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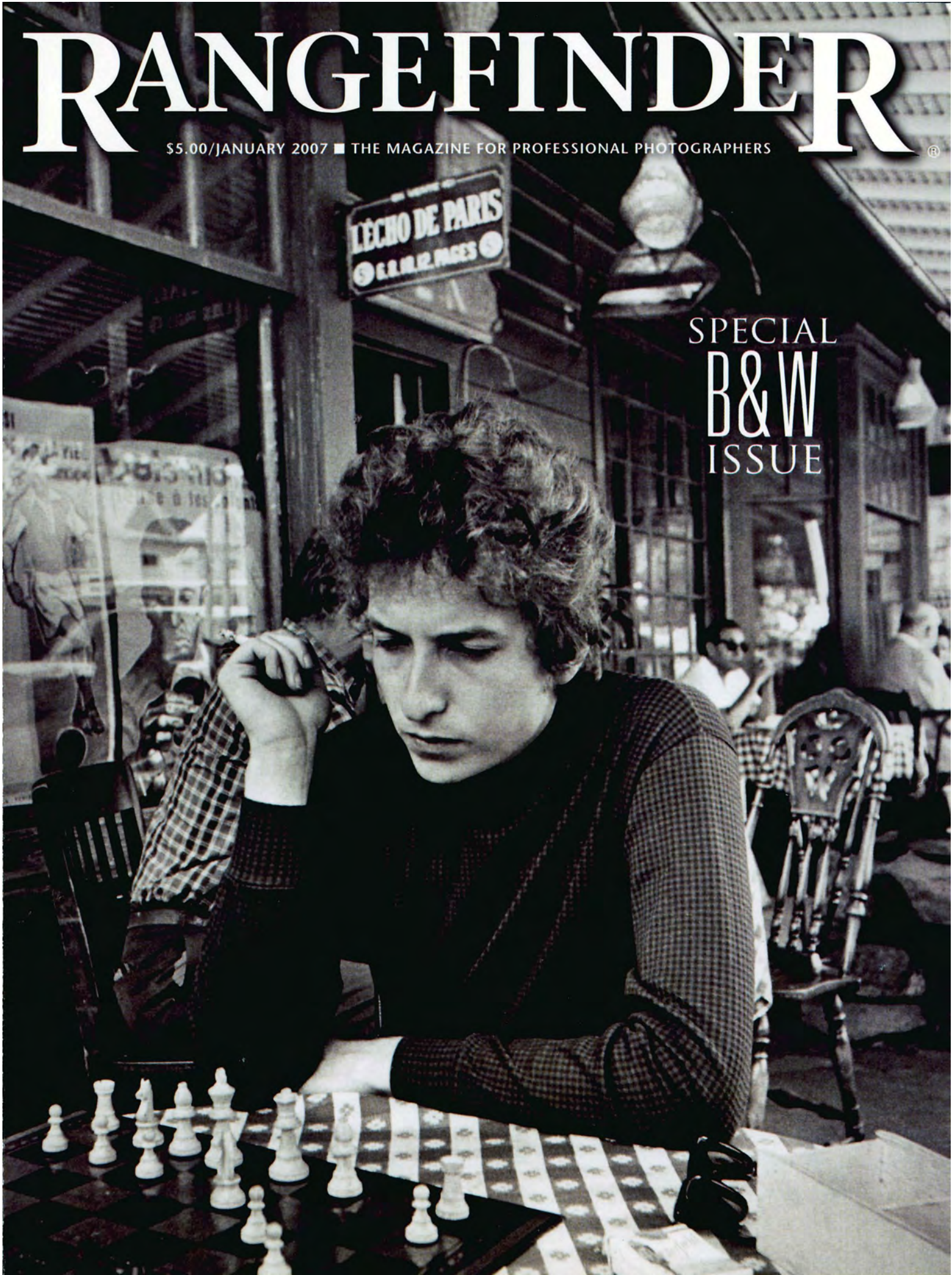


SPECIAL B&W ISSUE

PROFILE:

DOUG BUSCH

Story by
Larry Brownstein

Meet Doug Busch: inventor, master technician, uncompromising artist. In his Southwestern phase he desired maximum print quality. A 4x5 camera was not sufficient. An 8x10 camera was not quite up to the task. There was only one thing to do: design a camera and lenses that would allow him to fulfill his grand vision. He designed 8x20-, 12x20-, 14x17-, 20x24- and 40x60-inch cameras (the 40x60 is the world's largest "portable" camera) with lenses, film holders and cases, fabricated by his company de Golden Busch. He even had Eastman Kodak make his favorite emulsion, Super-XX, in all formats. Each exposure was inspection-developed in Pyrogallic Acid to prevent blowing out the highlights. Each negative was contact printed on Azo paper and developed with Amidol. No matter how close you get to one of those prints, you won't see any blurriness or grain, as they were not enlarged.

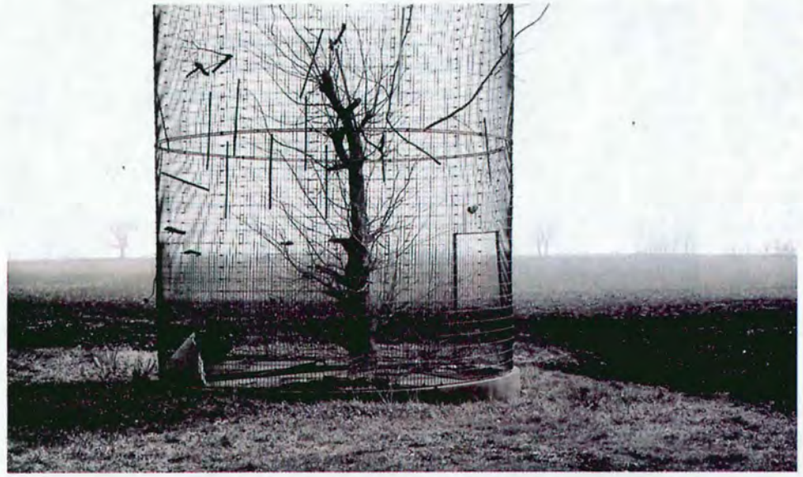
Once, while Busch was living in Chicago, he decided he needed to make a vertical shot of Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly, Arizona. He designed and built a camera, then drove across the country, exposed only two sheets of film with his 12x20 camera, and headed back home. The first sheet was developed perfectly, so the second sheet was discarded. It remains one of his popular prints.

Earlier in his career, around 1970, Busch was doing 35mm street photography along the lines of Garry Winogrand and Lee Friedlander. A workshop led by Al Weber in Carmel, California, gave him a new direction. Weber also helped him get jobs with Morley Baer and Ansel Adams. Busch moved to Carmel and adopted large format photography with cameras from 4x5 to 20x24.

Busch is not one to be pigeonholed. Though he was trained in the Ansel Adams tradition, his Southwestern landscapes have his own distinct mark upon them, with a great emphasis on the urban landscape. He has been one to follow his artistic impulses in many other directions: street photography, self-portraits, nudes, social documentary, European gardens and much more. As he says, "I could have been a rocks-and-flowers photographer my whole life, but I now feel a need for there to be social relevance to my work."

He mentions that when his daughter was about 12 years old, she got a new pair of jeans and was admiring how she looked in them. This was a time when she was focused on what others thought of her and her physical appearance, and she was very susceptible to the influence of advertising. Busch said to her, "You look like you are supposed to look. If God wanted you to look different, he would have made you look different." His daughter's perspective bothered him, and it got him to thinking about how people are trained by our culture to feel like they are not enough unless they have the trendiest jeans, the perfect physique, the right look. This thought process led him to consider the theme of *being enough*—the idea each of us is important regardless of our position in society and the clothes we wear.

Busch explored these ideas with his *Street Nudes* series. These photos depict groups of homeless people, leaning against or draped around one another. In some of these images, the subjects have sores and bruises that are quite visible. Despite the striking nature of the photographs, what is most apparent is that



Busch has captured their dignity. The huge prints (*Three Women*, a collage of three images, measures 50x90 inches) make a bold statement.

Busch's latest series, *Waves*, is an entirely new direction for him. The series has inspired much positive feedback and represents a real breakthrough in his work. One can understand why: Busch used a point-and-shoot digital camera rather than his usual large format view camera, he chose to print in color rather than black and white, and the prints have an ethereal softness, as opposed to his razor-sharp 12x20-inch contact prints. Breakthrough or not, the genesis of the series gives an interesting glimpse into his artistic process.

Not long ago, Busch and his wife were renting a beach house in Malibu, California. Because Busch is a smoker and his wife is asthmatic, he makes it a habit to smoke outside. So he often found himself outside, smoking on the deck with the ocean crashing below it and a view of the ocean. On these occasions he had a point-and-shoot digital camera with him. He began to see some possibilities and kept using the camera on his repeated visits to the deck. And, without making a conscious decision, he had begun a new direction.

In the viewing area of his studio, Busch showed me a few dozen of the *Waves* prints. Most of them are glowing with scintillating and seemingly unnatural color, though none of them are manipulated to add color. Many of the images are taken at dawn, and the color is a combination of the first light of day in conjunction with the light pollution from nearby Los Angeles. Amazingly, some of the images are yellow, some green, some black; many of them show great similarity to Mark Rothko's paintings, in which two colors often play off each other. Who knows—perhaps Rothko, too, was inspired by the play of light on the waves of the Pacific.

Busch is represented by G. Ray Hawkins, who for many years had a photography gallery in Los Angeles. When Hawkins first saw the photos, he knew immediately that there was something special about them.

"A lot of photographers since 1839 have been photographing the ocean," he says. "Ansel Adams photographed the ocean. Weston photographed the ocean. Just like a lot of photographers have photographed clouds. But when you see one by Stieglitz, you know it is by Stieglitz. When you see an ocean view by Sugimoto, you know it's by Sugimoto. What makes those different from everybody else? The answer is that the photograph is really coming from inside. It is really a photograph of something inside the artist's head, and he uses the subject matter to show himself to the viewer. This particular body of work that Doug has done is just that. All of the cerebral perfection he has applied to his work in the past has been completely bypassed. The brain has been completely bypassed. And the photographs are absolutely intuitive and from the heart."

Hawkins goes on to describe the experience of viewing one of the large prints: "When you are standing in front of these 6x6-foot photographs, you are mesmerized. You can't break away. You stare at it, and it transports you to a different place. And if you let yourself go, even if you have never seen the ocean, it takes you there, and it gives that experience of just being in awe of something, and you don't know what the heck it is. And the reason you don't know is because it is something internal. Doug didn't photograph waves. He photographed himself. He photographed his own emotional content one frame at a time. He simply used the ocean as a vehicle to do that."

Busch says that he has about 100 proj-

ects going at a time—how's that for multi-tasking? He mentions another project that he has begun—photographing the members of the Bloods and Crips, two of the most notorious Los Angeles-based street gangs. Busch has teamed up with a longtime friend, film director Antoine Fuqua. Fuqua has helped Busch gain access to Monster, the leader of the Crips, as well as other members of the gang. He is also in contact with Bone, the leader of the Bloods. Busch and Fuqua intend to photograph the gang members on their home turf. Busch plans to shoot in alleys with an 8x10 camera and an 1870s portrait lens. He also expects to photograph the mothers of the gang members, interiors of their homes, and the funerals that are an inevitable part of gang life. He has several museums interested in the project and a book publisher on board as well.

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The fine art world is known as a tough nut to crack. Busch says that in the early days he would often plan trips to visit museums and galleries in New York or Chicago to drop off his portfolios. "Galleries aren't open to seeing you, but they are open to seeing the work," he says.

He would do this every six months, bringing three portfolios each time. Busch used the subway to complete his rounds, as he didn't have much money. He would make arrangements to drop off the portfolios at three galleries, and then pick them up the next morning. Then he would do the next drop-off at three more galleries, repeating the process. Hustling like that got him connected with galleries and collected in museums.

"There are three things they want to see: That the work is valid, that you have a history and are not a dilettante who is going to walk away in five years, and that you have an exhibition schedule." Busch goes on to note that galleries are a business first and foremost, so they need to feel confident in an artist. Lastly, he emphasizes, one of the most important things a photographer has to do is "edit, edit, edit." Don't put anything in a portfolio that is *almost* the way you want it: It has to be finished and perfect.

Busch teaches many workshops and is a great proponent of the Zone System. He uses his understanding of exposure and darkroom chemistry to optimize his negatives. A good case in point is the Santa Monica Pier image, which appeared on the cover of his book *Tides in Time*. Remarkably, with such a high-contrast scene, he managed to capture detail in the shadows and in the highlights.

Busch has come a long way from his first job earning 50 cents an hour assisting a photographer at the 1968 Republican National Committee Convention in Miami. G. Ray Hawkins recently sold two of his large (6 x 6-feet) photos from the *Silent Waves* series for $25,000 each. Busch says the smaller prints at 23x23 inches are "selling like hotcakes."

Busch has a show about to open at Caprice Horn Gallery in Berlin, and his *Italian Gardens* book is nearing completion, with a traveling exhibition and book signing at the International Museum of Garden Art in Düsseldorf in the works. He has been busy with his *Vestiges* project, which was traveling through Germany and France until the end of 2006. With his commitment to his craft and art, Doug Busch's reputation will continue to grow; he will no longer will be, in the words of one of his collectors, "the best kept secret in photography."

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Larry Brownstein is a photographer and author of the books Los Angeles, Where Anything is Possible *and* The Midnight Mission. *His photos appear in numerous books, magazines, calendars, etc. His stock photography is represented by Getty Images. He has a growing wedding photography business. His work can be seen at www.larrybrownstein.com.*