



Bio – George Barr

**Topic – Why Photographs Work
May 14, 2021**

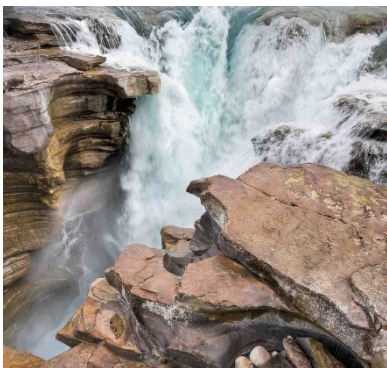
I was 12 and my Dad gave me an ancient Zeiss Ikonta folding camera to use, and come Christmas, a darkroom kit with which to develop black and white film and make 2.25 inch contact prints. From the library I discovered Ansel Adams, and wanted to be him. I read all his books.

I attended a course on the art of photography at the local museum and thought it boring (and the photos they showed too), but over the next six months kept seeing things they'd pointed out and my photography improved.

I joined the photo directorate in high school and started shooting football even though I thought the game dull, and dances, even though I was too shy to ask anyone to dance, and in time did the same at university, eventually photographing prime ministers and the Dalai Lama as well as beauty queens and rugby.

I didn't do well in physics, spending far more time photographing and hanging around the darkroom than attending classes, and scraped through a degree but with a pretty clear message that physics, math and even computer science were not likely to be good choices. For nothing better to do and to please my parents I decided to apply to medical school. It took two years of premed courses (I didn't even have high school chemistry or biology) and a huge improvement in marks but I was successful.

Somewhere between medical school and residency I picked up a thin paperback book called the Zone VI Workshop. The author claimed he could improve my print quality like nothing before - and damn it, he was right - Fred Picker might have been a prickly bastard, but he knew how to print, to teach and to create methods that were repeatable and predictable and resulted in luminous prints.



A few years into my medical practice and I was buying a substantial collection of books of photographs Edward Weston, and his son Brett, Paul Strand, Walker Evans and many more. I learned to appreciate the Stieglitz images I'd disparaged years before.

I'd succumbed to the allure of 35 mm. but in finally knowing what a good print looked like, appreciated the qualities of medium format negatives. I made extensive use of a Yeshica Mat 124 twin lens reflex for my landscape photography and my images continued to improve.

In the late 90's I went to a workshop with Craig Richards and saw that my prints looked better than most, and some of the others were having shows. I got up the nerve to arrange the renting of a wall at something called Photo Space, and at each event sold a couple of prints.

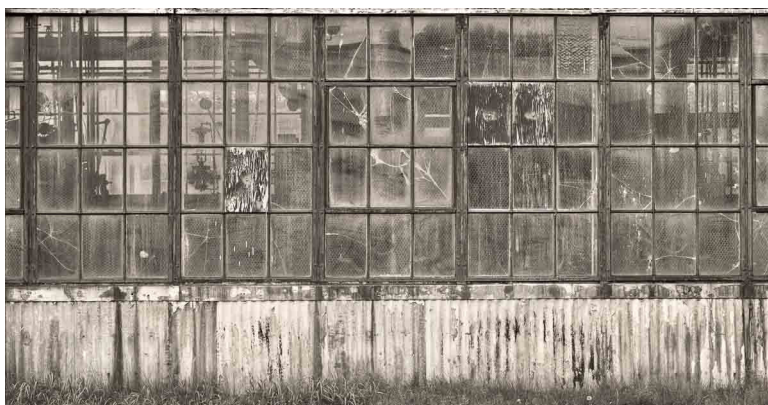
IN the early 2000's, digital wasn't an option, quality no where near good enough or affordable enough, but Epson had been selling photo quality inkjet printers for a few years. Black and white prints didn't look great but I read about dedicated black and white inks for a used Epson printer and I started scanning.

By this point I was shooting 4X5 and after lots of experimenting, had settled on an ancient Linhof Colour Kardan - a very solid monorail view camera with tilting back and a Technica front for lens swings and tilts and shifts. I even mounted a 420 mm. Artar lens on an apple sauce can epoxied to a lensboard for some long lens scenes. Scanning 4X5 wasn't difficult and I started making some very nice inkjet prints. Galleries sneered at me but I continued to sell a modest number of prints.



One day I discovered a website which had some wonderful photographs around Washington DC, shot with the then currently best point and shoot digital camera costing less than \$1000. To get the quality to make goodly sized prints, the author was stitching, both rows and columns, but successfully. Not long after I bought a Sony 707 - a huge lens attached to a rotating small back 5 MP camera, with an EVF which was adequate for the time. I had some success in doing my own rows and columns stitches until the first affordable digital SLR came along, the 6-megapixel Canon 10D.

I fell in love with digital, learned the intricacies of Photoshop and made prints that looked better than my traditional silver prints. My enlarger got less and less exercise. I continued to stitch though usually in a single row and was able to make prints up to 5 feet long that looked really good from 2 feet away.



One day, my tennis partner mentioned he'd been to visit the newly opened Calgary Farmers Market and suggested I might want to check it out as a way to sell my photographs. It seemed entirely impractical but what the hey, I went to talk to the manager. Turned out, one of the

Hutterite Colonies was renting space and selling their onions et al, but didn't believe in working on Sunday so the booth was empty - did I want to rent it for a modest fee for one day a week for the summer?

I did and I went and I worked and I sold - after two years I was selling thousands of dollars of prints a weekend, but I'd had to hire staff, work till 4 am getting prints ready, dropping prints off on the way to my family practice on Fridays, and was tired and cranky - as my wife pointed out one day - and without blinking, I had to agree. In the end I think I grossed about \$40,000 but expenses were in the order of \$39,000 - a viable future had I the time and or energy to keep it up, but with some sadness, I shut it down.

I'd started a blog on photography and was getting better at writing, and ventured to submit articles to some of the more popular photo websites like Luminous Landscape. One day I got an email from some publisher, wanting to convert the series of articles I had written into a book. I reasonably assumed this was going to be vanity publishing, but he clarified, no, they would pay me reasonable royalties. I spent the better part of a year writing "Taking Your Photography To The Next Level" based on the articles I'd written. It was eventually translated into 7 languages and financially was a modest success for me. I figured I was in their 'good' books at the publisher and so proposed my own idea for a second book. They accepted, and it was a very modest success.

I pushed my luck and proposed a third book, to consist of others photography, with me writing on why the images worked, and with a short essay by the photographer on the story behind the image. To my surprise, a number of famous photographers agreed to have their images included at no cost, and even to write for me. Not everyone agreed. I never did get past the snobbish assistants of Edward Burtynsky, but others agreed including John Sexton and Bruce Barnbaum. A few insisted that the image I'd chosen wasn't typical of their work and asked me to choose another but I had almost unlimited freedom to choose and write and thus was born my last book "Why Photographs Work". I knew a few of the photographers, found some amateurs whose work held merit, and reached out to even more professionals.

By the time I'd collected all the photographers and their images, I had a book which broadened my own tastes in photography and made what I thought a very worth while book. It paid for my daughters Masters In Physiotherapy.



I learned that not everyone likes what I say or the photographs I take, and those on the internet are not hesitant to be very blunt in saying so, but when I get an email from an Iranian photographer who has picked up my first book in a Malaysian airport bookstore and wanted to write to me how much they appreciated it, I could (mostly) learn to brush off cruel Amazon critics.

I've given a number of presentations over the years, done a few workshops, and at 71 and arthritic, don't take as many photographs as I used to, or should, but I still love the photographic image, still buy books of photographs and explore the web, and still make the occasional image.