

Dennis Meacham—



Spiritual
Expressions
through
Narrative
Photos



By Bryan S. Smith



Two great passions of photographer Dennis Meacham are the human form and architecture. His architecture series helped him develop an appreciation of good design that has carried over into his figurative work. “I have had comments from people that they see elements of architecture in my figurative work,” he says. “I’m mostly motivated by a passion and I think how both the human form as well as architecture can really be representative of the transcendent. I see them as very much spiritual expressions.”

As an artist, Meacham is compelled by something he believes we all feel within us that is connected to something greater than ourselves. It can be being out in nature and why people love the forest. “I think it is just feeling that connection,” he shares. “I am trying to express that feeling I get from a wide variety of things that I am connected to through my heart and attempt to express that through the photograph. There is a universal narrative about the cosmos in it and everything we create, even ourselves; they are all a manifestation of that on some level. It is very mysterious and I don’t claim to understand it or know what it is but we are all aware that there is something that connects us all.”

Meacham describes his work as having a painterly style, which comes from the fact that he was more influenced by painters as a child growing up than by photographers. He sees himself as more of a painter with a camera. He says, “With many of my images the concept is fixed in my mind as to what I want to achieve; the composition is there. I always leave room for spontaneity and surprises. I’m not very good at taking snapshots. Though I can take advantage of spontaneity, there has to be some main idea of what I am trying to achieve before I work on it or I burn up a lot of film and never achieve anything.”

He approaches setting up architectural and figurative photographs differently. Architectural pieces are obviously fixed subjects and Meacham explores whatever structure he wants to photograph and tries to find the point that triggers a connection to the inner self. It might be a certain angle or a certain point of view. “I select each composition on how I am struck emotionally by a certain location,” he states. “There is some kind of rhythm in form. I remember Joseph Campbell talked about this in the ‘Power of Myth’. In the last episode about art, there is a rhythm to form and shapes that will trigger something within our mind. He called





it ‘the light of the transcendent will shine through it and everyone exclaims awe. We don’t understand what it is but we know it is there.’ So that is probably how I approach photographing of more of a static subject. With the figure, if I have designed it like a studio shot that is more heavily designed, then I will take that factor into consideration as well. And on location, I’ll find locations that give me that feeling just by being there and then put together a concept of a narrative. I try to avoid the photographs looking too posed, but rather to trigger some sort of narrative element. And that is oftentimes a huge challenge. As I become more narrative as I mature as an artist, I find that creates a lot more challenges and a lot of failures.

“I am always pushing against my own walls. I tend to be a very grounded person and it’s very easy for me to slip into routines, so I constantly am sort of reminding myself to stretch myself, try and do it differently, and oftentimes I find what is interesting when I do succeed at pushing out of my own boundary; my initial reaction may be that I don’t know if it works. I have learned that to me that is a good sign. Because it means I have explored new territory and I am uncertain about it. That uncertainty, I think, is important.”

Mecham attempts to create more of an emotional impact through his images, moving from more of a pure spiritual influence into a more human experience. His work is very spiritually rooted, but continues to become more human in a way. He says, “It’s interesting because I realize that we are all spiritual beings and we are just here to have human experiences. So perhaps I am pushing to know more on a deeper level what it is to be human. And that is a very deep thing. And I have a long way to go.”

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His parasol series has been kept intentionally anonymous versus intimate. Much of his earlier studio work was more intimate in that the model's face was visible. The parasol series is one that is tapped into more of the universal rather than the personal. The viewer relates to it in a different way. People who view his work have a very different reaction based on whether or not they see the model's face, which Mecham finds very interesting. He says, "When a model's face becomes visible, it becomes something much more intimate because they are forced to see this as a person rather than just a form. That was the approach I took initially in much of my work. In a way, I think I have gone into this anonymous period for a while and I think I want to go back now to showing more faces – maybe with less or no props at all. It's always evolving and oftentimes I don't know where it's going. That's the interesting thing about life. Mystery and wonder are absolutely vital to life."

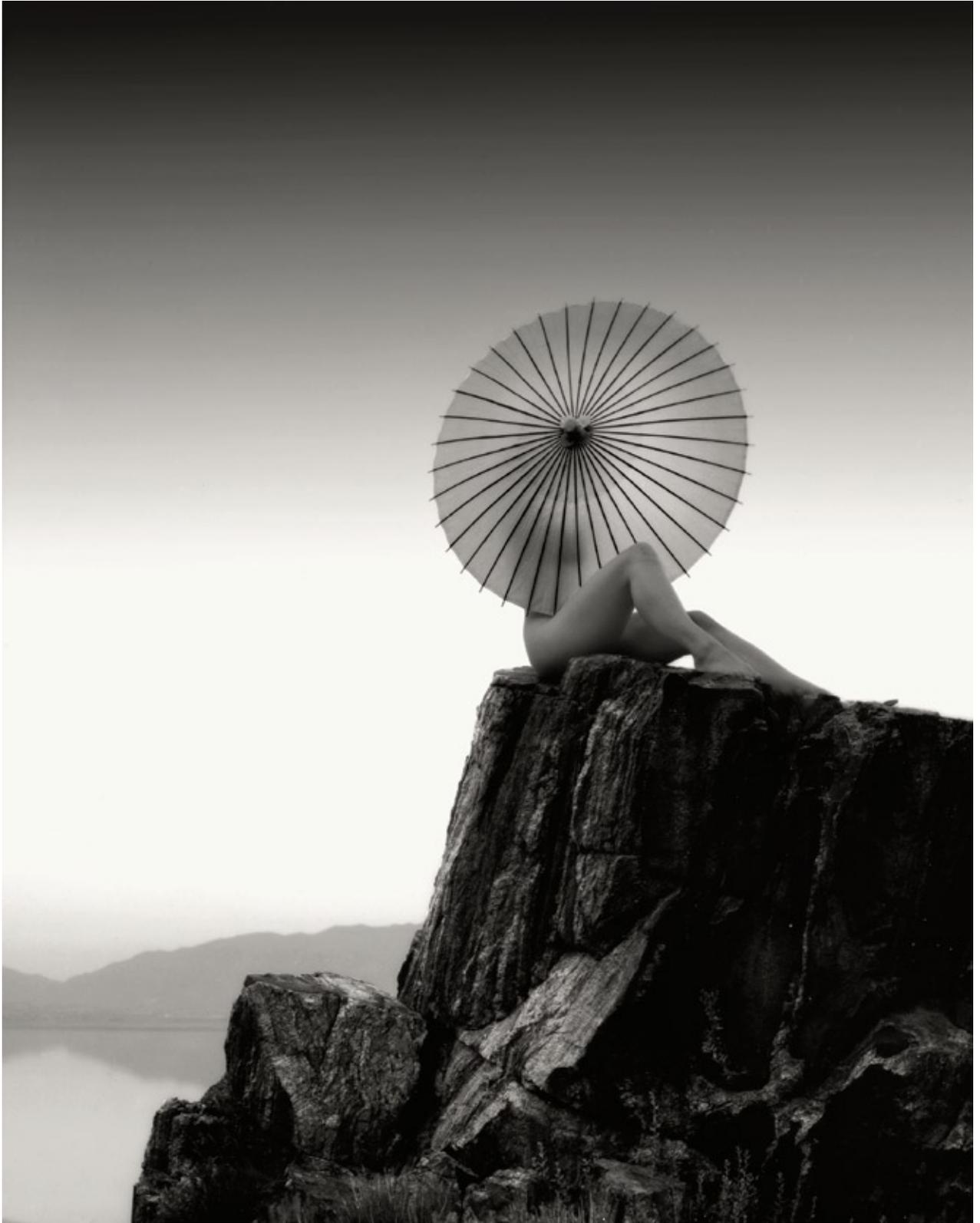
His models are people that inspire him. The women he has photographed have all been inspiring on some level. "They had to trigger that in me," he says. "It goes way beyond their physical beauty. If they don't possess that essence within them I'm not sure really what to do because that is the thing that will guide me."

Generally, Mecham knows when he presses the camera shutter he has the shot he has envisioned in his head. All the necessary elements come together, which can be very subtle like a certain movement, a specific position of the form, and the rhythm of the environment. He describes it as a moment of magic. "My parasol series reflects this," he says. "Most of the time, I know when that moment occurs. Although sometimes it eludes me and I feel as though I didn't get anything that day but when I develop the negatives it's there."

The artist started out in 35mm and received some very good advice from a fine art photography dealer in Santa Fe who had viewed his work. Some of the best advice he gave Mecham was that he needed to switch to a large-format camera because that is how we see and that he was using the wrong tool. "That was a very astute observation and it turned out to be good advice," Mecham believes. "Most of my work is shot in 4x5-inch format and it's also the ideal camera for architecture. I love the large camera because in terms of its operation, things go very slowly. It's a very methodical, almost meditative, approach to creating

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images. I still really love film. I don't do anything in digital capture at all. I love making my own prints in the dark room, whether they are color or black and white. I love the whole process of me making the print with my hands. I think it is very important for me to stay connected to it. For me, it's just a more expressive way to work."

Mecham sees himself eventually moving beyond the figure and doing more portraits. He recently photographed a small series of a completely restored B-17 bomber. It is very different from anything he has ever done. He says, "What was interesting is that the plane had never gone into war at all, so it was completely pristine, like a brand-new airplane. It was really quite a work of art. I am still considering how I want to use these images and how they fit in with the work I have already done."

He has studied music and music composition and worked at writing music scores for small films for many years. His passion is to explore cinematography and the motion-picture side of things. He received an Award of Excellence in Architectural Photography and was nominated for Photographer of the Year from Ilford International in 2004.

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