

Life Along the Hudson: A Visual Voyage with Joseph Squillante

BY *Sally Molini & Joseph Squillante*



Joseph Squillante
© Carol Capobianco, 2003

JOSEPH SQUILLANTE has spent the past three decades photographing the Hudson River, from its source on Mount Marcy to its mouth at New York Harbor. Like the Hudson River landscape painters before him, some of his photographs capture the beauty and romantic quality of the river while others focus on people who live and work along its shores, including farmers, fishermen and biologists.

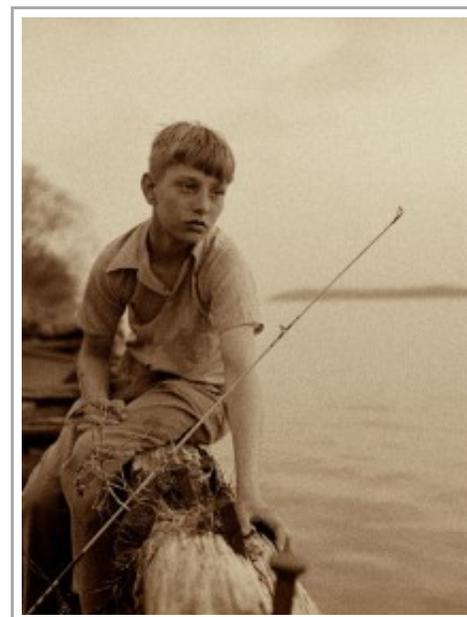
Although Squillante has seen much ugliness on the Hudson — including chemical discharge, oil spills, and industrial plant explosions — he keeps his lens trained on the river's natural splendor. "It's the beauty that matters," he

2009 is the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's voyage to the New World. What led to your focus on the Hudson Valley region and helping with its conservation?

My love of nature as a subject guided me to make choices about our environment. The photographs, in their purity and simplicity, speak loud and clear about how I feel, mirroring our natural world, from its tranquility to its tumultuousness.

My attraction to the Hudson River started in 1975, when a boyhood friend moved from the Bronx to paradise — otherwise known as Tivoli, a village 100 miles north of Manhattan, population 362. Tom's backyard is the Hudson River, which flows just beyond the railroad tracks with views of the Catskill Mountains.

Then a fledgling professional photographer, I took my camera wherever I went. On a memorable visit to Tivoli, I took two photographs in particular — one a signature image of a boy fishing and the other of an old truck driving along the railroad tracks — that would inspire me and direct me on a



Boy Fishing
(Tivoli, New York, 1976)
© Joseph Squillante, 1978

says. “That’s what makes people aware of this national treasure.”

Squillante’s commitment to help transform the Hudson into a cleaner and more esteemed natural resource has earned him the respect of the Hudson river community. He has worked with Riverkeeper, headed by Robert Kennedy Jr.; the sloop Clearwater, founded by Pete Seeger; and Scenic Hudson, founded in 1963 to help protect the Hudson River Valley.

With subjects ranging from landscape to portraiture and still life, Squillante has worked as a photographer for over thirty years. After receiving a BA in Marketing from Iona College in 1971, he attended the School of Visual Arts and The New School in Manhattan to study photography. He has exhibited his photographs throughout New York and Massachusetts, as well as in Italy. His work is represented in the New-York Historical Society, the Museum of the City of New York, the Beacon Institute, and several private collections.

— EXCERPTED FROM *Life Along the Hudson: Photographs by Joseph Squillante*
The Albany Institute of History and Art

The portrait of Joseph Squillante is by his wife, Carol Capobianco, Editorial Content Manager at the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, New York.

lifelong journey. In viewing the photos I shot that day, I marveled at how I, a novice, could get such incredible images. That’s when I realized it was the subject matter, the Hudson River, that provided the magic in those special pictures. I couldn’t miss with this majestic natural resource as the focus. And so my love affair with the Hudson River began.

Storm King Mountain helped start the environmental movement in the Hudson Valley. What actually happened there to help bring the movement about?

A 17-year battle was waged to save the face of this mountain and led to a landmark decision and the birth of the modern day environmental movement along the Hudson River.

Consolidated Edison had wanted to cut away the face of Storm King Mountain to build a hydroelectric power plant. This was during a time before environmental groups had formed, so it was concerned individuals who fought against this destruction symbolizing a new movement to protect scenic beauty. It was the first time that “scenic beauty” became recognized as something tangible and thereby able to be protected by law. This fight spawned some of the groups such as Scenic Hudson that make it their mission to protect the Hudson River and its surrounding watershed.

There are certain iconic images along the Hudson River, such as Bannerman Castle and Storm King Mountain. Besides shooting these famous beautiful sites, how do

Resources

[Riverkeeper](#)

[Scenic Hudson](#)

[The Scenic Hudson Decision](#)

you generally go about selecting subjects for your camera?

I find photographs everywhere, even after 37 years. For many years I meandered along the Hudson shooting what was appealing to me. The body of work I accumulated is so extensive that it does serve as a documentary of the Hudson over the years, even though that wasn't my initial purpose. However, I'd now like to concentrate on a more comprehensive outlook, filling in the gaps of places I've yet to capture, to complete an even broader picture of life along the Hudson. Shooting the Hudson River has been a life's work and will continue to be. As I reach out to people by sharing my work through exhibitions, teaching and publications, I find that my photographs cross lines — from fine art connoisseurs to fishermen plying the shores for dinner.

Some people have noted that my photos are similar to the Hudson River School and Barbizon painters. This is such a compliment, because though I am not a student of their work, I do appreciate and enjoy their paintings. Taking their lead, back in 1995 I started, with my wife, Carol Capobianco, the Hudson River School of Photography. This is not a brick and mortar school, but a school of thought, where we raise awareness of the river's beauty through photography.

Like some of the masters — André Kertész, Edward Weston, Ralph Gibson — it is finding the extraordinary in the ordinary. Finding the ever-changing light that is at our doorstep instills magic in the camera's captured moment. For me, what is extraordinary and ever-changing is a play of light. It is in this ever-changing-ness we find the infinite.

For me, what is extraordinary and ever-changing is a play of light. It is in this 'ever-changing-ness' we find the infinite.

What was your vision in establishing the school?

Like the Hudson River landscape painters, I am attracted to the beauty and romance of the river. My mission is to raise awareness of this beauty through photography. We help celebrate the Hudson's magnificence through workshops, presentations, in-classroom talks, lessons, exhibitions, and note cards and prints. I urge people to go to the river with their cameras and seek out its wonders. By encouraging people to get closer to the river, we foster public awareness of its beauty. Photography is an ideal medium to share this vision; it is powerful and accessible — just as the Hudson.

Some photographers feel that black and white, and all its subtle shades of grey, is the best means for emphasizing meaning, ideas, and mood — that black and white cuts past the “dream” of color. You capture intense natural beauty using traditional gelatin silver prints. Why that choice?

Photography as any other medium of expression is one step away from the real world. Black & white photography immediately attracts the attention of the viewer because it is different from the real world.

The intense natural beauty you speak of is realized by bringing the viewer beyond color to the light, line, shape, composition, shadow and sense of place. This, I believe, is why those who see my work can transcend the print and actually experience ‘being there.’

There is so much more to a rendering of the natural world than just the color, and often the viewer will stop at the “façade of color” and not move into the sense of the place. The intense natural beauty you speak of is realized by bringing the viewer beyond color to the light, line, shape, composition, shadow and sense of place. This, I believe, is why those who see my work can transcend the print and actually experience “being there.”

There has always been a practical side as well of why I shoot black & white: when I began to make photographs in the mid-1970s, I built a darkroom and purchased film in 100-foot bulk rolls to process and print myself, to keep costs down. To print color in one's own darkroom at that time was difficult and costly.

Just five or six years after I began printing black and white I studied with George Tice, a master printer and photographer. My print quality soared when I learned his technique of “Making the Fine Photographic Print.” With this new approach, I realized one of the strengths of the medium is its ability to deliver an extremely long range of tones. My prints became beautiful.

Some of my earliest influences like André Kertész, Edward Weston and most of the early masters worked exclusively in black & white, too. And so my path was before me.

What specific equipment do you use? Do you also use digital equipment or color film?

I began shooting in 1972 with a 35 mm Honeywell Pentax Spotmatic and went on to using a series of five lenses. Interestingly, it was the sound of the Spotmatic's shutter release over a rock & roll band that actually captured my attention.

After a few years, I moved almost exclusively to Nikon equipment for 35 mm format. For medium format, 6×7 cm, I use the Mamiya RB67, a SLR, and the Mamiya 7II, a range finder. I also use a Cambo view camera and a Speed Graphic field camera, both for 4×5 formats.

In 1979 I started working with a Polaroid SX-70 camera that produced an instant square format print. I found that a completely different energy was taking place when composing inside the square frame, so I had a Nikon F reformatted to almost a square shape so that I could continue working in that format with black & white film. (Almost a square because I still wanted the option of creating a vertical if I needed to.)

In June of 2008 I purchased my first digital camera, a Canon 5D classic, and I have been working exclusively with it since, testing out its capabilities. (I went with Canon because of its full-frame digital sensor.) However, as I have so much more control with film, the jury is still out on moving completely to digital. In my opinion, film offers more warmth and richness as well as more detail and depth. The edges are natural as is much of the light that I work in. I too find that the digital camera, especially in low light, is not capable of a precise rendering of the subject as would film.



Wildlife Biologist with Immature Bald Eagle
(Near the Town of Catskill, New York)
© Joseph Squillante, 2000

I also feel that prints made by hand are somehow more precious and jewel-like. Digital photography is not made by hand. And lastly I pose a question... is the digital print really a photograph? “Photo” means *light* and “graph” means *drawing*... so a *drawing with light*. Silver prints are exposed with light while pigment prints are sprayed with ink.

Food for thought!

A photographer has been quoted as saying that when he looks at a photo, it should hold him for five minutes. Do you agree?

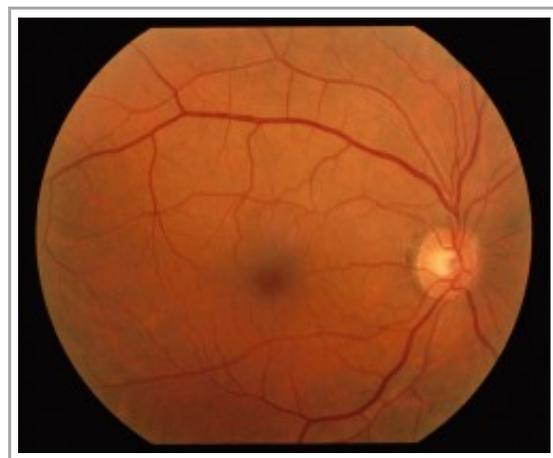
Five minutes? That is only the beginning of the life of a great work, which can hold one for a lifetime. Think of any of the masterworks.

You work part-time as a medical photographer. What subjects does a medical photographer shoot? Did this work influence your development in photography?

About three years after I started shooting professionally, I trained and began freelance work making images in a diagnostic test (fluorescein angiogram) of the human retina, which is like the “film in the camera” of the eye. What better connection for an image-maker? I still do this today along with teaching, selling my prints, and other freelance work, which enables me to pursue my fine art.

How about portraiture? What are some of the differences and challenges in capturing what you see in a face or person as opposed to conveying the beauty of a tree or particular bend in the river?

I had the privilege of studying with Philippe Halsman... and we definitely connected with each other. My rendering of one of his portraits moved him and he also chose to photograph me to illustrate “cross-lighting” during a class. In studying with Halsman I learned that people go through their days wearing a mask. It is the portraitist’s challenge to have subjects drop their mask and reveal who they truly are. It is that moment captured that makes a true and revealing portrait.



Human Retina
© Joseph Squillante, 1978



Pete Seeger at the Strawberry Festival
(Beacon, New York, his hometown)
© Joseph Squillante, 2000

The similarity in photographing nature and the human face is in waiting for the right moment. A mood can be enhanced with the correct light; in nature you need to wait for that light to occur; in portraiture, you can produce it in a studio setting. Time and light are of the essence.

You've earned awards working with various regional environmental groups. What are some accomplishments achieved so far, and what still needs to be done?

As a result of my years of photographing nature and the Hudson River in particular, environmental groups have used my work to further the cause of raising awareness about river conservation.

I have been designated a "River Rat" by the esteemed group Riverkeeper, and as a "Hudson Valley Hero" by the land protection group Scenic Hudson.

As the Hudson River recovers and becomes cleaner, more people are drawn to visit and live along its shores. We must be smart in the way we grow and develop, with an eye on the future that we will leave for generations to come, not just for now. We have to learn to live in harmony with our environment.

— THE EDITORS WOULD LIKE TO THANK JAMES SMART, WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THIS INTERVIEW

Biography

SALLY MOLINI is an editor of *Cerise Press*.

Printed from Cerise Press: <http://www.cerisepress.com>

Permalink URL: <http://www.cerisepress.com/01/02/life-along-the-hudson-a-visual-voyage-with-joseph-squillante>