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“White Gladiolus, 1999” ©2014 Ray McSavaney. All rights reserved.



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Remembering Ray

A Tribute to Ray McSavaney

By Eric Biggerstaff



Ray McSavaney, 2011
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On July 2, 2014 the photographic community lost one of its most elegant and quiet voices when Ray McSavaney passed away after a long battle with lymphoma, he was 75.

Ray left a photographic archive of over 50,000 4"x5" negatives along with many prints, but most importantly he left a lasting impression on those whom he met and those who were friends. Ray approached his art in the same manner in which he approached life: calmly, thoughtfully and quietly. At times the images he created were grand and bold, much in the tradition of other great West Coast photographers such as Ansel Adams but perhaps he is best remembered for the subtle and elegant way he caught light to reveal the magic of the smaller, more intimate spaces. Even his work in large industrial areas such as the Uniroyal Tire Factory in Los Angeles have a certain peaceful quality to them, very much like Ray himself.

If ever there was a photographer who placed themselves into their work, it was Ray. It can be difficult to categorize Ray and his art as he had many interests that took him down several different paths of photography. Best known as a landscape photographer, Ray was just as prolific and talented with his 4"x5" view camera as



Poppies, 1998

“Ray McSavane was a humble, unassuming, and quiet person. His talents were considerable, and his friendship and loyalty exceptional. Ray was a gifted, generous, and patient teacher. Over the years we taught more than fifty workshops together, and shared many photographic trips together exploring areas throughout California and the Southwest. Most importantly, we remained close friends over the past four decades.

Ray’s ability to handle disparate subject matter with grace was impressive. His subjects included the natural landscape, revealing portraits, urban architectural studies, botanical images, along with a huge body of work that he did in the Southwest. I know of few photographers who have so successfully made consistently beautiful images of such diverse subjects. I envy, and respect, his formidable photographic abilities. I do not have the words to adequately express how much I miss Ray. It is however reassuring to know that I can “listen” to Ray whenever I want, by looking at one of his eloquent images.” John Sexton

a street photographer, portrait photographer, still life photographer, architectural and documentary photographer. He has large portfolios in each of these areas and at the time of his passing was still concentrating on projects (such as his Los Angeles bridges and floral still lifes) that he had been working on for over twenty years. He also left a wonderful collection of color photographs, as well as drawings, which surprises many, as he was such a well-known black and white artist.

For those who knew Ray or who took workshops from him, they will remember him as a generous and gifted instructor who was a person of few words. Ray chose his words carefully and thoughtfully so they would be remembered. For some, those quiet words changed the course of their own art and for others they gained a deeper understanding of who they were as an artist. Everyone benefited from what he had to say if they cared enough to listen.

Regretfully, Ray was not an active self-promoter of his work with the result being that a huge audience did not see his wonderful vision. However, he did not hide his work either. Ray's photographs were featured in numerous solo and group exhibitions, and represented by well-regarded galleries. His images appeared in many national and international publications. In addition, he published a beautiful monograph of his work, "Explorations" which is still available. After several years of prodding, Ray finally created a website which is still up (www.raymcsavaneyphotography.com) and will remain available to viewers into the future. It contains nearly 150 of Ray's images, but only scratches the surface of what he had to offer and the small reproductions do not do justice to the outstanding prints he personally created, the tonality of which leaves one moved and amazed that silver can create such incredible beauty.

Fortunately Ray's closest friends are working to preserve his art and legacy. Ken Karagozian, John Sexton, and a small group of Ray's close friends are busy cataloging and preparing his archive for possible placement in an institution where others can see and appreciate what an immense talent he was. This effort is both labor intensive and costly so a fund has been established that allows anyone who might want to donate and help the cause to do so.

The other evening I was heading out to make a few photographs at an abandoned farm not far from my home. On the way I remembered that I needed to tell my wife Carol something that I had on my mind but had forgotten to mention before I left. As I scrolled through the numbers on my phone, the address book came to rest on Ray's name and phone number. My finger moved to delete it but something made me slow down and stop, to not push the button. Whenever Ray and I would photograph, he would tell me to slow down and not hurry, to take my time. With tears welling in my eyes I remembered these words and saved the number where it will be from now on, he keeps on teaching me.



Anasazi Structure, 12:30 PM, May 31, 1997

“I remember having my prints critiqued by Ray on several occasions in the early 80s. Just seeing the intensity and concentration that Ray brought to a critique was instructive. There were some long periods of silence while he stared at various prints. You realized that what was to follow were not idle or off-hand comments, but very carefully considered thoughts. Ray made various suggestions on how the cropping or tonality could be improved—suggestions that I took very seriously, and put into practice at the next printing session. Once, however, Ray made a comment that really thrilled me. He said, “I wouldn’t change anything.”

If Ray was happy with it, so was I. Ray’s critiques and his respect for prints made quite an impression, and really got me going on the right track.” Charles Cramer



Winter Snowstorm, Yosemite Valley, California, 1973

“Ray McSavaney’s visual insights and aesthetic sensibilities were no less than truly remarkable. Although I had not seen Ray for a number of years prior to his death, he nevertheless remains one of my all-time photographic heroes. I first met Ray in 1974 at an Ansel Adams Gallery workshop in Yosemite Valley. And, upon seeing (for the first time) a particular photograph of his, titled: Winter Snowstorm, Yosemite, 1973 – a print that was, as an aside, occasionally referred to as the “Oh, Jesus!” print due to the fact that everyone who saw it for the first time seemed to produce the very same exclamation! – I sheepishly inquired about whether he’d be willing to trade prints with me. After what seemed an interminably long pause, and in Ray’s inimitably reserved manner, he finally grinned and, ever so softly, replied... “OK.”

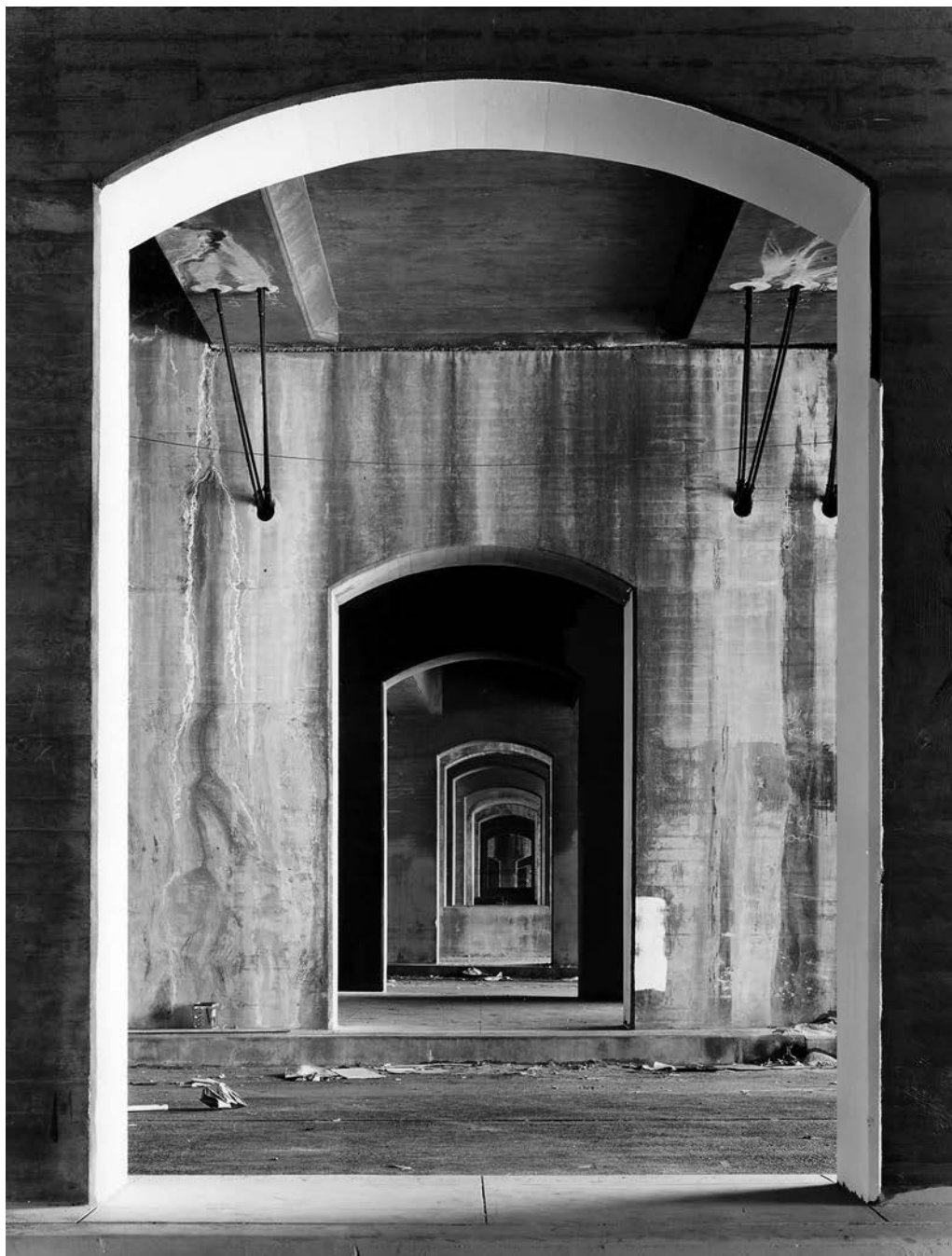
I have continued to enjoy and marvel at that photograph, together with countless others so exquisitely seen and crafted by him over the years. The loss of Ray is a genuine loss to the photographic community, and to the medium, itself. I count myself lucky to have known him and to have been inspired by his unique talents.” Huntington Witherill



Broadway Series, Los Angeles, California, 1983

"I met Ray in 1972 at a weekend workshop I was teaching for the Sierra Club in the town of Lone Pine, CA, beneath the summit of Mt. Whitney, the highest mountain in the US outside of Alaska. It was at the workshop, late in the afternoon of the final day when we had been reviewing student photographs brought to the workshop. I thought we had discussed everyone's work, when I asked if we had left anyone out. A relatively tall, thin fellow at the back of the room raised his hand, prompting me to ask, "Did we miss you?" He nodded yes, so I asked him to put out his work. I was flabbergasted. It was dramatically better than the work anyone else had shown. Everyone else was impressed, as well. His review completed, the workshop ended, but as the group filed out of the motel room where we were meeting, I reached out and grabbed his sleeve, pulled him off to the side and said, "You've got to become part of this group." He did, and soon he and I were teaching the workshops together.

Through all the years I had known Ray, I realized he was always a very private person, and I would never get to know him closely. Yet he was a good person, a great photographer, and a close friend. I feel the loss deeply." Bruce Barnbaum



Santa Anna Freeway Bridge, Los Angeles, California, 1983

"I was always pleased to be in Ray's company because of his humble nature and quiet, unassuming demeanor. His gentle manner and radiating warmth never failed him when he was interacting with other human beings. I personally understood and experienced these qualities in him as coming from his belief in maintaining and living what was spiritual in man and not merely the egoistic concerns of the everyday personality. May he rest happily and peacefully in his concept of "the light of silver emulsions" and the greater "Light" to which he aspired as a searching human being." Paul Caponigro



Sunlight and Storm, Marble Canyon, Arizona, 1991

“Ray McSavaney personified the idea that good things come to those who wait.

A few years ago, Ray and I taught a fall workshop in Aspen, Colorado. The night prior to the start of the workshop, Ray expressed an interest in photographing the Maroon Bells, a famous group of Colorado peaks and a place he had not been to in a very long time.

The next morning I woke Ray well before sunrise and we headed up the valley to a parking area below the peaks. It was a glorious morning and as we arrived, the parking lot was jammed! We gathered our gear and headed up the path to the lake below the peaks where we came across a scene neither of us had ever witnessed. There were at least a hundred photographers all lined up along the lakeshore waiting for the first beams of light to illuminate the summit of the Maroon Bells, the classic shot. Ray and I slowly wandered up the path finally finding a spot each of us liked where the crowd was a bit thinner.

Ray set up his well worn but trusty old Tachihara 4X5 and composed an image on the ground glass that was to his liking. It was fun to watch all these photographers with their multi-thousand dollar digital rigs stroll over to see what Ray was up to! After a bit, the sun finally cleared the crest of the ridge behind us and the peaks began to shine in the glory of a Rocky Mountain fall morning. Suddenly, the sound of shutters clicking could be heard whirling all around, but Ray didn't budge; he just stood there and waited as the light continued to brighten. After another ten minutes or so, I glanced over my shoulder to see the crowd loading their gear and heading back down to the parking lot, still Ray didn't do a thing. After another ten minutes, Ray and I were largely alone at the lake except for a few day hikers making their way along the lake shore. Finally I heard the quiet click of his shutter. He glanced at me over the top of his glasses as he made a note on his film holder, with a slight smile on his face.

I looked back at the mountains in time to see the sunlight and shadow line on the peaks create a beautiful pattern across the steep rugged face of the Maroon Bells, my camera long ago having been put back into its bag. I never saw a print of that image although he told me the negative looked very promising! It was a good lesson for me to learn.” Eric Biggerstaff



Ancestral Dwelling, 10:00 AM, October 5, 1994

"I first met Ray in 1987 at an Owens Valley Photography Workshop where he was teaching along with Bruce Barnbaum and John Sexton. That workshop opened my eyes to an entirely new world of fine art photography. I was so inspired and excited by the workshop that shortly thereafter I purchased a 4"x5" view camera. In the years that followed I attended a number of workshops that Ray taught in the Southwest and in Los Angeles. In 1999 I was extremely honored when Ray asked me to join his workshop instructional staff.

In the late 1990's Ray and I photographed about once a week not far from his loft in Los Angeles making images of the bridges along the L.A. River. At the same time Ray was working on a series of floral still life images in his studio, along with making frequent photographic trips to the Southwest that he loved so dearly.

I was impressed with how Ray could work with so many different subjects simultaneously, and with apparent ease. Along with his talents behind the camera Ray was equally gifted in the darkroom, his handcrafted silver gelatin prints are spectacular. Ray was an excellent writer, illustrator, and cook (especially desserts!).

Shortly before Ray passed away he asked me to be the temporary custodian of his photographic archive. My current project is to organize Ray's photographic archive with the help of a group of dedicated and generous friends. Our goal is to find a suitable institution that will care for Ray's prints and negatives and protect and preserve his wonderful photographic legacy so that it can inspire individuals into the future." Ken Karagozian



From the Melrose Series, 1988

“Ray was a gentle, unassuming man, quiet, kind and with a wry sense of humor. He made me laugh. A great teacher with remarkable tolerance for everyone, he ran lovely workshops and I never heard him raise his voice or panic when everything went wrong. Did Ray ever disparage another person? No. He loved the world, period, and found magic everywhere. In summation: He was a humble guy with a fiercely artistic and compassionate soul. First class all the way. Truly salt of the earth. A beautiful human being.”

John Nichols

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For further information on Ray McSavaney’s photography visit:
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