

***PDN:*** Did your interest in nature predate the photography?

**JAMES BALOG:** My interest in nature goes back a long, long way, to when I was a little boy. It's been at the core of everything I've done in my life in one way or another...sports, geology, and photography. It's all just a part of me.

***PDN:*** How did that interest lead you to photography?

**BALOG:** I discovered nature photography more or less by practice. It was something that I did a lot of when I was outdoors, and something I had the illusion of being good at. I didn't realize that I was still just beginning, I thought I was reasonably adept at it, and that it would make a good thing to do for a career. It was a good way for me to move on into the world that I liked being in.

***PDN:*** Did you have any formal training in photography?

**BALOG:** Very little. I've actually taken only two

workshops in my life: one was with Ernst Haas, and the other one was with Eugene Richards. Otherwise I'm trained in natural science. I have a Master's Degree in geomorphology.

***PDN:*** Were you ever an assistant to another photographer?

**BALOG:** I've never assisted anyone. And I've always regretted that in a way. I could have learned a lot instead of learning it by my own mistakes. But that's how the wheel turned.

***PDN:*** Given that there was no formal training, I assume you spent a lot of time just researching by yourself, to figure out how photography worked, and how things should look?

**BALOG:** In hindsight, I think I had a reasonably natural sense of composition, especially when it came to the landscape. I also learned a lot by looking at other people's artwork, whether it was painters and sculptors, or photographers and filmmakers. That's probably the best way to learn, by just peeling the blinders off your eyes and really studying

and looking and working at it.

***PDN:*** Do you have any advice for young photographers just starting out?

**BALOG:** For someone wanting to get into documentary-oriented photography, it's incredibly helpful to be well educated about other things besides photography, things that you have a genuine interest in. It also doesn't hurt to have terrific technical training. So if you can combine those two areas, I think it makes you that much more powerful.

***PDN:*** Can you tell us about some of your favorite photographers, people who influenced you and your style?

**BALOG:** Well, I've certainly been influenced by Irving Penn and by Richard Avedon, but I'm not just inspired by photography, I'm inspired by the whole range of arts, from music and literature to painting and filmmaking to sculpture and architecture. I think all those things are important for developing an esthetic sensitivity that applies throughout your whole life. And you bring that out in your

pictures when it's time to bring it out.

***PDN:*** How would you describe your own personal style?

**BALOG:** As far as my own style goes, sometimes I want to photograph in a real clean, simple kind of a way. Other times I want to be much more impressionistic and internal, and have the pictures reflect the way my unconscious is feeling about the scene, rather than how my eye perceives the scene. And that's what you see in my Holga pictures. I feel like my own creative style has some different components to it, based on how I'm feeling about the subject, or about a project, or about a given situation on a given day. And I'll switch from one camera to another, from one treatment to another, depending on what I think the circumstance demands.

***PDN:*** You've worked on several long projects including series on trees and endangered animals. Is there a process you go through when you're choosing your extended photo projects?

**BALOG:** The process of selecting a subject that you want to work on for years is a very subtle, tricky one. You know you're going to be owned, possessed, and married to this thing for a long, long time. So I find that what I work on in these personal projects is a combination of something that appeals to me intellectually, something that seems like the idea is meaningful and important. I just need to know that somehow the thing feels like it has its hooks in me. You just have to have this drive, this inner intensity and compulsion to do it, or you would never get it done.

**PDN:** There seems to be a split for you career-wise between paid work and personal work. Can you describe how these are different for you?

**BALOG:** There's often been an intense schism in my life between my paid, professional work, and my personal projects. Because I'm not independently wealthy, I do need to get paid for the work I do. So, I wind up doing the reimbursed professional work, and applying all the earnings from that towards creative

projects. And believe me, it can be a very self-defeating proposition at times. Most sensible people take the money that they earn and save it, and then apply it to something else. But I take it from one side of the business and pour it into the other side, and you know, I try and be grateful for the opportunity that that gives me to do my creative work, but it doesn't necessarily make for a rational business policy.

**PDN:** Do you feel that the artistic side of your work keeps the professional side viable and up to date?

**BALOG:** The personal side of the photography does keep a novelty and freshness and experimentation in the paid work that it might not otherwise have. It also gives me a distinct market niche, I suppose. People know you're not going to come to Balog to do a predictable picture that looks like somebody else's work. And maybe for years nobody comes to Balog for anything except a tree picture or an animal picture because they know that he's in that groove right now. There's not a huge

economic niche for tree pictures or animal pictures, but when somebody needs a picture of that subject there's a distinct place in a picture buyer's mind that might not be there otherwise.

***PDN:*** You travel a lot for your work. Is there any place in the world that has particularly excited you, a place that you have a close connection with?

**BALOG:** What's my favorite spot? There isn't one. The world is such an unbelievable place, it's impossible to narrow it down to one place. What I've gotten to do by sampling all these incredible places has been like a fairy tale. I never imagined when I was twenty years old that I would get to do all of this. I've been very, very fortunate.

***PDN:*** Have you ever been drawn to doing industrial or urban photography?

**BALOG:** There was a period earlier in my personal, creative life where I did a lot of photography of not pure nature, but of humans impacting nature. I did a series on

nuclear missile silos in the serene, agrarian landscapes of the American West. I did a series on people looking at water and trying to get under the metaphoric skin of what that relationship meant. And a lot of those pictures involved manmade landscapes. I also did a big body of work called Wildlife Requiem that was about people killing animals for sport. So, I recognize that those kinds of man/animal interface topics, in a very direct and obvious sense, are an important thing to focus on.

***PDN:*** I'm curious how you feel about your relationship to your subjects, whether they are animals, landscapes or trees. There's often that element of mankind encroaching on nature in your images. Do you feel like you yourself are an aspect of that?

**BALOG:** In a lot of my work I'm trying to make a commentary about humans encroaching on nature through their presence, but I'm not so naïve as to think that my own presence is not an impact on the animals and plants and landscapes that I happen to enter. What I can

do as a photographer, hopefully, is to help everybody else see their impact in a way that maybe they hadn't before.

***PDN:*** In many of your pieces you don't necessarily hide the fact that you're involved in the process. You see lights and stands and backdrops....

***BALOG:*** A lot of the pictures I do, in fact, show the human presence, overtly and explicitly, or in a more metaphoric way. The pictures emphasize the separation of the subject from its natural setting. You can see this in my Survivor Series, where part of the frame shows an animal on a white background in a classical portraiture style, and the other part of the frame shows some echo of the natural habitat that the animal is now separated from. But the idea shows up in a lot of different ways in other series of mine as well. It's a dominant theme for me in my work, the relationship of humans and nature.

***PDN:*** Let's talk a little more about the Survivors series in which you photograph

endangered species. What is the inspiration and motivation for this series?

**BALOG:** The inspiration for *Survivors* came out of an assignment *National Geographic*. I was photographing endangered species when it suddenly struck me—the whole trick to seeing endangered wildlife was to alter the context in which you saw them.

**PDN:** Shooting the animals in their natural environment would almost miss the point, because the destruction of that environment is one of the reasons they're becoming extinct.

**BALOG:** Exactly. So the initial idea behind those pictures was to show the animals in a non-natural setting to emphasize the point that they were cut off from their habitat. As I got into that series, I began to realize that those backgrounds let the human mind look at those animals differently. It let you look at them as personalities, psyches and intellects, as well as sculptural forms.

***PDN:*** Is it difficult to work with these animals and get them into these environments?

**BALOG:** Most of the animals I worked with on that series were captive; they were in zoos, or they were somehow involved in the film industry. I didn't necessarily like the fact that the animals were in these settings but they were there, and they provided an opportunity to see things, and symbolize things, and understand things that you might not otherwise get to. So I just went with it.

***PDN:*** You've done a series of photographs using a Holga camera. Can you briefly describe what a Holga is and why you use it?

**BALOG:** Frankly, a Holga is a cheesy little plastic camera costing about \$20. It has one shutter speed, two f-stops, and it's actually meant to be a toy. It has no particular sophistication. The lens on a Holga is basically just cheap plastic...it's like looking through a Coke bottle. Yet, the Holga makes an image that for me is more true to how the heart sees the world than how the mind thinks it's seeing the world. So in certain kinds of

subjects it really works. My Holga pictures are basically coming from a period that started in about 1997 or 1998 going up until the present. I have a range of images that were taken on a spontaneous basis in a lot of different places as I was going along, in many cases doing other kinds of work.

***PDN:*** In the prints you get flares, distortion, and focus problems....

**BALOG:** I let all the technical imperfections of the Holga become part of the piece. I don't fight them. If there's a light leak, if there's vignetting, if there's a blur, if there are apparent defects in the pictures, I work with that. I make it part of the piece. You want accidents to happen because they lead you into new creative revelations.

***PDN:*** I'd like to talk about your most recent work. What was the inspiration and motivation for the Tree project in which you photograph some of the oldest and largest trees in America?

**BALOG:** The tree project came out of a

newspaper clipping about champion tree hunters that I ripped out of *The Wall Street Journal* and stuck on my bulletin board. Five or six years later the clipping fluttered down off the bulletin board, and I looked at it again and I thought, “Yeah, this makes perfect sense. I think now is the time to do it.”

**PDN:** Could you talk a little bit about how you came up with the concepts for the way you’ve shot these pieces?

**BALOG:** The Tree Series went through a lot of evolutionary steps and what I found was that different treatments were appropriate for different situations. In the beginning of the series, I focused on trying to put up big backgrounds and lighting these trees, basically to create my own studio outdoors. I wanted to focus the eye, as well as human perception, on these trees as being individuals. That idea worked for a while, until I got up to trying to photograph trees that were just too big.

**PDN:** Like the redwoods and sequoias in

California?

**BALOG:** Yes, I knew I eventually had to deal with the tallest trees in the world. And I knew that no background was going to be a useful creative device for that. Somehow I had to get up in those trees and figure out an interesting picture that would happen as I was moving through those trees. I met some forest ecology researchers and they taught me how to climb up in those trees, and after a few weeks of working with those guys the proper approach started to present itself: a multi-frame perspective moving vertically down through the forest.

***PDN:*** Was there an external inspiration for this multi-frame approach?

**BALOG:** The biggest inspiration for me was actually the shots that were made back in the 1960s, when the first lunar landers setting down on the moon, when the camera eye was looking around and they were stitching together these big panoramics. I've looked back at a lot of that stuff over the years.

***PDN:*** Could you talk a little more about difficulties in the process of creating these Tree pieces?

**BALOG:** One of the hardest parts of the Tree Series was just finding the things. I had to get deep inside the forestry community in the United States and get to know people in different parts of the country who could tell me where these specific trees were. And then I had myself and my equipment and my assistant out there. There was an enormous amount of just physical labor involved, and an enormous amount of engineering. A lot of improvisation had to go on, on site, to make a lot of these situations work.

***PDN:*** I assume there was a lot of computer work involved in creating some of the composite pieces?

**BALOG:** If I would spend, say, three days in the field shooting one of these things, I would spend three, four, five or sometimes six weeks reassembling the shot after the fact. And that, for me, was sort of the dark side of the tree project. Because I'd get very few days of

being out in the sun looking at this beautiful tree, and then I'd get a lot of days sitting at the computer screen, staring at the monitor.

***PDN:*** When you present these pieces, what sort of size do you expect them to be?

**BALOG:** Ultimately I hope I'll have a chance to put some of these pictures into exhibition environments where they can be really, really big, at least 20 feet tall. And I'd love to see a couple of these prints at 200 to 300 feet tall. I'd love to print the sequoia at full size—245 feet tall—and hang it down the outside of a skyscraper in Times Square in Manhattan. I think it would be fabulous.

***PDN:*** Now that this project is finished and you've been showing the pieces, I assume you've gotten some reaction from people. What has that reaction been?

**BALOG:** So far the Tree Series has gotten the reaction that I dreamed of. Namely, that people look at it and they go, "Wow, I never thought of a tree that way; I never looked at a tree that way; I never looked at these trees as

these individual personalities.” That’s been very gratifying. One of the ideas I’ve been developing in my work for the better part of 15,16 years now is the idea that with a lot of these natural entities—be it an animal, tree or a rock—there is an individuality, if not a personality and a character there. And if other people see that in these pictures, then I’ve succeeded.

***PDN:*** What are you working on next?

**BALOG:** I’m going to try and save my money for once and I’m going to try and relax. My main energy right now is going towards getting the Tree Series put to bed— to publish the book and make the prints and let those things come out in the world. I’ve also got some very interesting documentary projects in process right now, one about a volcano and one about the jungle. At the same time I have a project that’s simmering on bald eagles. So there’s no shortage of interesting opportunities coming down the road.

***PDN:*** What motivates you to keep going?

**BALOG:** I've basically devoted my career to looking at the relationship between humans and nature, and to looking at nature. To me that's the core of my mission, and it has been and it will be until I pass out of this world. I want to do what I can to shift human understanding of who we are and what we are and how we should relate to all the rest of what's on this planet. To crack through the veneer of the illusions that surround us and see inside reality more purely than you normally get to see. To me, that's the real witchcraft and voodoo of this artistic process we're in. And basically I just want people to view my work and then probe their own perceptions. I hope that the work helps people to think and see differently. And ultimately, we can only hope, behave differently.