





*Vision*

*and*

*Craft*

*Photographs and text*

*by*

*Ken Lee*

Hartwell Tavern  
Minute Man National Park, Lincoln MA  
4x5 Arca-Swiss Discovery  
240mm Fujinon A + Yellow Filter  
TMax 100, Pyrocat HD

Large Format images render Beauty with a fidelity that delights the senses and awakens the soul. Today's tools are so powerful that all we have to do is find a worthy subject and include just enough of it to be whole and complete. Of course, that's more easily said than done! Because the world is cluttered, the job of the photographer is to filter out the dross, leaving only the essential. This is more true in the field than in the studio, where we can control the arrangement and lighting. Studio photographers and setup artists actually create their subjects, while landscape photographers have to go out and find them.

### Lessons Learned Early

My first valuable lesson in photography came when I was a young boy, in the form of a magazine insert, promoting the Time-Life book series on Photography. They showed you a group of people standing around in a city neighborhood, and challenged you to identify as many photos \*within\* the image as you could. Unknown to my parents, I filled it out and mailed it in. A few weeks later, a man phoned our home to sign me up for the series. He said I had talent. His offer was politely declined, but the lesson stuck: There can be many photographs within a photograph: Find the one in which there is only one.

Another valuable lesson came when I was a teenager: Leave the view camera in the case, but take the tripod along. Explore the scene from every location, and when you find the ideal angle, place the tripod, and then, only then, go back for the camera.

Peonies, Massachusetts  
4x5 Arca-Swiss Discovery  
240mm Fujinon A  
TMax 400, Pyrocat HD





These lessons were non-technical in nature. They were about giving prime attention to inspiration, not to equipment. Find the image first, then grab the tools you need to capture it. I have fond memories of climbing over rocks and riverbeds with my teenage photographic friends, holding our fingers and thumbs out together to make a frame, no cameras in sight. It must have looked funny to passers-by. We were learning how to see.

### “Just Say No”

Over the decades, the first lesson has proved the hardest: Which of the one-thousand possible images is best? Which conveys the clearest feeling? It has been often said that the hardest part of photography is “knowing where to point the camera.” Perhaps you don’t really have to know. When the time comes, you just know. And when compelling situations come along... the pictures we make, with little preparation, are most often the “keepers.” The others are merely filler, practice, studies.

When we respond to inspiration, a good photo comes from it. The heart races, we don’t think, we just react. We become one with the process. On the other hand, there are many times when the subject matter looks suitable, but not really exciting. We find ourselves thinking “Geez, there must to be a photo in here *somewhere*.” Not wanting to come home empty-handed, we feel obliged to make a few shots anyhow. “Maybe it will turn out nice”, we think. So we contrive a composition...and those are almost always the “duds!”

So, over the years, I have learned to appre-

Snoozin, Massachussetts  
Tachihara 4x5 Field Camera  
240mm Fujinon A  
TMax 100, D-76





ciate those days when I come home empty-handed. I have learned to “just say no.” I take fewer photos, but better photos. This is just the opposite of the approach we tend to follow when using other kinds of cameras.

### Large Format Clarity and Beginner’s Mind

In Japanese, the term *sho-shin* means “Beginner Mind.” It’s an attitude encouraged in the study of Zen and the arts. We don’t attain it by holding on to some particular idea or approach. Instead, we get it as we learn to clear the mind of all preconceived notions. When the mind is clear, we can see things as they are. We can sense nuances. These nuances are the real subject in our photographs. Since Large Format is all about presenting these nuances, Beginner’s Mind is always rewarding.

### What I Use These Days

I have recently returned to making Silver Gelatin prints, enlarged from 4x5. Since 11x14 is the largest I go, there’s no need for the greater fire-power of bigger film. Contact printing confines me; I missed the freedom to print each image at whatever size and aspect ratio is best. Whatever long lenses and big negatives giveth in terms of image quality, they taketh away as shallow depth of field and slow shutter speeds. For me, 4x5 represents the sweet-spot: the convergence of quality, portability, and affordability.

I had a nice 90mm for a while, but never used it. My shortest lens is 150mm Sironar-S. Since less is more, the lens I most often pull out of the bag is a 240mm Fujinon A, well-known as a superb performer for subjects dis-



Minute Man National Park, Lincoln MA  
Tachihara 4x5 Field Camera  
150 APO Sironar S + Yellow Filter  
Light rain, exposure was several seconds.  
TMax 100, D-76



tant and near. I also use a 300 Fujinon A and a 450 Fujinon C, favorites for their small size, excellent resolution, and wide coverage.

These days, I shoot Kodak and Ilford film, tray-developed in Pyrocat HD. I am addicted to my inexpensive infrared monocular for loading film development by inspection. It's a shame that we can't get a deeper range of tones with Platinum/Palladium: I just spent a year trying every kind of varnish and wax towards that end - to no avail. For the occasional image, it's the right way to go.

For scanning, I use a Microtek 2500f, which, unlike many other flatbeds, actually delivers the promised resolution. If UltraChrome ink-jet prints lasted as long as Platinum or Silver prints, perhaps I'd make more of them on my Epson 2200, and give them a warm tone look with the "Bronze Quadtone Curves" that I created for Photoshop, in an effort to capture the look of toned Silver Gelatin prints. (You can freely download them at <http://www.kenleegallery.com/bronze.htm>) Until that day arrives, I'm planning to stick with good-old enlarged Silver Gelatin prints.

Barn, Massachusetts  
4x5 Arca-Swiss Discovery  
300mm Fujinon A + Yellow Filter  
TMax 400, Pyrocat HD



