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Arts & Entertainment Magazine of The Taos News

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Tempo



THE GREATEST GIFT

TAOS ONSTAGE RETURNS "IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE:
A LIVE RADIO PLAY" TO TAOS MESA BREWING

BLINDFOLDED DINNER
AT LOVE APPLE FOR 'THE PASEO'

DAVID MICHAEL KENNEDY
EXHIBITS CELEBRITY PHOTOS

TAOS CHAMBER MUSIC GROUP OFFERS
'RUSSIAN HOLIDAY' CONCERTS

Art follows life

David Michael Kennedy exhibits three decades of photography in Taos

By Nikki Lyn Pugh

David Michael Kennedy has had an amazing career. Commercially, he has photographed some of the biggest names in the music industry. As a fine art photographer, he has chronicled the seasons of the Southwest and its people for the last 18 years.

There is something besides his well-trained eye, however, that allows Kennedy to reach into the rare depths of the subjects he shoots. Each Kennedy photograph, whether it be a landscape or portrait, tells a story. And what makes this storytelling so compelling is not so much technical skill, which Kennedy obviously has, but the very human relationships that he develops with each subject along the way. It is

these relationships that allow the soul of the people and places he documents to speak through the camera.

"When I work, I always try to celebrate the beauty and the uniqueness of a person," says Kennedy. "I am looking to show the positive beauty

of who they are as a human being ... The landscapes are the same way ... to celebrate the beauty of the land and of this country."

David Michael Kennedy's platinum palladium photography show, titled "Celebrity Portraits, Landscapes and Images from the Road," will open with a reception Saturday (Dec. 13), 5-8 p.m., at Heinley Fine Arts, 119-C Bent St.

From New York to Native America

Kennedy's career began in commercial photography in the 1970s and '80s in New York City. During that time he worked with CBS Records, photographing celebrities and recording artists such as Muddy Waters, Bob Dylan,



'Coyote Dancer, Lakota Nation' by David Michael Kennedy



Photographer David Michael Kennedy

Bruce Springsteen, Debbie Harry, Willie Nelson, Charlie Daniels and countless others. Some of the work from this era is part of the Smithsonian collection. In the mid-'80s, Kennedy broke away from fast-paced city life in search of more creative freedom and simplicity.

He moved his family to New Mexico where his lens naturally focused on the landscape around him. In the 1990s, life, location and personal tragedy led him to connect with the Native tribes of South Dakota and, eventually, the Pueblos of New Mexico.

"When I started working with (the

Lakota tribes), I went up to Pine Ridge and I just sort of hung out," Kennedy explained. "I met this wonderful woman, Chick Big Crow. Her daughter, SuAnne, was a star basketball player and a great kid ... When I first met Chick, I knew that she had started the Boys & Girls club there (in Pine Ridge) in her daughter's name, but I didn't know that her daughter had died in a car accident."

This fact would prove to be significant for both Kennedy and Big Crow. For Kennedy, the meeting would be the catalyst for a decade of work photographing Native ceremonial dance, which he always shoots as a staged experience, never during ceremony itself. Two years prior, Kennedy's own daughter died tragically in similar circumstance to SuAnne. When Big Crow viewed Kennedy's portfolio of works at that first meeting, her eye immediately went to a small sampling of photographs of New Mexico cloudscapes Kennedy had shot the year before. The portfolio was dedicated "to my daughter, Tymara Christen Kennedy, December 14, 1968 to August 1, 1991. May she ever be among the clouds."

"(SuAnn) looked at me and said, 'This was meant to be,'" Kennedy said. "The portfolio dedicated to my daughter is kind of like what the Boys & Girls Club is for her, so it was very magical."

Through Big Crow, Kennedy went on to meet dancers of the Lakota Nation and has since photographed dancers in the Pueblos of Tesuque, Picuris, Nambe, Ohkay Owingeh (San Juan), Santa Clara, Pojoaque, San Ildefonso and Taos. A percentage of each sale of these photos goes to community-based tribal organizations.

Some of his most well-known images include portraits of imprisoned Native Rights activist Leonard Peltier. And then there is the magic of that Ghost Dance photo, which Kennedy photographed in a staged setting in 1998. The suppression of Ghost Dance in the Dakotas was one of the factors

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that led to the Massacre of Wounded Knee in 1890.

"As soon as we got everything set up, the wind started blowing," Kennedy said. "The fringe in her dress, her hair, everything went wrong. I was saying (to myself), 'Do you see, David? Grandfather is telling you you shouldn't (shoot the photo) and he is not going to let you do it.' I was fighting all these feelings but ... I kept shooting"

Just as the sun was setting behind the horizon, the wind stopped.

"All of the fringe on the dress fell and her hair fell beautifully (into place)," he continued. "She looked into the camera and raised both of her arms in the air and I shot it ... My assistant, myself and Alice, the woman who was dancing, all sat there for a minute or two ... Then I said, 'Alice what happened?' She said, 'David, it was so amazing.' Her great grandfather had been at the original Wounded Knee Massacre. He was one of the dancers. As the sun went down, (she said) that he had come back. For me, it was a huge affirmation that this was right."

Images from the road

Par for the course, Kennedy's latest work, the "Images from the Road" series which is also on display at Heinley,

comes from personal odyssey as well.

"In 2000, my house burnt down. (Later that year), I got a divorce. I really had no idea what to do so I sold everything. I bought a '59 airstream trailer and took off for two years," Kennedy says, reminiscing about this more recent turning point in his life.

Using a 4x5 format homemade camera, Kennedy shot more than 2,500 negatives on his 70,000 mile trip, much of which he is still sifting through in preparation for a larger viewing and possibly a book. Kennedy returned to New Mexico with a new perspective on the people and places that make up rural America.

"Part of the reason that I took off was because I was really disillusioned about what was going on in this country," Kennedy says. "I think part of the journey for me ... was finding out where America is today ... Basically the people who populate America are amazingly beautiful, industrious, caring people. I met Pentecostal ministers, fishermen and just tons of people from every walk of life ... I came away from it feeling very positive because there is still a soul in this country that is very much alive."

Indeed, it is a soul that only an image-maker like Kennedy can capture.

Heinley Fine Arts is located at 119C Bent St. in Taos. For more information, call (505) 579-9678 or (617) 947-9016. Visit heinleyfinearts.com.



Courtesy photo

'Taos Hoop Dancer' by David Michael Kennedy

Courtesy photo

'Rain, Luna County, N.M.' by David Michael Kennedy



Courtesy photo

'Willie On His Bike' by David Michael Kennedy