

Paul Kozal: *The Decisive Moment*



It's a "nice, sunny day" in Paul Kozal's region of Northern California today; that means it's a good darkroom day.

"I go out to shoot on the foggy days," he says.

Many black-and-white photographers aim for the perfect exposures and razor-sharp negatives of Ansel Adams and the *f/64* school, hoping to make large prints from them. Paul Kozal has a different viewpoint. He draws his inspiration from the earlier Pictorialists, such as Alfred Steiglitz. "I like my photographs small and soft," Kozal relates from his Northern California home. "I don't subscribe to the 'bigger is better' philosophy. Often, someone sees a grandiose landscape and tries to imitate it by making a huge photograph. Most of my photographs are 5x7 inches; I try to draw viewers in, get them up close to explore a print's subtleties."

In many of his photographs, Kozal's softness comes from photographing in foggy conditions in the area around his home in Northern California. To get the right atmosphere, he returns again and again, hoping to be in the right place at the right time. "A lot of the moments that I capture

are fleeting," he explains. "I admire Henri Cartier-Bresson, so I'm happy that people have told me that I capture the 'decisive moment' in the landscape."

To capture these moments, Kozal eschews view cameras in favor of the speed and flexibility he gets from using 35mm and medium-format cameras. (His primary cameras are a 35mm Nikon F100, with 70-300mm, 24-120mm, and 80-400mm lenses; and a Mamiya 7II with 85mm and 150mm lenses.)

"I'm more interested in capturing atmosphere than in producing a technically perfect photograph," he says. And it's hard to imagine the intense mood of an image such as *Winter Oak* carrying through into a photograph in which everything is in sharp focus and printed in almost analytical detail. One of Kozal's strengths lies in showing us what we need to see and not a lot more. The images he's captured in the area surrounding his home don't have the vast space of an Ansel Adams landscape, but they have a psychological intensity that Adams rarely touched on. He sums that up by saying that he has a "real connection" to many of the places

◀ Palos Park

Winter Oak ▼



he photographs, "and I think it shows in the photographs."

Materials

His search for mood is aided by his choice of materials. He uses infrared film or Ilford HP5+, and develops in Rodinal because he likes the increased grain. To that he adds a generous helping of sepia-toning, a technique he's become a master of. "The Pictorialists used photogravure and soft-focus lenses" to get their effects, he said. "I use rain and fog and sepia-toning to do it." A self-taught photographer, he learned through trial and error which initial gray tones will produce beautiful warm/cold split-tones when bleached and toned. Part of his process is using as many as four different filters on variable-contrast paper, to produce the necessary gray tones. He sometimes produces photos in which the toning is counter-intuitive, such as *Palos Park*, which portrays a snowy tree in a snowy field of warm browns. "I'm just trying to get away from producing 'documentary' photographs," Kozal explains.

To that end, he also produces hand-colored photos, such as



Pinto Hills

August Storm, which was first toned in both selenium and sepia. Before sepia toning, Kozal painted rubber cement over the sky, so it would maintain a cooler tone. Once the print was sepia-toned, he removed the rubber cement and put the print in selenium toner, which took the edge off the brown

ground, and cooled down the sky. He then colored the print with Marshall Oil colors and Prismacolor pencils. He estimates he does such masking on about 20% of his prints, usually those from infrared negatives (such as *August Storm*) with dark skies and contrasty clouds.



August Storm

The Journey

Kozal is originally from the Chicago area, and became interested in the West as a child leafing through old postcards in antique stores. Many of the postcards were hand-colored black-and-white shots, which predisposed him to viewing that look as the "authentic" representation of the West. During his initial photographic forays to the West, while still living in Chicago, he photographed in black-and-white and color, but found the color images were lacking something. "They didn't have my artistic impression," he says, "and I recalled those old postcards, and decided to try handcoloring."

Now, ironically, the tools he's been using to recreate that period look are themselves becoming hard or impossible to find. After years of perfecting his toning process on it, Kozal has had to confront the discontinuation of his favorite paper, which was Agfa Multicontrast.

He switched to Kodak Polymax Fine Art—only to have Kodak cease its manufacture. He now uses Ilford Multigrade glossy paper and Berg sepia toner. Unfortunately, he

laments, the Ilford paper turns blue when selenium-toned (another favored process), rather than the purple he was used to with Agfa paper. Some of the prints of a photographer influenced by antique postcards may soon be considered antique themselves, simply because it's no longer possible to achieve their exact look. ■

Paul Kozal is represented in several galleries throughout the United States. His photographs are collected by private and corporate collections worldwide. For more information or to contact the artist please visit www.paulkozal.com.



Road to Windy Hollow



Cypress Trail