

Images of the mind

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PICTURES: HANS SAUTTER

People often speak of the “art” of photography, but Hans Sautter claims only photography. “I don’t work in a studio and paint images that wander in my brain,” he says. “I get out. I see the world. I look at the scenes, including the people, and images come to mind. I go after those images, with a camera, and capture them. It’s photography. To expose images I have to expose myself to the real world, the very real world.”

Jike-cho, Yokohama,
Japan, 2008

The nights are still cold in early April, and the land outside begins to take shape in the subtle light of predawn as Hans Sautter, photographer, slides the front door of his traditional Japanese home closed, shoulders his equipment, checks his camera, and sets out for the small pond that can be found in the part of the valley where he lives. April’s second week is upon Tokyo and Hans has a photograph in his mind’s eye. “I compose photographs in my head long before I see them through the viewfinder,” Hans says. Today, as petals fall in what the Japanese refer to as the cherry blossom blizzard, Hans hopes to find the image he sees in his mind. “Two times of the day are right for nature photos. The false dawn before the sun rises, and the jewel-box light that follows sunset.” And while some of Hans’ striking photography features a bright burning sun, most are studies in monochrome, even when they are in color. One art director called Hans the “non-available light photogra-

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pher.” The lion’s share of his work is shot in dark places or at night, handheld. “Digital is the state of the art now,” Hans says, “but one of the magazine editors I really respect prefers photographers who grew up with film. He says the quality of their work is much higher.”

LIFE AS A PHOTOGRAPHER

Born in Reutlingen, then-West Germany, Hans started what was to become his photographic career at age five, when his father gave him an Agfa Clack. He still has some of the photographs he took with that camera in the mid-1950s. Hans started traveling alone at age 15 and decided he wished to be a professional photographer at 16. He started by learning all there was to know about developing black-and-white photos in the darkroom. When he attended the Munich Academy of Photography, he took photos of Munich’s snowscapes, and turned them into stark desert-like images in the darkroom. “People told me the photos looked like they were taken in the Sahara, which piqued my curiosity. So I went to the Sahara.”

In Algeria, Hans found himself among the Tuareg people and recorded their way of life on film. At the same time, many of his Sahara landscape photos were reminiscent of the snowscapes in Munich. “The image captured on film is not the final image,” Hans says. “In those days, the image I was looking for was completed in the darkroom. Today, you might say it is completed or finalized with Photoshop, even though the changes may be slight.”

SEARCHING FOR THE IMAGE

In the early morning Hans Sautter found the right image on the pond near his home – thousands of cherry blossom petals of such pale pink that they appeared white floating on waters so dark they were nearly black – it may have been the third time he’d visited the pond that year, looking for the image he saw in his mind. That’s how he

HANS SAUTTER



He pursues projects with a highly-defined point of view, whether editorial, corporate, or architectural photography. He takes special interest in the lives of humans, their environment, and their modes of transportation. And he is especially conscious of the imminent loss of nature. His photography often sheds light on what is passing from view. He has delivered the worlds of central African Pygmies, the urban jungle of New York cabbies, the broad horizons of Australia’s roadtrain truckers, the cloistered realm of Kyoto’s geishas, the dizzying height of Chicago skyscrapers, and the windy masts of a tall ship in a storm. He has been based in Asia for more than 40 years and currently works from Tokyo, Yogyakarta, and Bangkok. His work has appeared in publications by National Geographic, Smithsonian, as well as the WWF, and in magazines such as Time, GEO, and Nature. Out from behind the camera, Hans enjoys a night at a jazz club, conversation and laughter with friends, relaxation in his very Japanese home, and extra time to sleep.

takes such magnificent photographs. If things are not right one day, he’ll come back again and again until light and circumstances meld into the image he seeks. Startling photos may contain a modicum of luck, a perfect formation of flying cranes, for example. But many of Hans’ shots of nature are premeditated. He has lived in Japan since 1972. He eventually found a home built by a master carpenter, situated in a nature preserve, far away from the thundering crowds of Tokyo, which put him in the perfect place to contemplate natural surrounds, build pictures in his mind, and tramp the valley where he lives, early in the day or late in the evening, recording those images. He also regularly goes to Indonesia, Borneo, and other countries, nowadays almost never for the first time. He has built images of those places and goes to capture them. If not this time, then the next, or the next. Still, Hans sometimes rues the shots he may have missed. He says that Borneo was covered with rain forest when he first went

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in 1976, but today only a few patches are left. Among ethnic tribes and peoples, indigenous customs and ceremonies are waning. He points to whole cultures that are dying or being assimilated. “If I could have anticipated that changes would be so fast and dramatic, I would have shot much more material then. But I thought I would be back soon, and could get them next time. In recent years I have made efforts to increase my volume in images of what is still there, before it vanishes forever.” Today we are fortunate to be able to feast our eyes on images captured by Hans Sautter, photographer.

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