



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

PROFANE PLACES

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

BY PHIL ZABRISKIE

KENRO IZU'S CAMERA doesn't look like most cameras you've seen. When it's assembled, the custom-built, large-format device looks like a massive version of cameras from the age of silent pictures. It weighs close to 130kg. The negatives are so thick and heavy that Izu can only bring about 80 of them on a trip.

And travel Izu does. After a car, van or beast of burden has lugged his gear to his desired destination, Izu looks for a place to set up and then waits. And waits. And waits.

COURTESY OF KENRO IZU

On a given day, he might take a few pictures. He might take none. 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

“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”

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 *POWER*'s 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. If 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 me – 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.

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 would sell those and come home when I needed to. My mother was very upset. She told me, “Finish and graduate [at a course in Japan] and I will send you to America.” But I thought if I waited two years, my enthusiasm and interest might fade. I think I was right, but I ran out of money.

And?

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.

📍 **Sounds like you were pretty determined not to go back home.**

I was just young and foolish, I guess, with nothing to fear.

And after several years of commercial work you started doing the kind of work you do now?

Yes. Before age 30 – 29 years and 10 months – I realized that I had made my mother upset when I came here. I didn't even graduate college. I realized my real goal was about exploring photography as an art. So I decided I would take a break from commercial photography and I would go somewhere with my camera. I was always interested in the pyramids, so I went to Egypt for one month. I came back and I continued my commercial work, but one picture really struck me. I'll show you. *[He digs through files and brings back a black and white photo capturing a pyramid beneath a darkly moody sky, with a series of low-slung stone structures in the foreground.]*

I took thousands of pictures. I was a totally naïve photographer. I took everything because I didn't know what I was looking for. This [picture] 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 Stonehenge and the pyramids in Mexico, those two places in a year. And then I started to see why I was making these journeys to remote corners of the world, on top of mountains, to deserts. I started to see this is a pilgrimage to find myself.

I will be 60 this year, and I'm still looking for myself. It's kind of embarrassing. At this age, I should know myself.

Do you still like this photo from Egypt?

In a way, I have a hard time seeing my pictures today exceeding the purity of this image. This was completely unintentional. It just happened. I think it was given to me. I have several pictures in my career I feel I was given, that my effort was rewarded somehow. I set the camera for three days and waited from sunrise to sunset. And for three days, not one moment, until someone said, "Give him it." And I happened to click it. But I've had a hard time surpassing the first image. It's always been my challenge.

Have you really gone three days without taking a picture?

Oh, more.



"LET'S HAVE A SHOW, BUT I DON'T WANT TO TAKE ANY MONEY. I WANT TO RAISE \$1 MILLION FOR KIDS IN CAMBODIA. I TALKED TO GALLERIES. I SAID: 'THIS ONCE, DON'T TAKE COMMISSIONS' "

What are you working on now?

India. It 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, cleaning, sweeping, bringing flowers or just coming to pray.

Bhutan was a very good place to start. They don't push their egos. Desire for materialism is minimal. Although in recent years, Bhutan started to open the doors and materialism came in. Even my guide for six years, he asked me to bring him an iPhone.

I read that you say a little prayer before going into these spaces.

That came from a very scary experience in Egypt. On one trip, I went into a tomb in a great pyramid. Me and my Egyptian

friend and another American couple. As we were coming up the stairway, we had a strong sensation, something pushed us back, almost like we were blown out from the corridor. I thought this was a warning. I felt like I invaded somewhere. Ever since, I always say what's in my heart: "Please excuse me. I am coming here and in no way trying to invade you 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 I was looking for. Actually, that was quite a down time for my photography. I divorced in the late 1980s, and I was not in very good condition. I cancelled a trip and I cancelled an exhibition, too. I did a few trips but I wasn't really very enthusiastic. That was the time I saw Angkor, the trees, the roots growing like snakes. So I just packed and went. I stayed a few weeks. Of course that's where I saw the children who were mine victims.

Is it true you wouldn't show anyone your pictures from there?

COURTESY OF KENRO IZU (2)



A tiny patient gets treatment at Angkor Hospital for Children in Siem Reap, Cambodia. *Opposite: Izu with some former patients of the hospital, at Angkor Wat.*

TAKE ANY MONEY. I WANT TO RAISE TO GALLERIES. I SAID: 'THIS ONCE, DON'T

I had a sense that I had always been taking from others – taking love from my parents, wisdom from my teachers, pictures from those places I visit – without returning anything. I think it was fate when I saw the children. I don't know why I thought of a hospital. Maybe it was my childhood dream – I was going to be a doctor who helped people who were dying – in a different form.

That's when you had the idea for a hospital?

On the first trip I saw many mine victims. When I went to Cambodia a second time, I was quite moved. Back then, partial war was still going on. Very few tourists came [to Angkor]. I was walking around one temple, in the corridors, and I sensed something behind me. I looked back and nobody was there. Then I sensed other things. I looked. Nothing. And suddenly, I start tearing [up]. There's no reason for it. 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 it 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." I talked to many galleries I have business with. I said: "This once, don't take commissions." The first year, we got \$300,000. It's amazing. I guess all the people who participated believed 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.

Did you have trouble with corruption or bureaucracy?

A little. But I think back then the government was desperate for any kind of aid from foreign money. So they gave me good conditions.

The hospital is specifically for children?

Yes, children under 15.

And it's free?

It's free. We ask for contribution of 1,000 riel, which is about 25 cents, for the first consultation, and half that for the second visit. Only 20 or 30 percent can afford it.

Most of the farming families are really poor, so they're exempt. We give [treatment] mostly free. Annual income from consultation fees is about \$8,000 and we spend \$2 million.

Do people come from around the country?

Mostly from the neighboring provinces, but some of them come as far as a three-day car ride.

You've been creative raising money with photography auctions and other ventures, but are you worried about finding funding during this economic crisis?

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 rely on personal relationships. That was one reason why we have been successful with auctions. But if 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 Cambodia and foreigners?

When we opened the hospital we had 38 staff. Among them are five foreign permanent staff plus numerous volunteers from all over the world who teach. They don't have a residency program in Cambodia. So we're now serving almost like an official residency program, a three-year program for doctors and a one-year program for nurses.

You're training doctors, too?

If we educate more physicians, more health workers and more administrators for the hospital, we can leave a bigger impact. With the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia lost a generation of doctors and professors. They should have been the mentors of young doctors, but they're gone. We are trying 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 big universities or hospitals or wherever. I think that is 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. Then when I travel, I leave the computer behind, cell phone behind. I am completely free.

Does it feel like a good balance?

I need more time. ■