

The Mouth of The Kenai

SEPTEMBER 17, 2014 · 4:40 PM

Plugged In: Good showing takes theme, thought



Illustration 1

By Joe Kashi, for the Redoubt Reporter

Several readers have asked how to put together a photo exhibit. Although I can't speak for others, I'll describe this week how I gradually developed my own photo exhibit now hanging at Kenai Peninsula College's Gary L. Freeburg Gallery through Oct. 10.

It's my belief that organizing a show around a generally coherent theme works better than simply throwing together a group of strong but unrelated images. When images reflect a consistent concept and body of work, they support each other. If good images are carefully selected, then the resulting exhibit should convey coherent overall content and a visual impression that's stronger than the sum of the separate images.

Finding a theme that ties together your images is an obvious first step. While technical



“Winter Window Veronicas”

proficiency is necessary, it's not sufficient to carry a weak concept to a satisfactory conclusion. The art's in the message, not the medium. Unfortunately, the concept for my current Kenai Peninsula College show came together only slowly and, at first, rather vaguely.

In early 2013 I shot a number of possible images at Nazi Germany's infamous Dachau concentration camp near Munich. One of our Soldotna Rotary Club members was among the 42nd Division soldiers who liberated Dachau in 1945, and he expressed a willingness to speak to a wider audience about his experiences. Although the Dachau photos suggested a possible theme, my sense was that there were not enough strong images to sustain a complete, 20- to 25-image solo exhibit.

Matters remained unresolved for several months. By chance, I independently made



“Under the 2014 Fire Front at Skilak Lake”

another photo that slowly “grew” on me. That photo, of two shadowy figures on a wall, is set out here as this week’s Illustration 1. This photo struck me as an appropriate key image around which to organize an exhibit, both suggesting and exemplifying the overall emotional experience of the Dachau photos.

A strong key image is not enough. The exhibit’s theme still required further conceptual development. It’s not very convincing to simply assert that a bunch of photos fit together without articulating why.

An intermediate step on the path to refining the organizing concept occurred earlier this year when I found myself musing upon the key image and writing the following haiku, a broad-brush image of the overall exhibit. Including the often-vague verbal imagery of haiku seems to work with photographic exhibits, encouraging viewers to imagine and project their own internal experience in to the exhibit’s photographs.



“Shadowed Window”

Fleeting Images

As our shadows brush
the walls of eternity,
fleeting images.

Many of the photographs I then selected are intentionally ambiguous, only partially representational or taken out of their larger context and, thus, less obvious. Several are shadowy, and intentionally so. I hoped that viewers would take the time and effort to individually “read” the images in light of their own life experiences and values, looking beyond the superficial images and finding something personally meaningful in the context of the juxtaposition of the Dachau and the notion of our fleeting existence. A major



“Gas Chamber – Dachau”

problem was how to present the selected Dachau images. Separately, none are particularly powerful. The solution seemed to be a sequence in which multiple images are arranged in a more tightly integrated, mutually supporting manner. Think of a sequence of this sort as a suggestive emotional narrative rather than explicit, start-to-finish documentation.

With my Epson 7900 roll paper printer, I could print the seven selected images on a single long 24-inch-wide roll, but properly mounting and presenting that long image sequence was a major problem. Brian at Frames and Things in Soldotna suggested printing all of the images on a single long strip of exhibit-grade photo canvas, with black background and borders. The canvas was then stretched and gallery wrapped on a 12-foot-long custom canvas stretcher. That worked very well, and at a reasonable price. Elsewhere in the exhibit I included a photo of the Dachau visitor center restroom, whose eerie lighting and hyper-cleanliness evident in the photo gave a sense that the “ghosts” of Dachau persist.



“Discarded Daffodils”

In choosing the images for the exhibit, I was guided by the philosophical thoughts contained in Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” one of the best-known analyses underlying our Western “theory of knowledge.” In his “Allegory,” Plato posits a group of prisoners held in a dark cave, tied and

bound, facing away from a bright fire, seeing only projected shadows on the cave's wall. Inevitably, the bound prisoners mistake the fleeting images of those shadows for fundamental knowledge, failing to understand that the shadows on the cave wall are merely superficial projections of unseen actual objects between the light and them.

Only after shaking off their bonds, turning and seeing the actual three-dimensional objects do some prisoners free themselves of their perceptual and cultural bonds, in the process



"Farnsworth Park Light"

learning of a reality deeper than superficial appearances. Mindful of his teacher Socrates' execution by supposedly enlightened Athens, Plato warns of the danger to those who gain knowledge and then challenge society's comfortable belief in the reality of shadows.

Plato's rational analysis pervades Western culture, particularly the physical sciences. In a complementary fashion, certain Eastern traditions, notably Zen, likewise encourage delving into the true nature of "reality" by intuition transcending superficial appearances. When these complementary approaches are combined, deeper insight into the ultimate nature of "reality" become possible. From such insights are born the cultural and scientific shifts by which society lurches forward from time to time.

Art, particularly the ambiguous images that I tried to include in this exhibit, plays an important role in this process by providing both the stimulus and the means to intuitively delve beneath the superficial. It is no accident that acclaimed, scientifically oriented universities, such as MIT, require every undergraduate to fulfill more semester credits in



“Last Roses”

creative subjects like art, music and writing, than in advanced mathematics and the physical sciences. MIT and others know that rational scientific methods and intuitive creativity fostered by the arts complement each other in a very practical way when training the engineers and scientists who make creative technical breakthroughs. It’s worth recalling that Einstein’s description of himself, emphasizing his intuitive leaps, was that he was an “artist of science.”

One all-too-easy trap when selecting images is to choose solely what personally appeals to us. That appeal may arise from internal reasons that don’t travel well for other viewers. For the same reason that good writers benefit from good editors, seek candid professional help when selecting your best images. While putting together this exhibit, I greatly benefited from the advice and kind help of KPC art professor Cam Choy, who I wish to thank.

Although the exhibit is already up and available for viewing at KPC during regular college



“Electrified Fence Detail – Dachau”

hours, the opening reception is from 4:30 to 6 p.m. Sept. 25 in the Brockel Building’s Freeburg Gallery.

Stop by the reception and let me know if you think the exhibit works or misses the mark. For those interested more in history than art, we’re anticipating a talk about liberating Dachau at about 5 p.m. that night from one of the World War II veterans who stormed that evil place in 1945.

Local attorney Joe Kashi received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from MIT and his law degree from Georgetown University. Many of his technology and photography articles can be accessed through his website, www.kashilaw.com.

Advertisements



Sprint Business

See how as-a-Service has become the best way to get everything from software to mobile devices and data plans.

[Learn more](#)