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ON THE COVER
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FEATURES

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STEPHEN JOHNSON
ON THE DIGITAL FRONTIER

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manipulation of images,
Johnson believes landscape
should be presented as
faithfully as possible.



Tokosha Mountains, Denali National Park, Alaska.
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ON THE DIGITAL FRONTIER

BY STEVEN BLISS



YOU COULD SAY THAT THE HISTORY OF LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY IS AS MUCH ABOUT

INVENTIVE CAMERA SETUPS AS IT IS ABOUT AESTHETICS. THE RENEWED CRITICAL interest in someone like Carleton Watkins, for example, reminds us that the earliest landscape photographs in the United States required the photographer to handle huge slabs of glass and a large, cumbersome wooden box. Many years later, the imposing image of Ansel Adams's camera and tripod perched atop his automobile became almost as iconic as his photographs themselves. And now, years after Adams, some of the most important landscape images are being captured by a photographer who carries a digital sensor and a laptop computer into some of the most revered places in America.

Stephen Johnson, the preeminent digital landscape photographer, is now in the final months of field work on an ambitious digital photographic survey of the national parks. When Johnson began *With a New Eye: The Digital National Parks Project* in 1994, he intended to shoot maybe eight to 12 parks over the course of approximately three years. Five years later, Johnson has shot in 48 parks, from Acadia in Maine to Volcanoes in Hawaii and from Alaska's Denali to Florida's Everglades. Johnson plans to wrap up the field work after he visits his fiftieth park.

But the sheer scope of *With a New Eye* is really just a small part of what makes the project groundbreaking. Johnson is both undertaking the first major digital project that concentrates solely on landscape, and producing the highest resolution photographs ever taken of the parks. He gets a jaw-dropping 6000x8000 pixels of resolution from his digital apparatus, which includes a 4x5 view camera and either a Dicomed or BetterLight digital scanning insert. The images appear on a laptop connected to the digital scanner, so Johnson can imme-

had seen. Then, in the late 1970s, he started shooting at Mono Lake, the renowned high desert basin in eastern California whose water level has been dropping steadily since 1940, when the city of Los Angeles began diverting the lake's main sources of fresh water. Fascinated with trying to capture the effects of the high desert light on the colors around the lake, Johnson started exclusively using color negative film in hopes of finding a way to print the soft shades of color exactly as he saw them.

"I kept spending more and more time in the darkroom trying to print the negatives as neutral and as reflective of the pastels that I was seeing out there as I could," Johnson said. "I was tired of all of this dead, dark oversaturated color I was seeing in so much work. It didn't look like the world I was seeing, and it missed the most fundamental component of being there in a photographic sense, which is the quality of light. I was seeing pastels all over the place, but I wasn't seeing them in any photographs."

This experience presented Johnson with an aesthetic challenge that would define his career as a photographer. In addition, the work he did at Mono Lake gave Johnson the opportunity to do his first major landscape exhibit. In 1979, he collaborated with photographers Al Weber and Don Worth on curating *At Mono Lake*, a touring exhibit of 110 years of photography of the area. The show included work by himself and 47 fellow photographers, among them Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Timothy O'Sullivan.

A couple of years after the Mono Lake exhibit opened, Johnson embarked on his second major landscape project, *The Great Central Valley: California's Heartland*. He undertook this project with friend and colleague Robert Dawson, like Johnson a native of Golden State's Central Valley, the vast agricultural region that runs more than 400 miles, from up near the base of Mt. Shasta down to Bakersfield in the south. Johnson and Dawson photographed from 1982 to 1985, trying to take in the scope and diversity of the Central Valley's natural and cultural features and represent how the land and communities were being transformed over the course of generations.

In 1986, an exhibit of Johnson and

Dawson's work premiered to enthusiastic reviews at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. The two photographers decided to team up with writer Gerald Haslam to turn the exhibit into a book, *The Great Central Valley* published by the University of California Press in 1993. That same year saw the publication of Johnson's *Making a Digital Book* which chronicled how he used digital tools to design, edit, and create graphics for *The Great Central Valley*.

While shooting there, Johnson paid close attention to the mixture of light and



Ash Cliff and River, Katmai National Park, Alaska.

color, continuing his quest to catch these striking pastels on color negative film. The last time he sat down with his friend and forerunner Ansel Adams, the younger photographer received some encouraging words about the pastels he had captured in some of the Central Valley photographs. (From the book, it's easy to see why. The cover photograph, which casts a stretch of grazing land in a soft pink hue, is only one example of Johnson's masterful use of pastels.)

This project was pivotal to the development of Johnson's aesthetic, opening his eyes to potential uses of digital technology in visual art. He began experimenting with digital photography in the early 1990s. By

this point, Johnson had been shooting large-format photographs for about 20 years and had consistently bumped up against the limitations of color negative film in terms of capturing the unique color and delicate light he was seeing in the landscape.

Digital photography provided Johnson with a means of taking his craft where he had been trying to push it throughout his career. In 1993, he was introduced to Michael Collette, who asked Johnson to try out a new camera he had invented. The camera included a scanning back that could fit a standard 4 x 5 camera and produced images with a resolution of 6000x7500 pixels and a file size of 130MB. After just one day in the field with the camera (which Dicom brought to market that same year), Johnson was stunned to find that the digital camera was not only out-resolving film, but also providing a dynamic range of more than nine stops. Though these were some major strides, what was even more important to Johnson at that point was the digital camera's ability to render even the most subtle tones accurately. In short, what he saw with the digital sensor was a culmination of an aesthetic development that had run through his work up to that point.

"When the digital sensor became available to me, everything I'd struggled to do with color negative film—in terms of rendering things accurately—suddenly was no longer a struggle. Because instead of battling back the biases of color film, I was literally holding a gray card in front of the camera and balancing the sensor for the light I was in. And the color was done at that point. This instinct to see color for what it is, and to really revel in this pastel world we live in, became far more possible with the digital sensor than it ever was with film. So for me, digital wasn't so much an aesthetic leap as an aesthetic landing."

Pacifica, California, is an attractive, unassuming coastal town of about 40,000 that sits about 10 miles of San Francisco. For tourists driving Highway 1 down the coast to more popular destinations like Half Moon Bay and Santa Cruz, Pacifica provides the first opportunity to get an up-close glimpse of the ocean. On any given weekend day the shoulder is dotted with travelers who have



Above: Travertine, Mammoth
Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming.

Below: Dune and Brush, Death Valley National Park, California

“I WAS TIRED OF ALL THIS DEAD, DARK, OVERSATURATED COLOR I WAS SEEING IN SO MUCH WORK...”

diately view the results of his work while working in the field. A digital densitometer and histogram allow him to see the density of light and the spread of tones, so he can tell instantly how closely the digital photograph matches his vision of the scene.

“I can see how far I’m letting the highlights and the shadows go,” said Johnson, “and I can control the tonality with extreme accuracy.” The first images he views in the field are just pre-scans, and shots that miss the mark can be erased immediately. Those he keeps can be viewed in greater detail while still in the field, then outputted later with an Iris printer back at this studio.

This results of this process are images unlike anything possible on film, and people across the United States—and around the world—will get the chance to see for them-

selves. Johnson plans to develop *With a New Eye* into a touring exhibit, as well as a book that he will likely design himself. Johnson also intends to create an electronic version of the project (either on CD-ROM or DVD). His assistant, David Gardner, has already started developing concepts for how to structure this interactive display.

Johnson is passionate when talking about the power of digital photography, but his interest in the technology has more to do with his aesthetic vision than with pixels and RAM. To truly grasp the motivation behind *With a New Eye* is to understand a few important things about Johnson. First, he is not interested in the digital manipulation of images; rather believes that landscape should be presented as faithfully as possible. Second, he is a landscape photog-



rapher working in the digital medium, as opposed to a digital photographer who happens to shoot landscapes. Third—and most importantly—that his move from film to digital was less a technological decision than the culmination of how Johnson’s aesthetic developed over the course of three decades.

During his early days as a photographer, Johnson worked in both color and black and white. With the important exception of Elliott Porter, he had been generally unimpressed with the color landscape work he

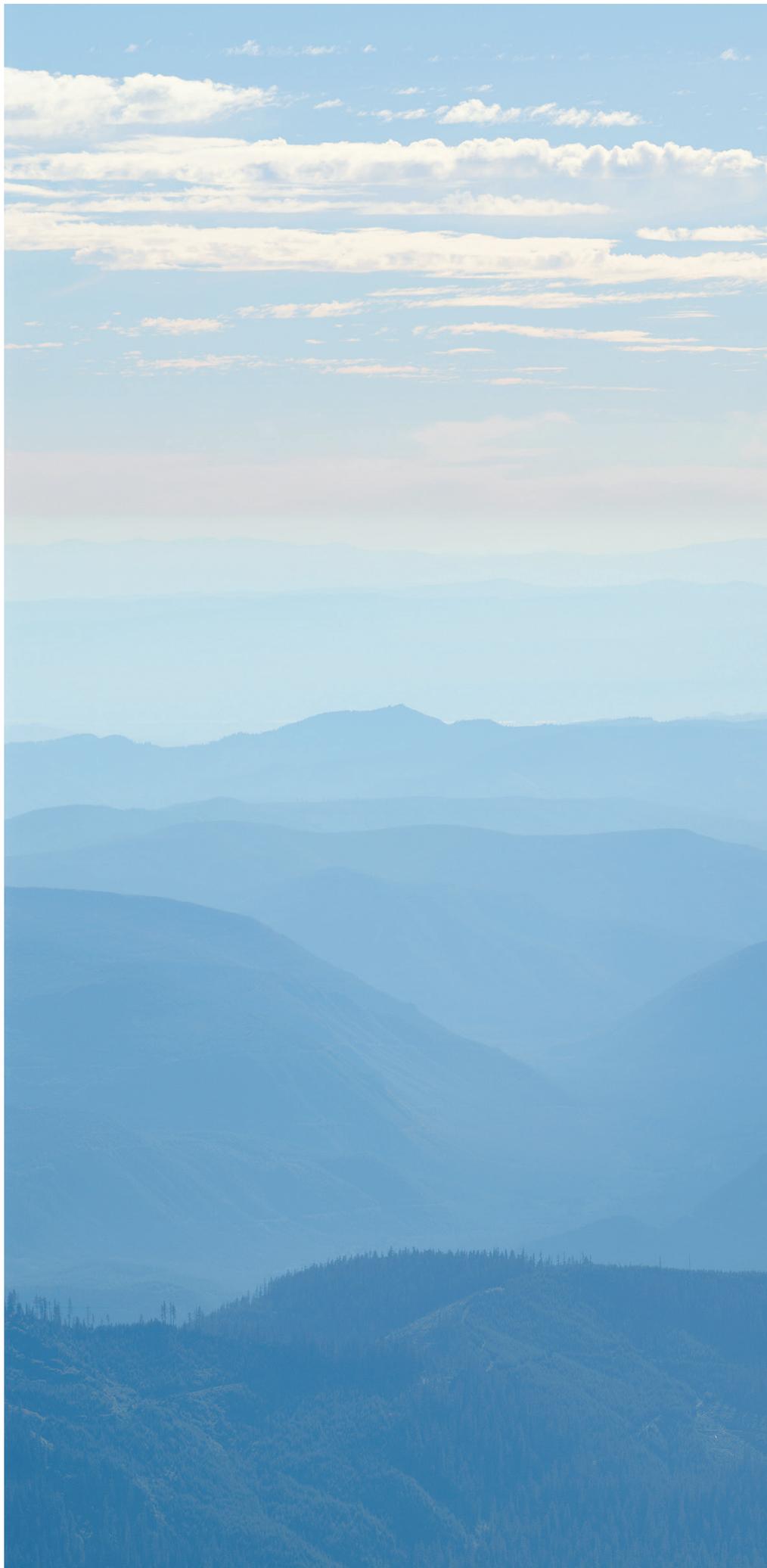
pulled their rental cars off to the side of the road for a quick snapshot of the coastline. Almost anybody passing through notices the spectacular views of the Pacific and the coastal hills, but those who take the time to leave the highway are rewarded with a chance to glimpse another Pacifica—a rather close-knit community of families, various creative types, surfers, and others drawn to this scenic town.

It's this less traveled section of Pacifica that is home to Stephen Johnson's studio—ideally situated just a minute off Highway 1 and next to a café. A visitor to Johnson's studio is immediately drawn to the collection of digital prints on view in a small gallery near the entrance. Many of these images are available for viewing on Johnson's comprehensive, well organized web site (www.sjphoto.com), but there's no substitute for standing in front of one of the actual prints. The colors are remarkably vibrant, and the details seem to jump out from the image. Looking at the prints, it's suddenly obvious why Johnson decided to call his project *With a New Eye*. His gallery also contains a viewing room—still under construction—which features a 360-degree digital print of the Grand Canyon. Adjacent to the gallery and reception area is the photographer's expansive work area, equipped with a number of Macintosh computers and various printers, including an Iris Realist and machines by Epson and Hewlett-Packard.

Johnson's studio also serves as a home base for his ongoing series of weekend workshops in digital photography. He has been teaching his craft for most of his professional life and has offered these workshops in digital photography since 1994. Johnson notes that the high cost of good equipment still makes digital cameras a niche market, but this is changing as prices begin their inevitable descent. He has also seen an increased demand for knowledge about the "how to's" of digital imaging. "More and more people are trying to do their own digital projects and design their own publications," Johnson said, "so they're looking to gain knowledge for some specific purpose."

Johnson's reputation as a pioneer in digital photography is firmly established. Adobe avidly seeks his input on which features to include in PhotoShop, his work has been heralded on Apple's web site and in MacWeek (Johnson uses a G3 PowerBook in the field), and a segment on the Discovery Channel showed Johnson at the Grand Canyon for the *With a New Eye* project.

Yet Johnson is quick to admit that when



he started the national parks project four years ago, he was still unsure how feasible it was to use the digital sensor for fine art landscape photography. Looking back on the origins of the project, Johnson said that he initiated *With a New Eye* simply as a way of discovering whether digital was suitable for landscape work and of finding out “if what I was seeing was real.”

In fact, Johnson harbored doubts as to whether he was ready to undertake a digital survey of national parks right up until the week he announced the *With a New Eye* project in 1994. The technology was still new to him at that point, and it took almost four minutes to capture an image. (Today, he scans an image in just over 60 seconds.) But Johnson found the type of control he got with the digital camera—including the ability to view an image on the spot—too seductive to resist. So on a Saturday in June 1994, a group of reporters, photographers and friends gathered in Yosemite Valley to hear him announce his new project and watch him show off the technology he planned to use.

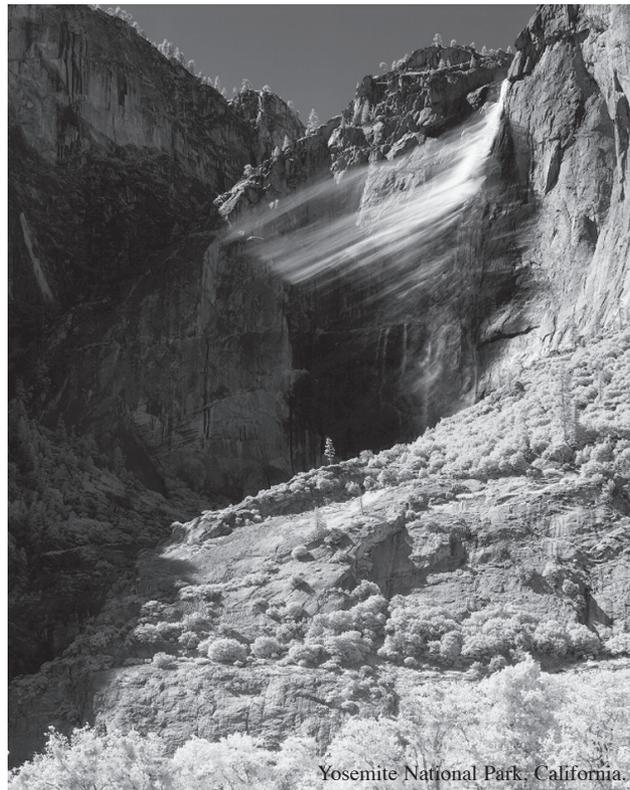
“I’d casually decided to shoot Yosemite Falls—not that I thought anything of any substance would come of it, but I thought it would be fun to see the effect of the scanning camera on the water. I had the PowerBook set up on the ground so everybody could see the screen, and this image of Yosemite Falls started scrolling. Just about that time, the wind shifted from a normal west-to-east pattern that comes into Yosemite Valley and started blowing from the east. The waterfall started blowing into the shadows, and suddenly this whole photograph changed into something very different from the color one I’d just shot. It is now an infrared image, and it’s hanging on the wall in my gallery.”

That day generated great enthusiasm for the project and affirmed Johnson’s hunch that digital could be used for landscapes. About a month later, he headed out for the Grand Canyon and Utah’s Bryce Canyon.

It’s fitting that Johnson is making the national parks the subject of the first digital landscape project. The history of landscape photography in the United States has always been closely linked to these parks—as in the work of photographers like Timothy O’Sullivan, Carleton Watkins, Ansel Adams

and many others. Johnson is flattered by the inevitable comparisons drawn between his works and that of these predecessors (he would never make these comparisons himself), and he does feel that *With a New Eye* ties him to a rich tradition of U.S. landscape photography. And, despite the fact his work is not as overtly concerned with advocacy as was that of Watkins and Adams, Johnson does believe that visual art can help make the case for protecting the nation’s most unique and striking natural places.

“The national parks have already been set



Yosemite National Park, California.

aside as preserves,” Johnson said, “but the more we understand about ecosystems, the more we realize that the boundaries of these parks are less and less secure. Getting people to care about the land is part of any landscape photograph I do. And by showing the places for what they are, you inevitably create a desire to see them continue to be sound and healthy.”

Yet while Johnson works within a long tradition of U.S. landscape photographers, his sense of how landscapes should be portrayed distinguishes him from earlier approaches to landscape photography—perhaps even more so than does his use of digital technology. He enjoys telling the story of being on the edge of the Grand Canyon one mid-day, appreciating the view

of the mist rolling through in the gray haze. “I was enjoying how nice this was,” he recalled, “when some people walked up to the edge of the canyon, only to turn away in disappointment, saying that it didn’t look like the postcards.”

For Johnson, the moral of this story is that most of us have grown accustomed to seeing the landscape in a limited way. He believes this is because most landscape painting and photography overemphasize the grandeur of places, confining the images to what some critics have called the “landscape-as-god” aesthetic. Johnson strives to capture what he calls the “more ordinary” moments of a place, and here, too, he finds that digital photography gives him precisely the right tool. The digital sensor provides a much broader dynamic range than is possible with film, so Johnson can shoot in light that is decidedly unspectacular—such as gray light, flat sun, or harsh shadows—and shoot places in a broader variety of situations.

“I think there is something more fundamental to an appreciation of a place like Yellowstone, Yosemite or the Grand Canyon—and it has to do with seeing a place’s subtleties and understanding them more in terms of what they are rather than what they can be. I hear people talk about ‘waiting for the light,’ and I’ve never been interested in waiting for the light. I’ve been interested in experiencing the place in a more ordinary way.”

Ultimately, what Johnson is trying to do with the *With a New Eye* project is create a renewed appreciation of locations that are very

familiar to us. At the same time, he wants to use digital’s unique ability to capture pastels as a means of challenging the way that color has been represented—and distorted—in most landscape photography.

“We’re used to seeing the film’s palette imposed on the landscape,” Johnson said. “The palette is dramatic and saturated. But that’s the man-made world, and I prefer the colors of the natural world.”

“With a New Eye” Project Sponsors: Adobe, Apple, BetterLight, Dicomed, Digital Pond, FWB, Iris Graphics, Newer Technology, Radius, Ricoh, Sinar Bron.

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