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# Asian Photography AND IMAGING

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# PUSHING **BOUNDARIES** AND **PIXELS**

– **Michael Clark**

In the heart-pounding world of adventure sports, there exists a genre of photography that thrives on capturing adrenaline-fuelled moments and pushing the boundaries of visual storytelling. Adventure sports photography transports us to remote and rugged landscapes, where athletes fearlessly challenge themselves and nature. In an interview with **Michael Clark** we discuss his unyielding passion for the great outdoors, his interest to capture athletes that push boundaries and more: Excerpts

**Your passion for adventure and risk-taking is evident in your work. How do you approach assessing and managing risk while capturing those incredible adventure shots?**

From my roots as a rock climber and mountaineer, assessing and managing risk is a constant process that is ingrained in everything I do. I work with the athletes to assess the situation and then we make a plan to insure everyone's safety as much as possible. My rock climbing skills allow me to access places a lot of other photographers may not seek out.

Given the above, I am still taking some fairly huge risks on occasion. Let's just say if there is such a thing as nine lives, then I have used up eight of them. I have had my rope cut down to one and a half strands of the core (out of 7 strands) while I was hanging on it three hundred feet (91.4 m) off the ground. I have fallen into quicksand in Tierra Del Fuego in one of the most remote places on Earth. I have also been hit by a beachball size boulder falling off a 600-foot (183 m) cliff. But somehow I always seem to come back with the images required by the client.

**How has your diverse educational and art background influenced your approach to adventure photography?**

I have been doing art since I was very young - starting at three and half years old. My parents recognised that I had a gift. I could draw things very nearly photographically real. From early on I was in art classes before I even attended school. In high school they ran out of art classes for me to take so I just went in to art class and did whatever interested me for the last few years. I learned photography through a teacher at my school. It was just one of the many art forms I tried out. I had my art work exhibited in the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. when I was 16. Hence, art was a huge part of my life. It gave me an innate sense of composition and a way of seeing that is still a part of my photography to this day.

At the same time, during my teenage years, I was obsessed with tennis and played at a minimum three hours a day up to ten hours or more each day depending on the situation. I wanted desperately to be a pro tennis player but I just didn't have the talent.

I studied Physics in University. I felt like I had done just about all I wanted to do in terms of art and I wanted to become an astronaut. I was a dreamer and my dreams were always big and difficult to achieve so going to space seemed like a lofty goal. After getting my undergraduate degree in Physics, I started rock climbing and that led me into the adventure sports world. It also led me back to photography. Once I put photography and climbing together that led me on a path to travel the world (on the cheap) and create images of my adventures.

**You've mentioned having near-death experiences during your adventures. How do these encounters impact your perspective on life?**

Risk is at the core of my photography. I got back into photography when I started rock climbing - as a way to document what I was doing. I am fascinated by risk, and how humans assess and deal with it. That is the core of my career. For myself, I have found that fulfilment lives on the other side of my fear. Hence, overcoming my own fear is part of the process just to get the images.

Adventure sports push you both mentally as well as physically. Over the last 28 years, I have worked with elite athletes in pretty much all of the various adventure sports. Perhaps the biggest perk of my job is getting to know and work with these amazing athletes - who have perfected their sport to the absolute limit

Part of being a professional photographer is about pushing the craft forward. It also happens to be good for your career to create new and unique images that stand out from your peers. Hence, part of the motivation to push the boundaries of photography comes from advancing my career, but it also comes from being a total gear head and my science background. My images show how I use the latest technology to create something new and unique. It is very hard to create an image that has never been created before, but I have done that on a few different occasions. In fact, many of my clients, like Red Bull for example, call me when they want to know if it is even possible to create a very difficult image.

**Is ice-climbing special to you? What unique challenges does it pose?**

Ice climbing is such a unique sport. It is my favourite adventure sport. How many sports do you get to kick and stab the playground? Every time I go ice climbing and look down I am just amazed by the view and the fact that I am hanging off the vertical ice by tiny hooks.

It can obviously be very challenging to photograph ice climbing. It is usually quite cold, and definitely below freezing. Hence, the right clothing and gear is essential. Getting above the climber on a rope is a lot more difficult than on rock and usually involves building snow or ice anchors to rappel back down the climb and get above the climber.

The first time I tried using artificial lighting to light up an athlete was on an ice climb in Ouray, Colorado. The light was placed on a bridge about 100-feet (30 m) above the climber and I rappelled into the other side of the gorge to around the same height as the climber. I used an experimental lighting set up (using Hypersync) to light the climber from such a far distance. The results far surpassed my original plan and had a hyper-real look to them.

**Can you share one particularly memorable or challenging experience that shaped your photography?**

My work with Red Bull, and in particular with the Red Bull Air Force, who are the best of the best sky divers in North America, if not the world, has been one of those extraordinary working relationships for over 15 years. I have worked with the Red Bull Air Force on dozens and dozens of assignments and have become good friends with the team. I am not a sky diver or B.A.S.E. jumper, but even if I was it would be tough to keep up with the team at their elite level. To document them in the air I hang out of helicopters and planes and climb and rappel giant cliffs. They are always dreaming up wild and crazy stunts.

My first assignment with the Air Force was a B.A.S.E. jump off a three thousand foot (914 m) cliff in Utah. With three B.A.S.E. jumpers each jumping three times I had a grand total of nine seconds to get the action images. Once they jump it is only a second or less before they are just a dot in the canyon below. I had three cameras firing at the same time - all tethered via wireless remote control triggers. I even downclimbed to a small ledge just below the jump point. I had my climbing gear with me but there was nothing to really clip into for safety, so I ended up tying off my rope to a dozen small bushes for mental stability. I was clipped into the rope but I knew nothing I was attached to would hold my weight so the downclimb was consequential. That resulting key image from that assignment was the start of a long term collaboration.

Working with the air force has been a privilege. It feels like you are hanging out with Superman and Superwoman when you are with them. That is because they literally fly (in their wingsuits) every other day. I have mounted remote cameras on helmets, airplanes, and helicopters and the footage I see from their first perspective is mind blowing. Nothing is impossible with that group. And that has informed me and my own world-view in a massive way.

Of course there are many, many more stories I could refence in regards to this question.

**You have earned numerous awards and recognitions. How do you balance artistic expression and meeting clients' expectations?**

As a working pro, every assignment is slightly different. Not all of them allow me to really express my full creativity. On some gigs the creative brief is pretty straightforward and planned out. On others I am given full creative freedom to really go after something new and exciting.

As with most photographers, you first get the safe images, the easy ones to create and the ones the client expects. Then you go after something a little more out there, that the client doesn't expect. It also starts with the pre-production beforehand and the discussion about what we are going to do. The client will have an idea of what they want, and we will plan to produce that set of images and then I will take it ten steps

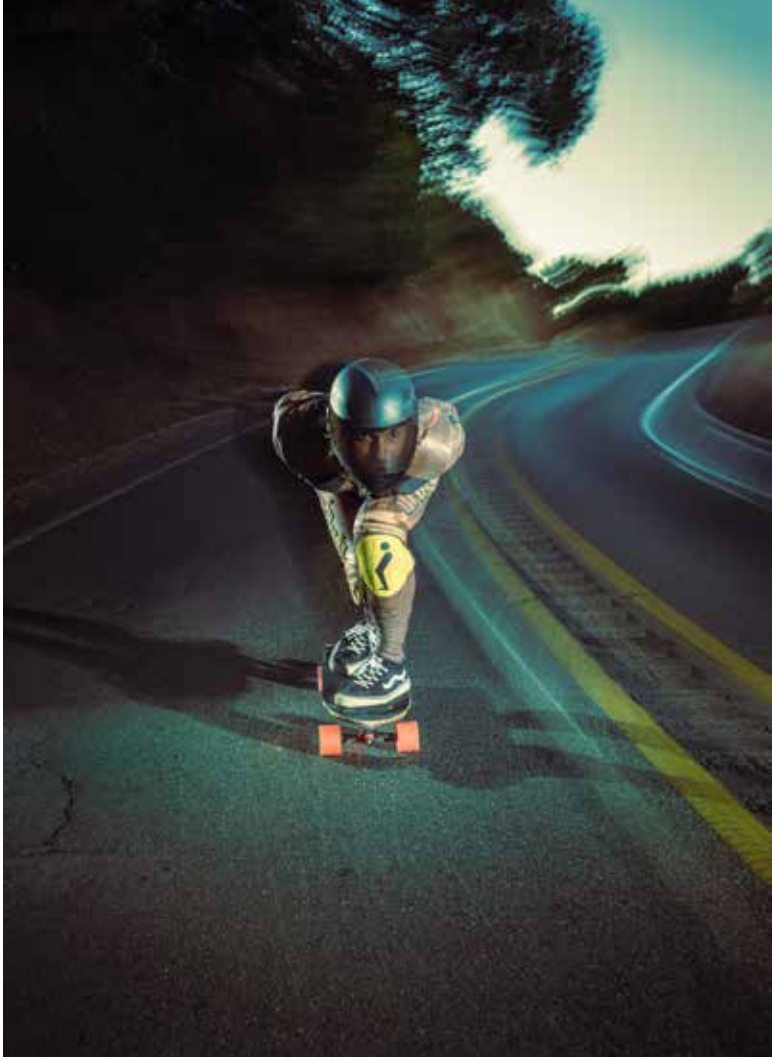
further than they ever thought possible. The challenging part is that it is up to me to make that a reality, which is the fun part.

After 28 years as a professional in this industry, I have found that my idea of what is good or bad, in terms of the images, is a much higher bar than what the client expects. I am always looking for perfection.

**Having been called a "Master of Adventure Photography", how do you ensure that your work stands out in a field where many photographers attempt to capture thrilling moments?**

If I were to distill adventure photography down to its basics, there is a correlation between how hard you work and the resulting quality of your images. When I say hard work, I mean going the extra mile to get to that tough-to-reach shooting position, arriving early, staying late, being obsessed, and being driven to learn how you can make your images better. A large part of this is physical. I call it the "sweat factor". If the sweat factor is high, meaning you had to work your extremely hard to get into position, then the odds are good you'll have some interesting and unique images.

Being successful in this field requires a lot of dedication, and not just to the craft. Dedication is being able to deal with rejection, setbacks and roadblocks and still have the ability to keep moving forward. As with many creative professions, photography is one where it helps to have thick skin. Even as a seasoned pro, your images will get rejected on a daily basis. If you want to be taken



seriously as a pro photographer, you will have to stick around through the ups and downs and prove you are dependable and consistent. I am almost certain that editors look at how long you have been in the business as an indicator of your abilities.

**What's your key advice or tips for aspiring photographers starting their hourney?**

There are several things I would say.

First off, photograph what you are passionate about. Second, make sure you learn about the outdoors and how to live and move in the outdoors. This is a huge part of outdoor and adventure photography. Just being comfortable in a variety of situations and environments is crucial to being able to create images. Third, work with the best athletes you can find. The better the athletes, the better the resulting images. Get in close. Learn to use wide angle lenses as these are part and parcel of adventure photography.

Then learn the digital workflow, its crucial. If you have a great image with poor post-processing that will nullify the final result. Calibrate and profile your monitors. Lastly, have an adventure. If you are not having an adventure, then the viewer isn't going to either. That is all part of the fun of this genre. Adventure is the name of the game.

TEXT: SANCHIT MISHRA