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"The concept of what you are doing is fantastic; and, of course, it is more than a concept." -- *Bill* "P.S. **Appreciate most of all the "brains" so evident in the operation.**"

"I just wanted to write and say "Thank You" for producing a magazine of **such high quality.** The May-June issue was the second issue of Lenswork that I had purchased and once again **no word has gone unread.** I am new to the world of Photographic Art and Photography but the insight that I get from the pages of *LensWork*, both written and visual far exceed the price of purchase. Thank you once again!" -- *Jason Gray*



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"I have been a subscriber for a while now and have to tell you **how starved the photography community would be without your publication.** I am so very happy you are no longer quarterly. I have only one wish for you, and I mean this in a good way. May you never enjoy broad commercial appeal." -- *Marc Climie*

"This 'preview' is a delightfully tantalizing treat, one which certainly brightened up my morning. On the other hand, it's cruel torture - now I've got to **race frantically out to the mailbox, day after day, eagerly hoping that the next issue of your excellent magazine will be waiting there ready to be devoured,** only to be disappointed by 'regular' mail. If you were trying to show just enough of the magazine to drive viewers into a frenzy to see the whole issue, well, you've succeeded. Thanks for putting out such a fine magazine." -- *Paul Butzi*

"I REALLY LIKE YOUR MAGAZINE! I **love to read the in-depth interviews,** and to hear what others are doing and thinking. It brings so much more to the field of photography when you can understand where someone is coming from. I also **enjoy the connection back to other arts.** After all, we do all speak a similar language and have common concerns when it comes to being creative." -- *Jim Graham.*

"Thanks. We are enjoying both the photography and commentary in *LensWork* - **thought-provoking and like having another congenial colleague** offering new thoughts and insights." -- *Ed and Dorothy Monnelly*

"Just finished looking through / reading *LensWork* No. 32. I wanted to say what a great publication you have here. **Thought-provoking editorials, thorough interviews, and splendid portfolios.**" -- *Miles Budimir*

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# LENSWORK

*Photography and the Creative Process • Articles • Interviews • Portfolios*

No. 38 Nov - Dec 2001

*Article*

Brooks Jensen

*Interview*

Ion Zupcu

*Portfolios*

J. Kevin Dunn  
Raphael Shevelev  
Ion Zupcu

*EndNotes*

by Bill Jay



# LENSWORK

38  
NOV — DEC  
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*Photography and the Creative Process*  
*Articles • Interviews • Portfolios*

*Editors*  
Brooks Jensen  
Maureen Gallagher

In this issue

*Article by*  
Brooks Jensen

*Interview with*  
Ion Zupcu

*Portfolios by*  
J. Kevin Dunn  
Raphael Shevelev  
Ion Zupcu

*EndNotes by* Bill Jay



# — ■ TABLE OF CONTENTS ■ —

6

Editor's Comments  
***The Magic of It***

Inspired by a suit of armor made centuries ago, our editor encourages photographers to transcend the possible, to dig deep into ourselves to bring forth the vision, to study the craft, so we might elevate our photographs from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

44

Portfolio : Raphael Shevelev  
***Let Us Be Grateful***



16

Portfolio : J. Kevin Dunn  
***My Life as a Dog***



60

***Interview with Ion Zupcu***

Ten years after leaving communist Romania, Zupcu finds a wealth of opportunity and freedom of expression in New York. Working in both the commercial and fine art worlds, he shares with our editor the simple requirements that allow him to continue his personal work while making a living in The Big Apple.

36

Brooks Jensen  
***Image & Idea***

“An image without an idea is as emasculating as a paragraph without a thought.” Here the question of *purpose* challenges photographers to ask *why* they photograph, and ultimately why we should *care* about their photographs.

69

Portfolio: Ion Zupcu  
***Still Life***



84

***EndNotes by Bill Jay***



# EDITOR'S COMMENTS

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## *The Magic of It*

Several years ago I was visiting the Art Institute of Chicago specifically to see a Paul Strand exhibition. While walking down the large hallway from the main building to the back complex where the exhibit was located, I walked past a large display of medieval suits of armor. I'd never had much interest in things medieval, but I found myself absolutely mesmerized by these suits of armor. After studying them for some time, it dawned on me that what made them exquisite works of art was the intricate detail – *unbelievably* intricate detail – that went into the craft and production of each suit of armor. I noticed that my mind boggled with a sense of *disbelief*. At that moment I realized that this is the magic of a great deal of artwork – you look at it and simply can't believe someone could make it. It's as though the artist *did* something that is *not humanly possible*. These suits of armor were so complex, so detailed, so intricate, with so much fine metal work that I thought, "*This can't be done.*" I felt it was, literally, impossible, yet there it was in front of me.

If the artist can't do it, yet it has been done, then how? As the mind reels in front of such works of art there is only one con-

clusion that makes any sense: it must be the work of the gods, of the muse, of some supernatural force working *through* the artist. Mozart created wonderful sonatas, beautiful music that are beyond mere musical notes. Beethoven composed symphonies with subtle nuance while he was deaf. Rembrandt used brushes made of goat hair and paint pigment made from the most primitive materials and painted renditions of people that look as though they are absolutely alive. *This* is the magic of it. Ordinary materials, ordinary mortals, making truly extraordinary results.

The question I have for all of us photographers is, *where's the magic?* Ansel Adams once had magic in his prints because we all looked at his black and white images and said "My God, how the hell does he do that?" Our images didn't look like his. No photograph we'd ever seen looked like his. We drooled and signed up for the workshops.

Fast forward to today. Thousands of photographers can make a beautiful, zone-and-tone print that looks every bit as good as an Adams original. Dmax and the Zone System are no longer mysteries.

PhotoShop and the computer are making it even easier, and soon everyone will be able to make a great photograph – well, at least a *technically* great photograph. This is and always has been the problem with photography as an art form. It doesn't look very magical; in fact, it looks downright mechanical. That's why there is such a natural aversion in so many traditional photography circles to the digital print; it's even *more* mechanical.

How many times have you been at a gallery opening (perhaps of your own work) and overheard someone say, "I could do that" or "I've got one better than that." Photography is billed as the *democratic* art form and everyone believes it. So how does a photographer separate their work from the lucky hobbyist? If the hobbyist has access to mechanical tools that make their images technically indistinguishable from the those of a master printer, then what *is* the difference?

And here we meet the fork in the road. What is it that distinguishes fine art photography from merely making pictures? Is it subject matter or is it process – in the complete sense, technical, mental, and spiritual?

If it is subject matter, I believe it is a shallow art form. As such, it will always struggle to be accepted (and purchased) as an equal to traditional arts. Simply put, a lot

of fine art photography has degenerated to photographing a bit of subject material that ordinary people can't – not because of technology, not because of talent. A great deal of what passes for fine art photography today is not based on vision, talent or craft; it is based simply on *access*. Think here of the plethora of books about Japanese fetish girls, portraits of indigenous peoples from the far reaches of the globe, weird rock formations, obscure and odd subcultures, or taboo subjects. The average person doesn't have access to these oddities and therefore can't photograph them.

This formula for success is clear. If you want to be published, find something no one else has access to and get to work. Visit the photography section of the bookstore and test my theory. You'll see that I'm right.

But, is this a solid foundation for meaningful artwork? Is this really the key? Do the best painters have access to colors denied to the ordinary painter? Are the best musicians granted access to notes ordinary musicians can't use? Are the best poets the ones with unique words? Then why are the photographers most worthy of publication and exhibition those with the most obscure and unfamiliar subjects?

Or is it that the best artists are those who use ordinary materials and ordinary subject to create extraordinary artwork?

The medieval armor I saw at the museum was just metal – not even obscure or rare metals. Picasso painted with ordinary paints; Robert Frost used ordinary words; Benny Goodman used an ordinary clarinet. (And yes, he was an *artist!*) Is it just possible that the best art is a result of those who bring to the work the best craftsmanship along with the best vision, the truest spirit, the most creative mind, an inspired talent, and the most diligent work ethic? Hmmm ...

There is no new subject material for photography. Whatever we think is new, is really not new. Worse, if we think it is really new, it is quickly reduced to a fashionable or out-of-fashion trend. There was a time when the f/64 Group were considered revolutionary visionaries because they saw the “straight landscape” as subject material. Now their work seems somewhat dated and cliché. Any photographer today who tries to show us beautiful black and white images of Yosemite is considered a minor copyist and hack. But are there no new images that can ever be made in Yosemite? Is it Yosemite, or the photographer who manifests this limitation?

There is nothing new under the sun, not really. Technologies are new, yes, but the basic human condition has not changed for thousands of years. The same passions rule us that ruled early man. The same

questions plague us that have plagued our ancestors from time immemorial. This is, and always has been, the source of great art. *Who am I? Where is this? Why?* (Or as the philosopher Alan Watts has proposed, there are only four great questions that have plagued man forever: 1.) *Who started it?* 2.) *Where's it going?* 3.) *How will it end?* 4.) *Who's going to clean it up?*)

It seems that photography presents us a unique choice in the field of art. We can work to find something new that has never been photographed before and claim it as our unique photographic turf. Or, we can accept the challenge to use our tools as merely tools and come to the realization that the real task of being a photographer is to develop ourselves as conduits for inspiration that creates artwork. One path leads to tomorrow's clichés. The other path leads to artwork that seems to last. One eventually looks easy; one looks forever profound.

Photography is unique when compared to so many of the traditional art media because it is so wrapped up with this question. Photography is the most technological of all media. The technology of photography is seductive. It's fun! But if we hope to make art with our tools, the issues that should command our attention most ardently are not the technological ones but rather the issues of wonderment, mystery and depth. We are not making

suits of armor. Our tools will never dazzle with technical brilliance, at least not for long. The future generations will look back at our prints, our books, our techniques and our tools with the same quaint smile that we use when considering albumen prints and wet plates. They will never wonder how we did it. They will wonder how we could suffer such primitive techniques.

And this is where the life of the photographic artist begins. Our work will either entertain them in its technological

coarseness or cultural historicity, or it will engage them in the deeper questions of life. Our work will either show them our world, or ask them about theirs.

This is precisely why I love photography. It is a tool, but it is also a challenge that constantly forces me to think about what I am doing, what I am making, and why.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brandon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.



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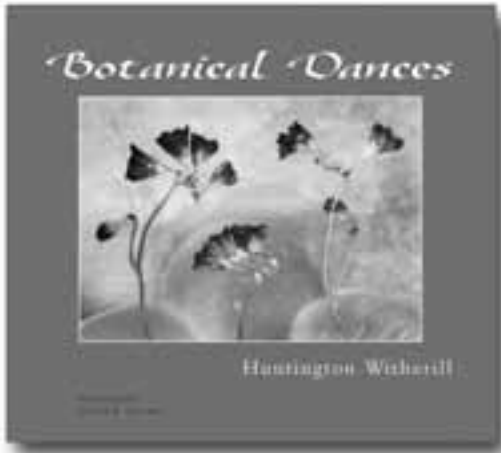


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LPG-014  
*(Wilted tulip)*  
*Untitled, May 12, 2000*

by Ion Zupcu



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# ALONG THE WAY

*My Life as a Dog*



*by*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Kevin Dunn".

J. Kevin Dunn





# IMAGE & IDEA

*by*

Brooks Jensen

I once met Ansel Adams at a gallery opening where I shook his hand. It was a Walter Mitty moment. For those of you who don't remember Walter Mitty, he's the fictional character who constantly lived a life of fantasy where he was the hero, the daring pilot, the celebrity, or the spy. In reality, he was just an Average Joe dreaming of someday being somebody. Shaking Ansel Adams' hand was, for me, a Walter Mitty moment. I was ready to receive some sort of magical transference of cosmic photographic wonderstuff. I fully expected that my photographs would suddenly become better. It didn't happen.

Instead, I became an "ARAT" photographer – a term a friend of mine uses (somewhat disparagingly) for *Another Rock, Another Tree*. The question is: who cares? I ask this question seriously. *Who cares* that I've made another photograph of a compositionally interesting rock, or tree, or riverbed, or sand dune, or (you fill in the blank). Like so many photographers I know, after pursuing these kinds of images for years I eventually had to look back and assess the results. Years of productive energy had generated a body of work that was nothing more than Another Rock, Another Tree. Boring photographs, done so much better by so many others so many times before me. This is not to say there is inherently anything wrong with photographing rocks and trees. *It's not rocks and trees that are the problem*, or even landscape photography in general. The problem lies not with the subject material but with the *content*. Put more bluntly, the problem is with the *photographer*.





# LET US BE GRATEFUL



*by*

*Raphael Shevelev*

Raphael Shevelev





# INTERVIEW WITH ION ZUPCU

Brooks Jensen: To native-born Americans, yours has been an interesting and unusual path, Ion [pronounced E-on]. You began your photography in communist Romania long before you came to the United States. Tell us a little about how you got started in photography and what it was like being a photographer in Eastern Europe at that time?

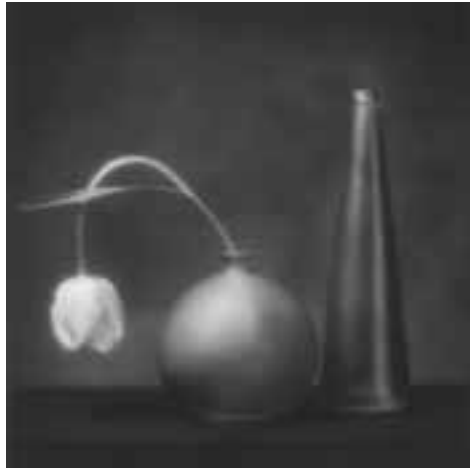
Ion Zupcu: I started studying photography when I was 19 years old. My brother was a photographer at that time and I started by joining him in the darkroom, and then photographing a few months later. I did not do fine art from the beginning, though. Right after I finished high school I started to work for a studio. At that time we were doing mainly portraits and weddings on the weekends, which were the primary uses of photography in Romania at the time. I enjoyed an association with professional photographers in Romania. Two or three years later I started looking for more fine art work. I guess I was around 25 years old. So that was the start.

BJ: Do you see any differences between fine art photography in Eastern Europe and what you've seen in America?

IZ: Well, fine art photography in Romania at that time was quite a bit different than here. Romania was a communist country and we did not have freedom of speech. We were not allowed a different opinion than whatever was prescribed at that time by the communist government. So, I was especially motivated to create images that people could look at and "read between the lines." In my photography at that time my images were based on



# STILL LIFE



*by*

*Ion Zupcu*

Ion Zupcu



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