HEROES

POWER

A Japanese artist specializing in the sacred puts down his camera to help Cambodian children

PLACES

BY PHIL ZABRISKIE

Kenro Izu with his massive camera at Tiger Nest Monastery in Bhutan

“I STARTED TO SEE THAT THIS IS A SACRED PLACE – A SACRED PLACE THAT EXUDES A SPECIAL KIND OF ATMOSPHERE. THAT INTERESTED ME SO MUCH”

That sounds like meditating.

In a way. But my wife knows I am far from a meditating person. I am always in a hurry. But when I get there with my camera, suddenly I can focus on one small area. I forget about everything else, like a US$600,000 shortage in the budget of the hospital. Or that I’m late on my mortgage payments or behind deadline on my commercial assignments. Everything is gone.

How did you get started?

I was a high school student and I wanted to be a medical researcher. I had a laboratory in my house. I was cultivating mold and bacteria. My room always stank. My mother hated it. And I had a microscope. My first single reflex camera was for that, to capture images of germs.

When I started thinking of which college to go to, I realized that my math was terrible. And my teacher said, “I don’t think you’re going to make medical school!” At the time, I started to enjoy the aesthetics of the mold and the germs magnified. I started taking the camera off the microscope and pointing it at landscapes and objects and people. And then, instead of medical school, I went to art college.

But you were lured away to New York, weren’t you, by this idea that photography could be art, rather than a commercial undertaking? What was your plan?

I had no plan. I couldn’t speak the language. I could afford only a one-way ticket. I had a Nikon and a Bronica and I thought I could afford only a one-way ticket. I had no plan. I couldn’t speak the language.

But you were lured away to New York, weren’t you?

By this idea that photography could be art, rather than a commercial undertaking? What was your plan?

I had no plan. I couldn’t speak the language. I could afford only a one-way ticket. I had a Nikon and a Bronica and I thought I could afford only a one-way ticket. I had no plan. I couldn’t speak the language.

How do you reply?

“| I just didn’t sense it.” It’s a very personal experience. It’s not only, “Where is the sun? Where are the clouds?” but the slightest movement of air or wind that creates a certain atmosphere that I—and only maybe I—respond to. My Tibet team thought I was meditating, because I sat by the camera for an hour without moving. I was just watching the sky and trying to sense the right moment.

This process, my photography, is not about making a catalog of the world’s sacred places, but trying to find my own passage as a man. Usually, it takes about three weeks on each trip, thinking about myself and existence and the truth and essence of life.

On a given day, he might take a few pictures. He might take some. It depends on whether or not the moment he’s waiting for—a moment he can’t describe until he sees it—is “given” to him, as he describes it.

Izu’s work has been collected in numerous books, most of them focused on “sacred spaces.” His graceful, otherworldly prints have also been exhibited in museums and galleries around the world. But the Osaka native’s most lasting legacy won’t be what he saw or captured, but what he built: the Angkor Hospital for Children in Siem Reap.

After being deeply affected by the children maimed by landmines during Cambodia’s decades of conflict, Izu mobilized his assets—his pictures and his friends—to raise money to plan, build, and administer a hospital that has now treated more than 600,000 children under the age of 15, who pay only a pittance and only if they can afford it.

He spoke to reporter Phil Zabriskie about his work and life in a bright, largely unadorned studio in an old chocolate factory in Red Hook, New York, about two hours north of New York City, where he lives with his wife, Yumiko.

To take your portraits, do you travel by yourself?

I usually form a local team. It’s India. Nandita [his assistant in India] coordinates a vehicle, translator, guide, whatever we need. If it’s a more remote area, then horse, donkey, yak, and we go wherever we want.

How does the team respond when you sit somewhere for three hours without taking a picture?

Sometimes they get frustrated because they don’t know what’s going on. Often I was asked, when I had set up a tripod and was waiting to expose for a few hours, and suddenly I click the shutter: “Mr Izu, what’s the difference from two hours ago and now?”

How do you reply?

“I just didn’t sense it.” It’s a very personal experience. It’s not only, “Where is the sun? Where are the clouds?” but the slightest movement of air or wind that creates a certain atmosphere that I—and only maybe I—respond to. My Tibet team thought I was meditating, because I sat by the camera for an hour without moving. I was just watching the sky and trying to sense the right moment.

This process, my photography, is not about making a catalog of the world’s sacred places, but trying to find my own passage as a man. Usually, it takes about three weeks on each trip, thinking about myself and existence and the truth and essence of life.

I had only $85 when I came to New York. I checked in to the YMCA and I realized that each night I had to pay $15. With no food, I thought I could survive maybe four or five days. The next day, I started to look for a job in a Japanese restaurant washing dishes. I got a job, and I continued that for three months before I found an assistant job with a Japanese photographer.
So it was really easy for me to get going. I had a hard time surpassing the first image. It's always been my challenge. It just happened. I think it was given to me. This was completely unintentional.

It took thousands of pictures. I was a totally naive photographer. I took everything because I didn't know what I was looking for. This image is the only picture that struck me. I pinned it up on my darkroom wall. Each time I passed by, I looked at it. Why is it so interesting to me? I started to see that this is a sacred place—a sacred place that exudes a special kind of atmosphere. That interested me so much. I wanted to see more of these places.

Then I was really motivated and I started doing more. I went to Egypt, and the pyramids in Mexico; those two places in a year. Then I was quite moved. Back then, partial war was still happening. Very few tourists came. Then I sensed other things. I looked. There are more people in your pictures these days. The first two years in Bhutan, I was purely trying to photograph the atmosphere surrounding the sacred spaces. But I started to feel that something was missing. And I realized that sacred spaces would not be there without the people who created them, who maintained them when the pilgrims come. I started to think, when I was blown out from the corridor. I thought this was a warning. I felt like I was somehow in a place. I know what’s in my heart: “Please excuse me. I am coming here and in no way trying to invade or deny anything about your religion. I respect you and please allow me for one day, two days, to take pictures.” And when I leave, I say, “Thank you for allowing me to be here.”

What are you working on now? I'm working on something that will be titled “India: Sacred Within.” It's the sacred sites of India plus the people living and working around them. Through those people, I guess I'm trying to see myself.

There are more people in your pictures these days. The first two years in Bhutan, I was purely trying to photograph the atmosphere surrounding the sacred spaces. But I started to feel that something was missing. And I realized that sacred spaces would not be there without the people who created them, who maintained them when the pilgrims come. I started to think, when I was blown out from the corridor. I thought this was a warning. I felt like I was somehow in a place. I know what’s in my heart: “Please excuse me. I am coming here and in no way trying to invade or deny anything about your religion. I respect you and please allow me for one day, two days, to take pictures.” And when I leave, I say, “Thank you for allowing me to be here.”

When did you first go to Angkor? In 1993. I thought there was life, a sense of life that was lost. Actually, it was quite a down time for my photography. I divorced in the late 1980s, and I was in a very good condition. I cancelled a trip and I decided to go back home. It was a very good time for me. But I was feeling such an embrace, like a baby in a mother’s arms. I felt so warm and happy. After that, I started to realize I wanted to give that kind of feeling to kids who need help.

How did you get started? When I came back, I thought, “I don’t want to take any money from these Angkor pictures. I will try to raise money through photography.” I talked to gallery owner Howard Greenburg. I said, “Let’s have a show, but I don’t want to take any money. I want to raise $1 million through my sales and build a hospital for kids in Cambodia.” Talked to many galleries I have business with. I said, “I have done, don’t take commissions.” The first year, we got $300,000. It’s amazing. I am giving all the people who participated sold in my dream or they trusted me. Then, two donors in Japan were willing to match my commitment. So that was $900,000. That was our construction money.

I am very much concerned. We have a spring gala planned and I don’t think it’s going to be easier than usual. We try to focus on personal relationships. That was one reason why we have been successful with auctions. But this crisis lasts long… people’s investments will be smashed. We have to be very creative. We just hired a new CEO to lead fund-raising and management of the organization. So I will kind of step aside.

The staff is a mix of Cambodians and foreigners. When we opened the hospital we had 30 staff. Among them are five foreign permanent staff plus numerous volunteers from all over the world who stay. They don’t have a residency program in Cambodia. So we’re now serving, almost like a residency program, a three-year program to doctors and nurses.

You’re training doctors, too? If we educate more physicians, more health workers and nurses, and administrators for the hospital, we can have a bigger impact. With the Klimek Rosae, Cambodia lost a generation of doctors and professors. They should have been the mentor of young doctors, but they’ve gone. We want to recreate that lost generation. So our senior doctors in the hospital are now in their mid-to-late 30s. If we continue another 10 years, they’ll be the doctors who can teach at universities or hospitals or wherever. I think that’s the most important thing for the country.

How is your time divided between the hospital and photography? When we are having particular things happening in the hospital, I am 100 percent involved in that. When I travel, I leave the computer behind. Cell phone behind me. I am completely free.

Does it feel like a good balance? I need more time.