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A Magnificent Platinum Obsession

By Frank Van Riper
Special to Camera Works

Think about the last time you set out, determined to make photographs.

Maybe it was during your last trip to Europe, when you knew the light on the Roman Coliseum or the Eiffel Tower was going to be perfect. Perhaps it was during a fall camera club outing to a scenic rural place when the October colors were at their peak.

Maybe it was just a random day alone with your camera, when you could feel the creative juices flowing and knew that, come hell or high water, you were going to return with keepers.

If you are like me, you probably burned a lot of film – not profligately, but certainly in sufficient quantity to insure that you came back with something.

Now consider this:

When he is out shooting, even when he is shooting overseas, it is not at all unusual for photographer Dick Arentz to make only one picture a day. In fact, on a typical weeks-long trip, Dick only might bring enough film for 30 pictures.

And, he says, he always comes home with film left over.

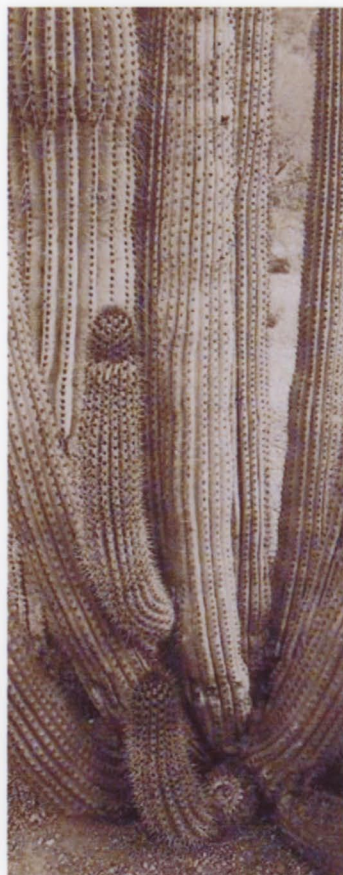
But the pictures Dick Arentz does make tend to be magnificent, especially when they are translated into simply beautiful platinum/palladium prints, arguably the most elegant, not to mention archival, method for translating black and white photographic images to paper.

A "mini-retrospective" of Arentz's work is on display through the end of this month at Washington's Troyer Gallery on Connecticut Avenue. The photographs are effectively twinned with the striking minimalist constructions of sculptor Marie Ringwald who is well known in town not only for her personal work, but as an instructor in the Corcoran Gallery's prestigious fine arts program.

It is always a pleasure when beautiful art in different media work with, not against, one another in exhibition. And this show achieves a visual serenity that is as pleasing as it is informative.

One of the things that informs Dick Arentz's photography is its deliberation – as well as the photographer's unusual, not to say bizarre, equipment.

Arentz works in large format to create landscapes of quiet power. But not just in any large format. You get the impression that grabbing a 4x5 view camera off the shelf at a high-end camera store simply would have been too easy for this born tinkerer (and onetime oral surgeon.) To illustrate: If your brand new digital snaphooter is the contemporary of, say, a zippy new Mazda sports coupe, Arentz's two main cameras are the spiritual cousins of the Model T Ford.



© Dick Arentz
Platinum print of Organ Pipe cactus in Arizona shows every spike of the tall plant.



© Dick Arentz
Snow-covered church in Rico, Colorado offers a textbook example of how platinum/palladium printing can render detail even in lightest areas.

