

Mark Berndt by Lynne Eodice
Conveying a Message in a Single Frame



Mark Berndt recalls, "One of the most significant things about my childhood was the small collection of cameras that my dad kept in a hard-to-open compartment in the china cabinet in our dining room in Kansas City, where I grew up." As they got older, Berndt and his brother were allowed to take pictures with these cameras. "I was at first thrilled, and later frustrated, by those deckle-edged prints we got back from the drugstore," he says. The two boys built a black-and-white darkroom in the family's basement and began developing and printing film, and eventually processed their own Ektachrome as well. Berndt acknowledges that the "hobby phase" lasted only a short time before the boys began doing some commercial work to support their photography expenses: "We started out copying photographs and making posters for friends and family."

Today, both Berndt and his brother are professional photographers. Berndt shoots environmental portraits of "people whose everyday work makes a contribution to society." He is building a client base of nonprofit organizations, including Saint John's Health Center Foundation and UCLA, that all enjoy his wonderful slice-of-life photographic style.

Finding His Own Niche

His father's death in 1975 taught Berndt the value of portraiture and led him to concentrate on photographing people. Although photography remained a creative outlet for Berndt throughout the years, he began a career in the film industry in the mid-1970s, working first as an editor and then as a director of television commercials.

"My 'niche' was dialogue and storytelling," Berndt says, "and I constantly assembled casts of actors to play 'real people.'" During his free time, he enjoyed doing portraiture and street photography. "My personal photography gave me a way to be creative without having a client over my shoulder," Berndt comments. He says his portraiture also gave him insights on directing actors, adding, "The discipline of communicating nuance in 30-second 'movies' helped me sharpen my ability to distill the essence of a situation into a single frame."



A cinematographer friend introduced him to the Leica in 1985, and Berndt says that this quiet rangefinder camera altered his way of shooting. "Each camera has its own character that affects the way you see and make images."

Berndt created a portfolio of street photographs taken in New York over the course of several years of "carrying my

Leicas with me constantly." This work led to a documentary project, where he was commissioned by the Montebello Police Department in California. "That brought everything together for me," he explains. "Three weeks of riding with the police, mostly at night, allowed me to create a body of work with a purpose, depth and honesty. I was, for the first time, able to work in 'my style' for a client, rather than filling in an art director's layout."

Two years ago, Berndt stopped directing TV commercials and returned to photography full-time. By his admission, "I've been busy reinventing myself, or maybe just reconnecting with my passion for photography."



His clientele today consists of non-profit organizations—or the "corporate-direct" market—in education, science, medicine and the arts. "I set a goal to make my living as a photographer, creating images that celebrate regular people who help make the world work—shopkeepers, city workers, doctors, nurses, teachers, scientists, community leaders, artists and musicians."



Berndt recently finished projects for four medical centers in Southern California and the Midwest. "The work ranges from documentary images and environmental portraits to still-life images of the latest surgical instruments and orthopedic implants," he says of these assignments. "I've also just completed a food shoot for a calendar project." Recent editorial assignments include a magazine cover photo of the mayor of Los Angeles, an environmental portrait of a film director (this is Los Angeles, after all) and musicians for several CD projects. Also, he is the contributing photographer for Saint John's quarterly magazine. "I never know exactly what I'll be shooting next," he says, "but I'm always moving towards my goal."



Sharing Knowledge

Berndt is entirely self-taught in photography. His personal education includes working in a camera store during his teenage years, learning about cameras, lighting and darkroom equipment. He also found inspiration in books and magazines, and by shooting a lot—"learning what worked and what didn't." In his 20s he worked as an assistant for two successful advertising photographers in Kansas City, where he learned a lot about lighting and large-format cameras, as well as the business of photography. "I developed a business model that I pretty much follow today," Berndt



points out.

After getting into digital imaging in 1993, he taught himself Photoshop and made his first Iris print in '94. "When I got a computer, I sold my darkroom," he says. Berndt also began teaching a workshop to help photographers who wanted to make the transition from shooting film to digital imaging. Dennis Keeley, a successful photographer and the chairman of the Photo and Imaging Department at Art Center School of Design in Pasadena, California, asked Berndt to develop a course at Art Center based on this workshop. "It concentrates on digital workflow while reinforcing digital's place as a tool for creating images, not as a new medium unto itself," Berndt explains. "We focus on understanding the tools, meticulous digital capture, efficient workflow, and the power of the digital darkroom to complete the artist's vision."

Inspiration

Berndt says that his early influences were an eclectic mix of photographers whose work appeared in prominent magazines such as Life, Look and various photography magazines, as well as the Time/Life Photography series and Masters of Photography series of books. "I'll forget many," he says, "but Paul Strand, Duane Michaels, Elliott Erwitt, Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Paul Fusco, Peter Lindberg, Arthur Elgort, and Annie Liebovitz come immediately to mind."

He emphasizes that two photographers have especially influenced his style—Jill Freedman and Jay Maisel. He admired Freedman's portraiture and black-and-white work after seeing two of her images of Kurt Vonnegut in a photo annual during the early 1970s. "As I remember, the caption said she shot with a 35mm lens on her Leica and a 105mm on her Nikon. Her photographs were startlingly honest and uncomplicated, relied on no gimmicks, and had that sensual richness that came from treating the 35mm format and Tri-X film with the utmost respect."



On the other hand, Berndt credits Maisel for influencing his color work and sense of composition. "His graphic use of color, and his ability to distill the world in front of his camera to its essence heavily influences my work," states Berndt.

Berndt's Tools

"I shoot 99.9% of my work digitally now," he says. He currently works with Canon 1Ds and 5D camera bodies and a variety of fast lenses ranging from 14mm to 200mm. "Much of my work is done with available light, so fast prime lenses are a must, especially since I prefer to work at ISO 100." He uses battery-powered Profoto strobes for lighting on location. "Most of the time, I'm lighting to balance or supplement available light and end up shooting at f/2.8 or f/4."



Berndt does his own post-production work on four Macintosh computers, including a G4 laptop. "On location, whenever there's power available, I download or tether to an iMac G5 with a 20-inch screen. My primary workstation is a dual 2.5GHz G5 tower with two Apple monitors, 4.5 GB of RAM and a terabyte of disk array storage." He makes prints on his Epson 9600 and 4000 printers.

Where He's Going

Berndt says he's continually learning and growing: "I work every day to become a better photographer— to create intentional and artistic images." He is also developing two documentary projects, continuing to make time for his personal work, and building a business that allows him to earn a living doing what he loves. "I want to attract more quality clients like the people I work with now who believe in what they do, choose to collaborate rather than dictate, and find value in my perspective and in my images." Visit www.markberndt.com.



For eight years, Lynne Eodice was feature editor for Petersen's PHOTOgraphic. In addition to having articles and photos published in this magazine, her images have appeared in an instructional guide called The Complete Idiot's Guide to Photography, and she's contributed stories to Canon Insight and Family Photo magazines, and www.takegreatpictures.com, a photo community website.