



Robert Rathe

BALANCING ART & COMMERCE

BY PAUL SLAUGHTER

Whether Robert Rathe is photographing people, landscapes, a personal project or corporate work, his distinctive creative style always enhances your visual perception. Robert, like many photographers, got hooked on photography at a young age. For the New Jersey native it was at the age of 16 when he first saw the darkroom that a cousin had built in his home.

Years later, in 1971, while enrolled at George Washington University in Wash-

ington, D.C., as a political science major, he realized that photography was his true passion and decided to pursue a B.A. in fine art instead. "While at George Washington University (GW) my work was mostly abstracts and portraiture," Robert says. "We were Zone System zombies; naturally, my early influences included Minor White, Paul Caponigro and, of course, Ansel Adams, who came to speak at GW and was selling his 8x10 prints for \$300, unfortunately, money I didn't have at the

time. Other photographers whose work inspired me were Henri Cartier-Bresson, Edward Weston, Arnold Newman, Yousuf Karsh, Mary Ellen Mark, Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Diane Arbus, Bruce Davidson, W. Eugene Smith, Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange."

Upon graduation Robert had his degree and his passion, but didn't have a plan for making a living. "It was the early 70s," he quips. Robert soon realized that if he wanted to make a living as an assignment



photographer rather than as a fine artist, he would need to produce images that told stories, sold products or explained a corporation to its shareholders. While there are a few things such as fashion, food and weddings that he's never shot commercially, Washington, D.C., like some other "second tier" markets outside of New York, Chicago or Los Angeles, allows for a certain amount of diversity in terms of photographic specialties.

Robert says, "With corporate work, the distinctions between specialties are somewhat artificial. For example, a large annual report may include executive portraits, lifestyle shots, products in the studio, architecture, aerials and industrial or technology. Vision, style, lighting skills and problem solving ability often transcend subject matter and specialty. For me, the joy is in the



'catch,' in making a photograph that works, aesthetically, technically and emotionally. When shooting for a client, I'm paid to solve a communications problem. When I'm shooting for myself, I have a more demanding client and the currency of artistic satisfaction is the only payment allowed."

Robert's first major gig was doing theatrical photography at Wolf Trap Park for the Performing Arts. One day at Wolf Trap, waiting for his wife to get off work, he started shooting some random shots during a dress rehearsal. A public relations person came over to tell him that photographs were not permitted. In the course of the conversation, he was offered a job shooting the next evening at a Presidential gala. President Ford and Vice President Nelson

Rockefeller were there, and seemingly, half of official Washington. Robert says, "It was pretty heady stuff for a recent graduate and was the beginning of a two-season stint as the 'official' Wolf Trap photographer."

Robert continues, "There was a level of insanity to the deadlines, but it provided a great learning experience. I'd shoot a dress rehearsal, drive back to my apartment to soup the black-and-white film, letting it dry while I caught a few hours of sleep. In the morning, I'd set up my 'darkroom' in the bathroom, with the enlarger next to the toilet and the trays spread out in the bathtub. After hours on my knees processing prints, I'd wash the prints in the kitchen, spreading them out to dry on every flat surface in the apartment. RC paper was fairly new at the time, but it was a lifesaver. After blotting and blow

drying the last remaining water drops and doing quick work with a spotting brush and some Spotone, I'd take the roughly 100 prints, bolt for the car and drive like a maniac out to Wolf Trap in time to put together press packets for opening night. I didn't miss any deadlines, and haven't in the 30 years since."

The Wet vs. Digital Darkroom

For most current projects, Robert shoots with a Nikon D300. He says, "Digital has huge advantages over film both creatively and from a workflow standpoint, although I find it much slower to edit on the computer than it was to sort film on a lightbox. Clients expect digital files. Once you start working

digitally, you incorporate the creative flexibility of the medium into that workflow, which makes going back to film difficult. You have the option of sharing the images with the client as you're shooting, which can improve communications and collaboration. It's faster in terms of not having to overshoot, bracket, etc., to cover potential technical glitches, lab problems or film loss.

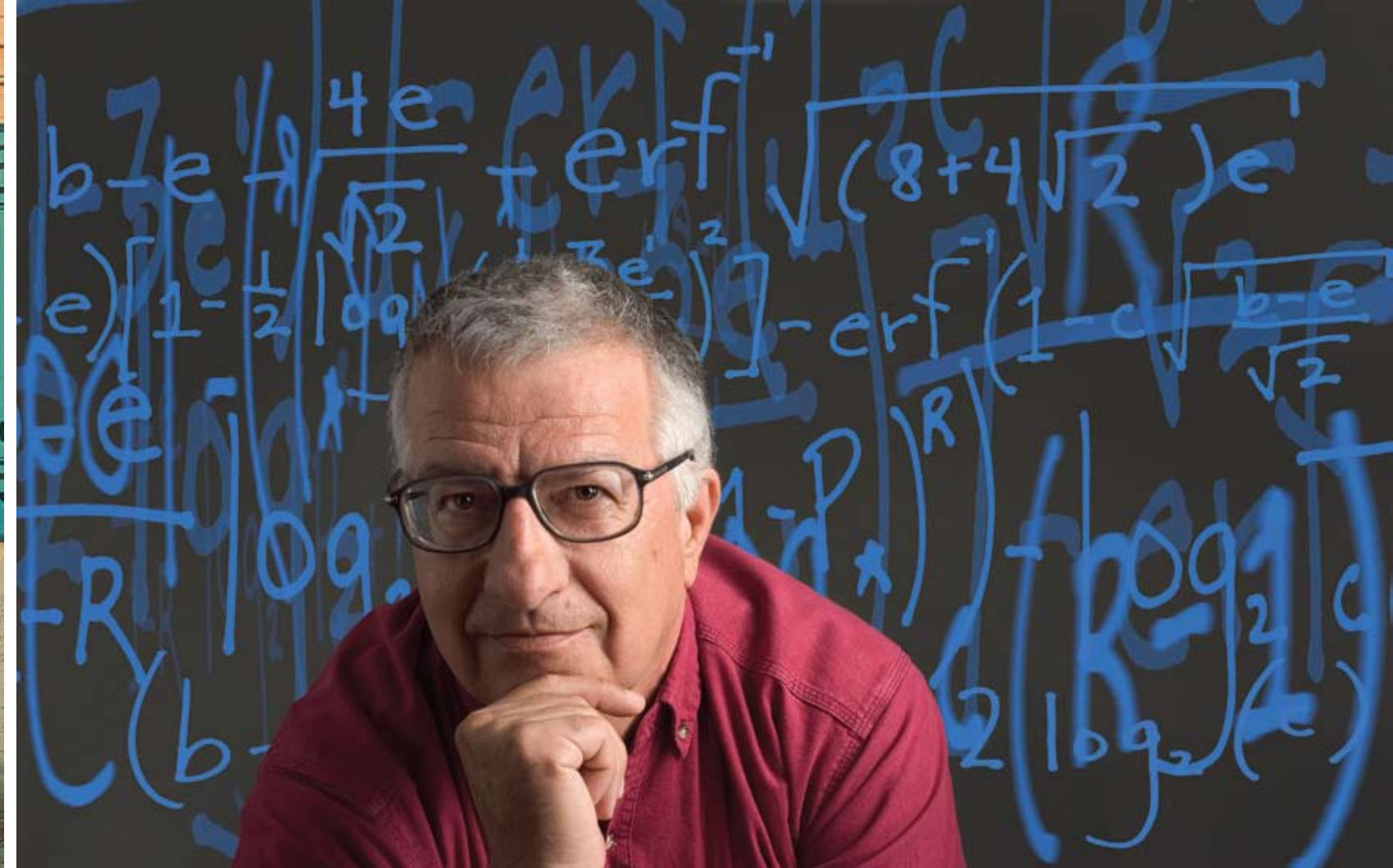
"The digital darkroom is far superior to the wet darkroom. From both a productivity as well as an artistic perspective, the digital workflow allows more creative control, greater output and faster turnaround times. The creative and technical control available with digital is precise in application and staggering in scope. The quality of inkjet printing is stunning, repeatable and rivals the archival quality of traditional printing techniques. However, there is something timeless and unique about a hand-printed (in the traditional darkroom) image that cannot always be duplicated with current inkjet technology.

"I'm currently using an Epson 3800 inkjet printer and Epson papers. When I print, it's generally portfolio images, prints for the studio and, occasionally, prints for sale. Every once in awhile, a client will need a print for display. Sometimes I print these in-house but usually send them out to a commercial lab. Of course, my personal work is a little different, and I do print that when I have time."

Workflow

After a shoot Robert transfers all the RAW images to his main hard drive with Lightroom, to rename, embed metadata and make image copies. Images are edited on a color-calibrated monitor and ranked, with the highest ratings brought together in a Web gallery for client viewing. When final images are selected, he produces hi-res files and delivers them via FTP as 8-bit RGB TIFF files. He generally doesn't provide CMYK conversions since that's best left to the ad agency or designer who has access to the printer-recommended settings for the specific press. Besides Lightroom, Robert uses Photoshop and DxO to digitally enhance images.

"The quality of digital photographic software and computers keeps getting better and better," Robert says. "The costs are either dropping or staying the same for better quality, speed, storage and more



megapixels. On the other hand it means that equipment has a very short lifespan before it's no longer adequate in the competitive marketplace. This requires constant upgrading of both software and hardware, with new learning curves and research needed to make intelligent purchasing decisions. With all of the changes, it's still the image that counts—whether it's made with a pinhole camera and film or the latest digital camera. A great photographer can create powerful photographs with almost any sort of camera.”

Balanced Marketing

In Robert's view, marketing is all about a balance. He embraces changes in technology, but also cautions against diving in too headlong. “Marketing has changed from a system that's hard portfolio driven to one that's Web driven,” Robert says. “Websites are great in that you can make your work more visible to potential clients and have it working for you when you're busy doing other things; you don't have to spend time bringing a book around. On the other hand, you miss the personal connections established with portfolio visits.”

Continues Robert, “Digital and technology changes cut both ways. They lower the technological barriers (autofocus, autoexposure, fix any mistakes in Photoshop) and bring many more photographers into contact with the marketplace, increasing supply versus demand. On the other hand, these same changes enable us to do more, reach new clients, offer new products and services, and be more productive within the

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time limits we face. There are some incredibly talented shooters out there, but those who survive in the business will be the ones who can adapt to the changing environment and develop business skills equal to their photographic ones.

“That said, most art directors and other clients don't have time anymore to meet with photographers, so it's easier if they can view your work online. After an initial screening, they may call in your book for a specific project or make a decision based upon your website and phone presence. Given the number of people involved in buying decisions, electronic portfolios or websites make it easier for people in differ-

ent locations to view the same work at the same time.”

Though Robert sees a lot of change in the industry that could be viewed as either positive or negative, he remains enthusiastic about the possibilities. “Certainly, the busi-

ness has been good to me and it's a wonderful way to earn a living but it's changing. Today budgets are smaller, deadlines are tighter, clients are trying to do more with less and Web publication (versus print) requires less technical quality. Photographic resources from around the world are only a mouse click away. Over time, one certainly hopes to build technical and creative skills. Ideally, you work for better clients with better budgets and more interesting projects. Hopefully, your vision evolves not with the latest fad, but with a more enduring growth that reflects your unique view of the world, and the experience and technical skills to translate that vision into an image that communicates with the viewer.”

When asked what he would like to be doing in five years, Robert replies, “I'd like to be doing just what I'm doing now. I'm producing work that I'm happy with, working for clients that I like and continuing to learn

and grow with digital technology. Maintaining one's passion for photography in the presence of all the pressures of the

current business climate is a challenge, but at the end of the day, we get paid to do what we love—to follow our creative instincts and produce work that satisfies our own vision and meets a client's communication needs. How bad can that be? If I weren't a photographer I'd probably be in business in some capacity or consulting for businesses. I suppose it's a little unusual in that many photographers really don't like the 'business' end of the profession, but I enjoy it.”

View Robert's portfolios on his website: www.robertrathe.com.



Portrait of forensic anthropologist William Maples for National Wildlife Magazine

Paul Slaughter is a world-traveled photographer, writer and ASMP member residing in Santa Fe, NM. Paul specializes in location, stock and fine art photography. An avid jazz lover, he has an extensive photographic collection of jazz legends. You can view portfolios of Paul's work at www.slaughterphoto.com.

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