, and the new look old.

With all of your photographic and Photoshop experience, do you still ever hit a wall with what you want to create? Do you feel like you are still constantly discovering things with Photoshop, or thanks to the Adobe connection, you have it down?

> I don't find myself hitting a wall. Instead, it seems more like I'm too tempted to try every path in the maze. It's not so much the mechanical knowledge of the application, it's a matter of resisting the urge to explore every possible avenue. I need to really focus on the paths to the image I saw in my head in the first place.

> Photoshop, for me, has eliminated barriers to exploration. I can try as many options as time allows, but the ideas really need to be there in the first place or it's just moving pixels around. The only time I get stuck is when I can't seem to look at the application in a new light and rely on the same techniques to get different results. It takes exploration – and once you understand the logic behind it, you can use that information to solve the problem backwards; I want this result, what will give it to me?

If you could give Photoshop one magic button, what would it be?

> My first instinct is to say "Create Great Idea" button, but that's not what technology is for (in my world anyway). Computers shouldn't HAVE ideas, they should IMPLEMENT them. People have joked for years about us adding a general "Make Better" button (Shadow/Highlight comes close to that task).

> I would love to see a program that can take care of the mundane tasks that seem to occupy so much of my time. Chores like copying files, editing / adding metadata, keywords (voice activated perhaps), color correcting and archiving. I'm always looking for ways to expedite repetitive tasks so I can focus on creating the images rather than managing them.

You give a lot of great advice in your book, do you think people listen?

> I have to say, I'm amazed at how many people have READ it. Speaking from my experience, I tend to flip through the visuals of a book first, and read it later! But I have received so many emails that speak to the content of the book that I know people are not only reading what I have to say, but paying attention to it and are applying those concepts to their own lives.

> I've attended numerous seminars and what I find is that, in any given seminar (or book) of 20 ideas, people remember maybe 3. Out of those three, there's often one in particular that strikes them; it speaks to them for some reason, and can have life altering effects. I guess I'm hopeful that people REALLY remember and act on one thing I said rather than generally remembering all of it but acting on nothing.

> I try to listen to as many people and ideas from as many sources as I can. As my friend Skip says, "we have two ears and only one mouth. and that's for a reason".

You mentioned not being a movie watcher? Are you a music lover? If so, what do you really like to listen to? Loud or soft? Do you have an iPod?

Movies, when I make the time to watch them (usually on a plane) can be a great outlet – and input. I just typically enjoy reading more. With a book, I can visualize the characters, places and events without relying on someone else's interpretation.

I have a very active imagination and I love to exercise it. I also have very vivid dreams that I jot down to help me remember them. They are the basis for many of my digital illustrations.

Yes, I do love music. I listen to all kinds, and all speeds and at various volume levels. I have an iPod. But I rarely remember to charge it in time. I'm the same way with my phone. I can't wait until I can just carry around one device – PDA, iPod, phone, etc. and I won't need a zillion cords and batteries.

Do you listen to music when working in Photoshop, or are you someone who requires absolute quiet when creating images?

I think this depends on WHAT I'm doing in Photoshop. If I'm doing a "dust-and-scratches removal fest", I can have music playing. If I'm contemplating the visual interpretation of an emotion for a creative piece, I need the equivalent of an aural "blank slate". Typically music without lyrics is much more enjoyable for me.

Seeing you spend so much time on an airplane, when you finally have time off, would you rather sit tight at home and just spud, get BACK on a plane to go somewhere else, or jump in the car and take a road trip? If so, potential destination?

"Sitting tight" isn't really in my vocabulary. If I'm at home, I'm working on the house – in part because my environment is very important to me in being creative. If I'm not traveling for work, I'm a bit hesitant about getting on a plane because I spend plenty of time in them as it is. I recharge my internal batteries by being alone. I don't draw energy from other people so I have to be careful and set aside time for me to get back in balance – my down time.

Potential destination? If I HAD to get on a plane? I've always wanted to go to Iceland. I've also been to Moscow which was the opposite of everything I've ever imagined it to be. I had a phenomenal time and I'd love to go back. I'd also love to visit St Petersburg. I have found that immersing myself in a different culture is always rewarding.

Back to planes, have you ever been skydiving?

Not even close. I would only parachute out of a plane if there was something seriously wrong with it. Even then, I probably wouldn't have the guts!

What is your favorite color?

Blue. I feel like I should have a longer answer to this… a Pantone color or an RGB color value to specify WHICH blue. No, today it's blue. Tomorrow, I don't know. It might be olive green, or a dusty rose. I suppose that's the longer answer.

Who are your biggest photographic/artistic influences? Some of your shots remind me of early Ernst Haas images, while others remind me of Rothko.

In fact, Rothko is one of my favorite painters. However so are Picasso, Duchamp, and Braque – very different from Rothko, so much more energy and movement in their work.

And, of course, I have a long list of much loved photographers ranging from Maggy Taylor to Robert ParkeHarrison, Keith Carter, Jerry Uelsmann, John Sexton and Michael Kenna. It's about as difficult to choose a favorite photographer as it is a favorite color!

You mention in the intro to the book that you are a painter as well. What kind of images do you create when you have a paintbrush in your hand? Do you tend more towards the abstract or the realistic?

I tend towards the abstract. I have enjoyed encaustic painting, in part because I sometimes love to be a beginner at something again – there is no pressure to be perfect. Plus, I find I don't learn as quickly when I'm trying to be perfect. There have been many studies that suggest

that if you give two groups an assignment – one group to create as many pieces of work and the other to create a single "best" piece of work the first group learns significantly more and produces better work in the same time frame. I don't want to ever stop learning.

Do you still shoot film, or have you gone all digital these days? Why?

Some might think that it's horrible of me to say this but film is almost a burden now (at least for me). I enjoy seeing what I'm shooting while the shoot is still happening. Although I do miss the "hand-on" aspect (more in the printing of images than the capture), I believe that's why I took to painting. Satisfying the tactile needs in other manners allows me to move forward without my nostalgic nature holding me back. I don't mean to offend with my outlook on digital, everyone has different requirements both from what they put into photography and what they get out of it. Digital may not be for everyone, but at this point, it's definitely how I want to pursue my photography. And I do rent medium-format equipment if a project needs it – it all depends on the final result that I have in mind.

If you had a son or daughter that wanted to be a photographer, would you pay to send them to photography school, or would you just tell them to be a realtor instead?

The irony in that question is how heavily realtors rely on photographers. I would certainly encourage them to explore what they felt was their calling. I can't say that I precisely followed my educational background (psychology) though I do rely on it for my artwork and perhaps in dealing with other people. I think going to school should prepare you for life, not necessarily for a job.

Do your parents think what you've done with Photoshop to be pretty cool stuff?

I have to say, I think my parents are pretty proud of me and the book was, in part, a gesture to them. It was a formal monument, a thank you for supporting me as a photographer. It's also a clear demonstration that the "new" world of digital photography can be just as valid and beautiful as photography has ever been. Usually parents brag about their children, but I think my dad is becoming quite the Photoshop evangelist himself!

Now that the book is done, do you still take pictures from airplane windows occasionally, or is that phase of your work completed?

That phase of the BOOK is completed, but that window remains an undeniable source of inspiration I can't ignore. It's so easy to take that imagery for granted because you're in this cocoon, but the reality is that 6 inches from your face is a world in which you would freeze to death within moments. We're travelers here, visitors, just passing through. Out of the total number of people who have ever lived, a tiny fraction have ever looked out of an airplane window. I can't pretend this isn't a sobering thought.

Are prints of the images in the book available? If so, where?

Yes, they can contact me via www.jkost.com <http://www.jkost.com/>

Do you print all of your own images, or do you have someone do it for you?

Depends. If I have time, I print them myself, but I have also had excellent luck with H&H Color labs. They're quick and the color is dead on.

Anything new on the horizon that you would like to share with us?

I can't wait to see what Adobe Lightroom has in store. It takes a step back from image editing and focuses more on managing images, getting the most out of RAW files, but will still allow me to jump to Photoshop to explore just as I've always done. As I mentioned before, I'm looking for a tool that will help speed up the monotonous, time consuming and repetitive tasks in my digital workflow and allow me to focus on the creative side of image making – whether that's behind the lens or in Photoshop.