



INTERVIEW

with the pros

Matthew Bamberg is a fine art photographer, digital artist and writer based in based in Palm Springs, California



VINTAGE TIKI

The trunk of a palm tree carved and painted into a Polynesian God (Tiki). The image, taken on 35mm film in three shots – top, middle and bottom, then merged using a panoramic photo merge option in Photoshop CS5. The Tiki was found sat in front of a fenced-in abandoned resort (Take Shack) in Palm Springs, CA. Ten years ago, I jumped the fence and took the shots, then had to walk around the place and shoot some more. The shot was recently scanned, cropped, selected and pasted into a new background in Photoshop CS5.

Shot details: Canon Rebel film camera, settings unknown

The beginning

Growing up in South Florida made a deep impression on me. Memories of palm trees, pink hotels, art deco and modernism are vivid in my mind from those years. My mother was a terrible artist, but she was a successful writer and led me to the craft at a young age. I always liked feature articles and my favourite book was the World Book (called an encyclopaedia now). I'd turn its glossy pages, looking at all of the pictures from around the globe. I longed to go just about everywhere. My photography tool of choice was a Polaroid Land Camera (the kind that produces instant pictures). It was bulky and odd looking but did a great job at giving you images in a minute or two. My interests back then were meteorology, journalism and art.

Many years went by before photography came into my life. During that time I got a degree in meteorology, went storm chasing and worked on cloud seeding projects (I was a cloud observer, shooting clouds before and after seeding runs). Then I taught school, and then at the ripe age of 35, I decided to take up art. I found a perfect program at the Inter-Arts centre in San Francisco State University that offered up some truly unique experiences that taught me how to meld all the disciplines together to create art. I learned that art is everywhere. I studied multimedia and video production, producing a short story of

about my mother, which had won all kinds of awards and was put in the Best College Stores of 1963. I learned how to compose a frame and how to do such things as compose over-the-shoulder, long, and close-up shots and sequence them into emotional and political narratives. Finally, I learned how to use a video toaster to make text on video. I fell in love with that and then took a class on text and image. After that I graduated with a master's

CAFE FLORE

This HDR piece was shot with 35mm film about 10 years ago in, where else, but Paris. It was then digitally replicated into two more shots – one with an EV value of -2 and the other of +2. The photos were merged with Photomatrix Pro and tweaked in Photoshop CS5. This is one of a set of Paris photos I have in my collection, some of which were taken with black and white film – how ancient is that? This technique is the one you use to make single-shot HDR photographs (see my book Beginning HDR Photography).

Shot details: Canon Rebel 350 D, Canon kit lens 28-90mm f/5.6 1/1000 sec, 200 ISO, camera set on the curb of the street



from SFSU. I had gone to school at night while working as a California public school teacher. I taught everything, and there were also many opportunities to try experimental art that I had learned in the classes with my young students.

Moving on

When I left the Bay Area's El Nino weather all I wanted was the sun, so I moved to Palm Springs. I wanted to write. The last time I had gotten published was in the junior high school newspaper. I wanted to see my words in print again. I took up 'picking' (like on the TV show American Pickers) and wrote about the things I found traveling around the country. On those trips I started photographing old motel signs, a task with which I became totally obsessed.

I wrote my first article as my house filled up with Samsonite suitcases, Micmac dishes, poodle knick-knacks and California pottery. After prowling around for local area newspapers, looking for an editor that would



be an author and get a book published, any kind of book really. I was no technical wizard, but did have an eye and a partner with a better one who taught me how to frame a compelling image

My images continued to sell, getting snapped up by 'B' celebrities and others who could afford expensive mid-century modern second homes. I contacted agents all over the country to buy the novel had written. Somehow or other I got in touch with a technical book literary agency who needed a writer to write about fine art photography – a 'how-to' book from shooting the image to printing, framing and selling it. I told the agency, I was just the man. One short year later, my first book *Digital Art Photography for Dummies* (Wiley) came out.

Boom and bust

Then it all went bust. The housing market collapsed and my photography business went down. No one was buying anything. I began to shoot more and more and moved on to digital because writing the book required that I know the cameras of the future. It was 2004. I went to Paris where I bought a Canon Rebel to shoot for the book. To make money, I became an online professor first teaching teachers, then went on to teach writing.

A few years later, after tirelessly (and unsuccessfully) looking for a publisher of my novel and at the same time writing (and photographing) features for several Southern California newspapers and magazines, I took the part of columnist for two papers and one magazine. I was writing congregational profiles (I'm still amazed that I did that) to profiles of locals and travel articles. Then the newspaper business went bust.

I soon gave that up and went back to the

take my work, the article was picked up by the Palm Springs alternative newspaper. It was the cover story. The editor came to my house and shot pictures of my 'pickings'. I watched. The article appeared as a cover story with a blown up image of a pink poodle I had collected on the cover. I bought a new camera, printer and frames from a thrift store and started a business making and selling mid-century motel signs for a local consignment shop in Palm Springs owned by two guys who did nothing but advise me that my work sold and to make more. At the time mid-century modern was all the rage and the real estate business was booming.

I had also started traveling around the world, snapping images of all kinds of things, ranging from street scenes to close-ups of vintage radios, not to mention hundreds of signs. My goal was to create scenes emblematic of my youth. I created a huge collection of photographs from all around the world, all on 35mm film (images, which I'm still scanning today). I also wanted to

FOOT IN PHILLY

When writing my book *101 Quick and Easy Secrets of the Master Photographers of the Twentieth Centuries*, I attempted to emulate the work and techniques of the greats of photography. This one is based on a feet series in which photographer Lisette Model set her camera on the curb of New York City sidewalks, catching walking legs and feet, revealing how footwear offers signals to class and style. I did the same thing in Philadelphia, capturing many images like the man's foot above. In order to get the image sharp, I used a high ISO and wide aperture. Model's work doesn't pay much attention to technicalities; her work often had an over-the-top quality – risqué and edgy street photography that's still appealing today.

Shot details: Canon 5D, Canon 24-105mm f/4 L lens, f/4, 1/1250 sec, 800 ISO, camera set on the curb of the street





STEEL BOWL

A sign image in Southern California some 12 years ago. This is one of dozens of sign photographs, mostly taken so that they are 100% visible from the best side and usually brightened by direct sunlight casting on them. Most were taken using a negative value for exposure compensation to bring out the colour, then saturated a bit more in Photoshop.

Shot details: Canon Rebel film camera, settings unknown

technical book literary agency to get more work. They loved the Wiley book and got me a deal to create a book about how to photograph San Francisco. I went there frequently, climbing scenic hills, seeking the best vistas from which to shoot. After all, I had lived there for years. As a bike rider and hiker, I knew every part of the city from the seedy (yet fascinating) Tenderloin to Fishermen's Wharf. That book was published and then some. I went on to write one photography book after another, coming up with unique niches that weren't covered by the big shots.

My books, *Digital Art Photography for Dummies* and three books in the *Quick and Easy Secrets* photography book series described the process from taking the picture to printing and framing it. In my book, *New Image Frontiers – Defining the Future of Photography*, I interviewed top world engineers, photographers

and gallery owners seeking to find answers to sensor research, new camera models (including the new mirrorless line manufactured by a number of companies), and sought an answer the proverbial question: 'How does a photographer get his work into a gallery?'

Currently, I'm promoting two new state-of-the-art books -- *Beginning HDR Photography* and *Photography Applications to Cloud Computing*, which have been released by Thomson Learning. My focus is beginning photographers (after all, I was an elementary school teacher and was all too familiar with process writing). I also teach photography classes at UCR and writing at the University of Phoenix and Ashford University.

Today, I shoot with a seven-year-old Canon 5D with a 24-105 mm lens. (I also shoot with Tamron wide-angle and zoom lenses). When I'm

with a camera, my energy level and well-being turns magical. I'm on the hunt for shape, form, colour and kitsch, which I seek out like a police dog in customs. To be sure, my eyes are wide open. I often put my lens cap to the side of my camera gripped in the palm of my hand, using it as a brace to stop camera shake. I sprint with my head turning in all directions, up and down. I make sure to stop completely to take a shot.

The meaning of photography to me

Photography simply needs to be fun – the part of my professional life that gives me nothing but pleasure. This craft, along with art, is one of the greatest loves of my life. It gives me an opportunity to constantly make mistakes and learn by them, finding out that some of my assumptions about light, camera settings and composition are masterful new techniques and others utter duds. It's an incentive to learn new technicalities when the old don't work any more. For example, of late I've paid much more attention to my auto focus settings (one-shot, al-servo and all that) and apertures, creating sharper pictures while moving, or of moving objects. I shoot far more shots in manual mode and manual focus.

My advice to new photographers is that there are two avenues to seek out a little extra money (or a lot, depending upon the time you have to put into it) and have your work published – work with your heart or head. You can use both, but if your head leans toward technicalities, you're bound to miss shots of things you love. Also, take risks and be yourself. No one ever feels good shooting images of things they don't like. For example, I'm not fond of studio portrait photography. It comes down to focus, focus, focus – in everything from the shot itself to the message you want to bring forth. Finally, set your goal so that people are eager to view your image for an extended length of time. Note also that none of this happens overnight, at least not for the majority of people.

What's in my camera bag?

- Canon 5D Mk II
- Canon 17-105mm f/4L lens
- Tamron Telephoto 24-200mm
- Hoya Pro polarizing filter
- Velbon El Carmagne 530



My style and technique

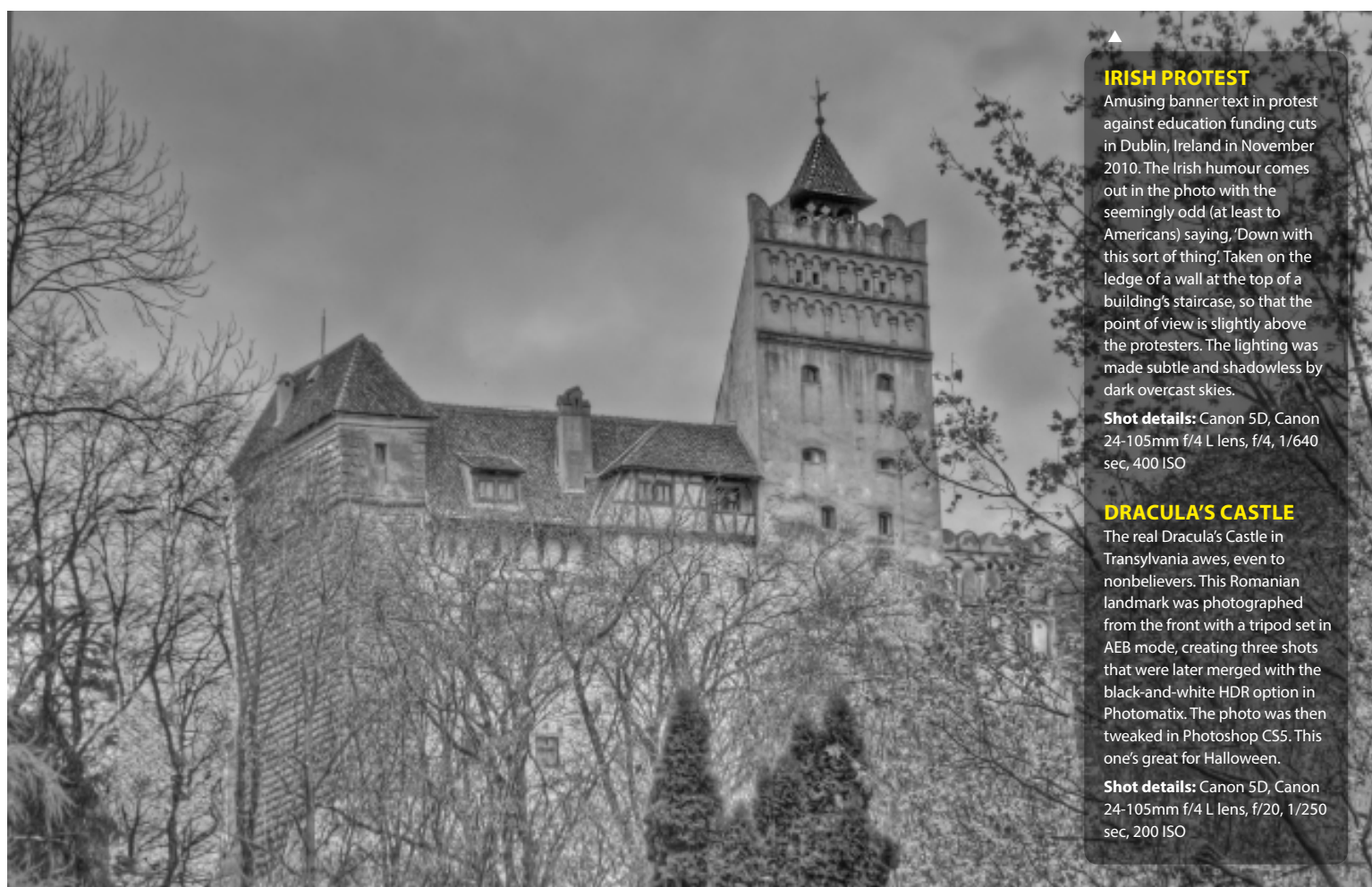
Today I strive to shoot images that juxtapose textual and visual elements, which play with your mind and emotions. I believe that this enables me to capture magical moments and produce images with impact like those on my blog textandimagephotography.com. I used to care a lot about the weather, hoping that it'd be good, but no more. If it's cloudy, I set my camera AEB (Auto Exposure Bracketing) so I can process the cloudy-day shots into HDR later, making these types of days mysterious – even scary (see the image of Dracula's Castle below).

My style fortified itself after writing and researching about master photographers of the twentieth century. I pondered each and every one of the photographers' works and lives that I related to and wrote about, seeking to first emulate, then develop their ideas. I'm moved most by the women who were the photography greats of that era – Helen Levitt, Lisette Model and Tina Modotti, although I can't pinpoint the exact reason why – yet, it's another thing I haven't figured out. They took risks, travelled to places where people don't usually go, introduced people to new cultures and ways of life by creating visual art that is entertaining to look at – an escape from the ordinary.

Finally, the technical stuff. I make shooting as simple as possible, usually carrying only my camera around my neck. It's big and heavy enough as it is. I've come to learn to clean my lens often, which I've learned is a good thing. Now I carry disposable wipes in my pocket. If I'm doing dusk, dawn or night shots, or landscapes, I drag a tripod around with me – a Velbon El Carmagne 530 – which I find more than adequate for my needs. It's no fun, but I think of it as getting a little additional exercise, sometimes carrying around that thing for hours on end. Since I delve into digital art and HDR, I frequently use Photoshop CS5 and Photomatix during post-processing, sometimes spending hours on one image.

The future

I am contemplating buying a graphics program, like Adobe Illustrator, to continue my work on integrating text and image. I've got my sights on Barbara Kruger type works, with my own political spin of course. I'm planning my next book, which is surely to be on fine art photography, and want to put more effort into my website and four blogs: matthewbamberg.com, retrosignblog.com, digitaltravelerblog.com, palmspringsdailyphoto.com and the newest one; textandimagephotography.com ●



IRISH PROTEST

Amusing banner text in protest against education funding cuts in Dublin, Ireland in November 2010. The Irish humour comes out in the photo with the seemingly odd (at least to Americans) saying, 'Down with this sort of thing'. Taken on the ledge of a wall at the top of a building's staircase, so that the point of view is slightly above the protesters. The lighting was made subtle and shadowless by dark overcast skies.

Shot details: Canon 5D, Canon 24-105mm f/4 L lens, f/4, 1/640 sec, 400 ISO

DRACULA'S CASTLE

The real Dracula's Castle in Transylvania awes, even to nonbelievers. This Romanian landmark was photographed from the front with a tripod set in AEB mode, creating three shots that were later merged with the black-and-white HDR option in Photomatix. The photo was then tweaked in Photoshop CS5. This one's great for Halloween.

Shot details: Canon 5D, Canon 24-105mm f/4 L lens, f/20, 1/250 sec, 200 ISO