

ARTIST'S CORNER

*Editors Note: Michael Gordon was an Artist-In-Residence in 2011.
His exhibit was entitled "The Joshua Tree"*

By: Michael Gordon

For more than a quarter of a century I have passionately explored, hiked, and photographed every corner of California's deserts with a distinct emphasis on the Mojave. With consistently higher elevations and greater average annual rainfall, the Mojave Desert is a botanically rich and diverse desert which provides ideal habitat for numerous species of cacti, flowering shrubs, wildflowers, the iconic Joshua tree, and much more. It also provides ideal habitat for this photographic artist. And like generations of desert rats preceding me, I fell deeply under the spell of the Mojave.

I repeatedly tried but failed to turn up any historic photographers who had worked intensively and exclusively in monochrome with a fine art approach to California's deserts. I then realized that I could be that artist, one whose work could be intimately associated with the deserts of California. I had walked into many of the desert's most remote canyons and climbed on mountain flanks and stood upon their summits. I had spent an untold number of days in the wide open silence and slept an equal number of nights on the ground under a dark sky brightly illuminated by the Milky Way (it has been recently suggested that as many as 80% of children born today will never see the Milky Way or starry nights). I was hooked by every enchanting bit of the California desert and wanted to tell its secret stories. I wanted to share my desert experiences with those who already were lovers and sought to change the minds of those who too easily dismissed the desert as "ugly" or "boring" without even knowing what is there.

The California desert is my ideal artistic habitat. I need plenty of silence and space to roam and no one around to interfere with either - the desert offers this in spades. After some number of years of



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photography here, consistent and obvious themes began to emerge from my work: desert plant studies; geologic landforms; and simple meditations on space, light, and silence (I can't explain how to visually convey silence but I hear it in my images). These realizations provide a guide for my artistic endeavors: I can simply and joyfully wander with my camera to see what I find, or I can specifically set out to further develop evolving and growing bodies of work.

In 2011, I had the honor of being selected as Artist in Residence at the Mojave National Preserve. It was probably some twenty years earlier when I made my first photographic study of a Joshua tree, but it was likely a superficial portrait of a beautiful tree in beautiful light with little substance. Over the next twenty years, I read and studied much about *Yucca brevifolia*. The Joshua tree - which is not actually a tree - now had deeper dimensions and much more significance. I became fascinated by this unusual yucca and wanted to share this fascination with others.

From approximately 2008 to 2011 (the year of my Residency at Mojave National Preserve), Joshua trees became a primary focus of my work. Although I photographed them across the four states in which they are found, most of my work was made at home in California, and much of it in Mojave National Preserve. The Preserve provides all the important ingredients I require: vastness, silence, few people, and the largest Joshua tree forest known to man. I routinely explored the forest periphery, seeking charismatic specimens who stood alone against the ravages of time and weather. I walked slowly, meditatively, and in a heightened state of awareness. The trees often called out and asked to be photographed. They very often would tell me their name before I would ever expose a sheet of film. I used a 100+ year old diffused focus lens on a 4x5" large format view camera to complete the timeless visual aesthetic I sought.

Twenty-something years ago I would have never imagined a creative and artistic life based almost exclusively on the Mojave Desert. I now cannot imagine life without it.