



RUSS CHRISTOFF:

LUMINOUS MNEMONICS

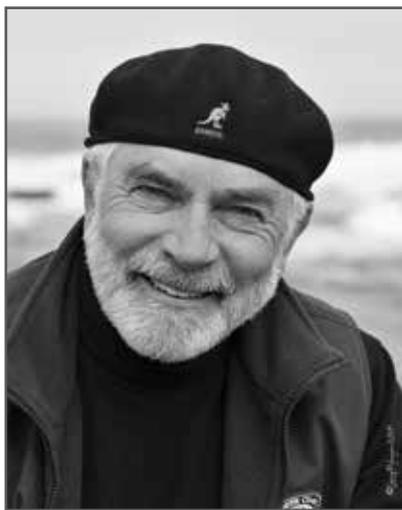
By Michael Potts

His images jump off the gallery wall: colors border surreal, a curious blend of sharpness and painterly softness artfully elevate our common scenes – looking back to the village from the point, Point Cabrillo Lighthouse – into doorways to memories of a perfect day in Mendocino.

“It’s all in the bracketing,” Russ Christoff explains. “I hold the button down and my camera takes three exposures of the same view, one for the highlights, one ‘correctly exposed,’ and one for the shadows. Then I blend the images, taking the best-exposed bits from each. The technique is called HDR, High Dynamic Range.”

Russ has been lugging five pounds of high tech camera around Mendocino for a few years. “I like showing people the way I see things, but I don’t want them to merely look, I want them to really see. My interpretations of the North Coast are meant to evoke dreamlike images and, perhaps, take the viewer to another place – this is my mantra.”

Russ’ interest in photography began when he was a combat medic with the Marines in Viet Nam. “My dad gave me his old camera. We weren’t supposed to be



Larry Wagner photo.

Left: Mendocino Bluffs. Right: Before the Storm.

taking pictures of the war, so I only photographed friends. On the way home, on Okinawa being ‘recivilized,’ I invested in my first Nikon. . . my cameras ever since.” Back home, Russ was a nurse, model, actor, and voice-over artist before settling in to teaching third graders in Antioch, California. Telling his life, Russ laughs, adding “and I was the former face on 300,000 jars of Taster’s Choice [coffee].”

“When I was in front of the camera, I constantly picked the brains of those on the other side for tips about lighting, staging, composition,” Russ recalls.

In the late ‘90s, Russ and his wife Genie shot a TV show, *Traveling California State Parks*, that can still be seen on YouTube. “A grueling four-year project. Both of us were teaching, editing at night. We consciously shot ‘with legs,’ meaning we avoided things that would make the film look dated, like images of cars. I understand the series is still playing on educational stations around the country.”

“I started learning about composition. Now I like to wander Mendocino, getting the flavor, trying to shoot the familiar in a different way. Pushing the button only starts the process. I may not know there’s a story when I



Left: Kasten St. Sunrise. Right: Noyo Harbor. Available sizes: 12" x 18", 22" x 32", 30" x 45", and 40" x 60", with or without frames.

click – sometimes I think there’s a story and later discover there isn’t. I work to find the story. The fact is, a meaningful story accompanies each image; otherwise there is no reason the piece should be exhibited – because then it is just a photograph.”

Following his career as a teacher, Mendocino beckoned. “We have made closer friends here than in 25 years in Antioch. The Mendocino Art Center and the creativity of the art world it attracts just falls right into how we feel,” Russ says.

The vividness of Russ’ HDR images is the result of new technology. “I’m a late bloomer,” he jokes. “I came to digital photography late. I didn’t take the hint when I asked my salesman for a Nikon F and he replied, ‘We haven’t sold one of those in awhile. . .’ Poking around the Ark Thrift Store, I found a 25¢ photo magazine with an article about HDR that really triggered a burst of creativity for me.

“Right now, I’m shooting with a Nikon 7200 with 24 megapixels. . . but unless you’re enlarging images beyond the common 8" x 10", you really don’t need all those megapixels; four is plenty. Many cameras do in-camera HDR, but I prefer to control the process. Aside from blending the bracketed images, I do very little image manipulation. I shoot landscapes because, for me, that’s where the compelling stories are.

“I’m always trying to capture color the way we saw it when we were 12 years old. The luminosity of my finished photographs results from the way they are rendered onto polished aluminum. The image itself is translucent,

and so light comes to your eye from the mirror surface of the metal. There’s a sense of depth you don’t get with paper. Compared to paper prints, these images reproduce more faithfully what we see with our eyes. The dyes are remarkably permanent – they say 1,000 years – and the polyurethane coating makes them scratch resistant. Not an inexpensive process, but if the story’s there, it’s more than worth the cost.”

In college, Russ, a business major, studied marketing. Combined with his experience in front of the camera, this provides a pragmatic attitude toward the business of art. “Setting ‘Art’ aside, I want to create things people can actually use. I have artistic pieces from around the world . . . but people don’t come to Mendocino for a picture of the Acropolis. I want to do what’s right for my customer, and that’s not a typical artistic viewpoint. Selling a photo, I’m not thrilled by the transaction, but I really enjoy hearing a buyer say, ‘your picture really moves me.’ So I deliberately price my work lower than the market will bear.”

Asked if he ever considers teaching photography, he’s quick to protest: “I could tell about the ‘Rule of Three’ in about five minutes, and I’m done. That’s the most important thing. I’m so much more interested in staying on the learning side: if I can learn one new thing each day, I’m content to be living here in paradise!”

Russ Christoff’s work can be found at the Mendocino Art Center and at Edgewater Gallery in Fort Bragg.