

CAUTION TO THE WIND

BY PAUL SLAUGHTER

Michael Clark

Photographer Michael Clark has risked life and limb to get unusual photographs of rock climbers, mountaineers, kayakers, and mountain bikers in remote locations around the world. Using unique angles, bold colors, strong graphics and dramatic lighting, he captures fleeting moments of passion, gusto, flair and bravado in the outdoors. Balancing extreme action with subtle details, striking portraits and wild landscapes, Clark creates images for editorial,

advertising and stock markets worldwide. As a former physicist, Clark has worked on both sides of the technical revolution—helping refine the technology and now using it for his current profession.

Clark grew up in Madison, WI, and later lived in Lubbock, Texas. As a child his parents realized he had artistic talent and enrolled him in art classes. While in high school he became fascinated with photography. A teacher helped him

set up a darkroom and he began to develop black-and-white film. Still, when it was time to start college he put away his cameras and pursued a degree in physics at the University of Texas in Austin. He took a rock climbing course in 1993, during his last semester in college. Climbing became an obsession and the sport brought him back to photography. After college, while on a trip in France he photographed Toni Lamprecht, a world-





class German climber. When Clark returned to the states he sent his best photographs from the shoot to *Outdoor Photographer*, *Climbing* and *Rock and Ice* magazines. All three agreed to publish his work. He was shocked, but delighted. And so his photographic career began.

Shooting Adventure Sports

Clark says, "If I had to pinpoint the most amazing part of my job, I'd have to say

it's the athletes. Photographing mountain bikers descending near vertical walls and jumping off 30-plus-foot cliffs is always exciting. Whitewater kayaking and mountain biking, in general, are two of the riskiest sports I know of at the world-class level. To get the shots I need, I work with the best around. Many of the athletes I work with are seriously putting their lives at risk. Staying fit and carrying a bare minimum of camera gear helps me keep

up with them. It is a rare day when I carry every lens and photo accessory I own. Most of the time I have one camera body and a few lenses in a fanny pack."

According to Clark, living and shooting conditions out in the field are rustic and sometimes incredibly scary. "No matter how many times you do it, rappelling over the edge of a 2000-foot cliff will get your heart going every time. Camping in -35 degree Fahrenheit weather or solo-aiding a route to put a rope up aren't the most pleasant activities. Standing in the line of fire of a mountain biker going Mach 10 off a cliff is a bit easier. Hanging off a Tyrolean traverse over a 40-foot waterfall as a kayaker drops in is actually pretty fun. It's all in a day's work. The higher the sweat factor, the better the images."

In the interest of preventing staid photographs, Clark is always looking for a new angle from which to shoot—which requires a lot of location research before a shoot and some rendering of his mind's eye via sketching. He says, "In one sense, I am a documentary photographer who shoots hundreds or even thousands of images a day to get the shot, but I strive to create images that are jaw-dropping, artistic and clever."

As much of an outdoorsman as he is, Clark spends a lot of time "in the office." He says, "I spend 50 percent of my time marketing my images and dealing with





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photo editor's needs. Labeling, sorting and maintaining a stock file of images takes up an enormous amount of time. Even so, working for myself and watching my business grow more than makes up for any drudgery." Clark's marketing efforts have changed very little over the last 15 years. He continues to promote himself via postcard mailers, e-promos and online portfolios as well as his newsletter, Web site and blog. His biggest change has been that his newsletters are now digital. The PDF option has allowed him to send it out to a much larger audience than would have ever been possible before.

Influences

Studying physics taught Clark problem-solving and logical thinking skills that have been a great benefit to his photographic career. Clark is self-taught, aside from a few photo workshops here and there and the tutelage he received in middle school. That said, much of why he was able to make it as a photographer early on can also be attributed to the fact that, in 1996, when he moved to Santa Fe, NM, very few people were adept at both climbing and photography.

Clark has been influenced by master modern painters such as Dalí, Picasso and Van Gogh as well as those from the Renais-

sance. Photographers Ansel Adams, Eddie Adams, Galen Rowell, Platon, Joe McNally, Richard Avedon, Sandro and Dan Winters have been sources of inspiration for him.

Projects

Most of Clark's ideas for projects come from clients, whether they involve shooting a variety of adventure, landscape or portrait assignments. He also shoots a fair bit on-spec for stock agencies and book projects, and for licensing directly to specific clients. His book, *Digital Masters: Adventure Photography*, came to him via a publisher's

offer. Clark also wrote an e-book about digital workflow titled *Adobe Photoshop Lightroom: A Professional Photographer's Workflow* after working with Adobe on images to launch the initial version of Adobe Lightroom. The book is recommended by Adobe on its Web site.

Camera and Printing Equipment

Clark began in photography using an Olympus OM-1 when he was 14. Since then, he has shot in just about every format except large format. Today he shoots primarily with a Nikon D700 and a battery



of lenses, though he occasionally uses a Hasselblad. (You can see a complete list of his equipment by visiting his Web site.)

Clark says, "Most of my work is produced digitally, which has allowed me to advance my craft considerably, especially in terms of using strobes and flash on location. Digital has given back a serious amount of control over the entire photographic process and especially in postproduction."

Clark uses Epson 1800 and Canon iPF5100 printers for making inkjet prints, and he prefers Moab Entrada and Colorado Fiber Satine papers.

Workflow

Clark uses the industry's standards, Adobe Lightroom and Adobe Photoshop, to process his RAW images. He downloads images, imports them into Lightroom, edits and processes them, then exports them to Photoshop where he finalizes them.

While the fine details of his workflow are a lot more complex, this is "the gist of it." He has a completely color-managed workflow with calibrated and profiled monitors, printers and scanners. If you'd like to read all about his workflow methods, check out his e-book on digital workflow on his Web site.

Photography—The Future

Clark says, "I see a convergence in photography. It is all headed to video with stills being pulled from motion clips. Holographic images, 3D and the like, are also coming. Photography is going to continue to change radically as technology advances, and as a result, I think it will become harder for working pros to make a living. Everyone will be able to create good content, not great, but good enough; the commercial world seems to be happy with good enough work these days.

"My conversations with the camera makers have led me to understand that they are looking to create cameras that can recreate



a scene exactly as it appears to the eye with just the push of a button. When it gets to that point, we as photographers—and more importantly, as artists—will have to bring something to the image much more than just what is in front of the camera."

Photography—Now

"I teach three to four workshops a year. As technology continues to change, my background in physics and the ability to

figure stuff out on a technical level becomes more and more a highly valued skill that I can capitalize on," Clark says. "If I was just starting out in photography, I would suggest joining a pro photography organization like ASMP or APA, learning about the business aspects, which are more complex than actual photography. Pro photo organizations are a great place to learn about pricing, contracts, marketing, promotion and the little things that make a business succeed. Learn how to price your work so you don't undercut the market and shoot yourself and everyone else in the foot. See if you can assist other photographers who you think you can learn from. If they produce images that inspire you—that's a bonus.

"The other piece of advice I would give is to become an expert at your craft. In the world of digital photography you need to know everything there is to know about shooting, processing, delivering and marketing your images. Don't cut corners on color management and workflow."

Awards/ Clients/Books

Michael Clark has received awards from Photo District News, ASMP and Teva Mountain Games. His clients include Nike, Nikon, Red Bull, Manfrotto, DuPont, Adobe, Patagonia, *National Geographic*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Outside*, *Men's Journal*, *Backpacker*, *Outdoor Photographer*, *Climbing* and *Bike Magazine*. His stock photography is marketed by Getty Images and Aurora Photos. For a list of summer workshops, and to see his blog and other information about his career, visit Clark's Web site at www.michaelclarkphoto.com.



Paul Slaughter is a world-traveled photographer and writer residing in Santa Fe, NM. Paul specializes in location, stock and fine art photography. An avid jazz lover, he has an extensive photographic collection of the jazz greats. You can view portfolios of Paul's work at www.slaughterphoto.com.