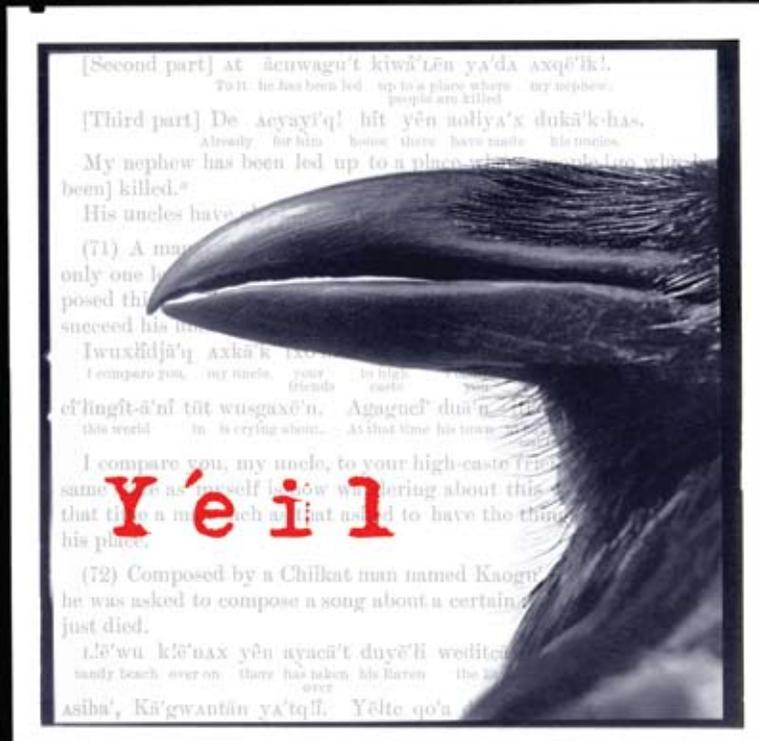


Pontiac: Why are you asking so many questions?

raven: I like shiny stuff, and boy are you shiny.



[Second part] at acuwagu't kiwa'ten ya'da axqé'ikl.
To it. he has been led up to a place where my nephew,
people are killed

[Third part] De acyay'q! hit yén nollya'x duká'k-has.
Already for him house there have made his uncle's
My nephew has been led up to a place where people have
been killed.*
His uncles have

(71) A man
only one
posed this
succeed his

Iwuxáá'q' axka k
I compare you, my uncle, your friends to him
ef'ingit-á'ni tít wusaxó'n. Agaguel' dui' n
this world in to crying about. As that time his town

I compare you, my uncle, to your high-caste friends
same as myself is now wondering about this
that time a man such as that asked to have the thing
his place.

(72) Composed by a Chilkat man named Kaogv'
he was asked to compose a song about a certain
just died.

l's'wu k's'nax yén ayacá't duyé'li weditec
handy beach over on there his taken his heaven the
asiba', Ka'gwantán ya'tq'li. Yé'lte qo'a

Y'e i l



Larry McNeil:
Photographer,
Artist, Educator

By Paul Slaughter

“My photographs are about American mythology, ravens, the intersection of cultures, and finding the sacred in unlikely places. It is about the sacred not being for sale, but being able to be rented at reasonable rates. It is about being able to fly by night.” —Larry McNeil

Larry McNeil’s family is from the small village of Klukwan, Alaska. He was born into the Killer Whale House, Keet Hit, of the Northern Tlingit and was raised in both Juneau and Anchorage. He is a product of both traditional Tlingit culture and the mainstream North American world, with an emphasis on the Tlingit side. He now lives in Idaho with his wife, Debi, and son, T’naa, where Larry is an artist, photographer and professor of photography in the Art Department at Boise State University. Before moving to Boise, he was a professor of photography at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, NM.

Santa Fe’s annual Indian Market—the Gary Farmer Gallery, owned and operated by the Mohawk actor of the same name—exhibited Larry’s works in August 2007. There, I was happy to see that Larry and his body of work are rich with Tlingit perspective.

Growing up, Larry’s greatest artistic influence was the traditional Northwest Coast art imbedded with heroic and funny stories in things like monumental totem poles, wall screens and the regalia that his people wore, like Chilkat robes. His mother, Anita Brown McNeil, was a groundbreaking student in her hometown and was among the first Tlingits to shatter the race barrier prohibiting native students from attending public school. Larry made a piece about this landmark event in his history, titled *Once Upon A Time In America*. Of the

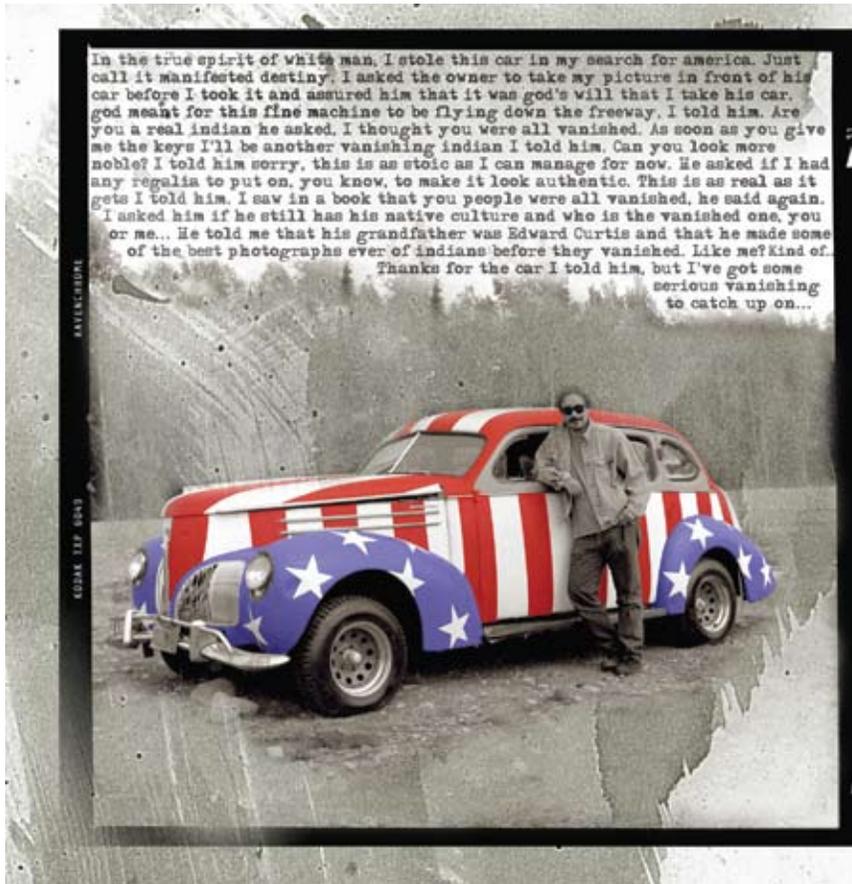
work he says, “It was about fighting for academic freedom. I don’t think I would have had the freedom to not only be a photographer, but also a university professor if it weren’t for my mother paving the way for my generation, so I am especially appreciative of her heartfelt sacrifices that

my following work,” he says. “It has humor and irony like all of my other work and set me free to be a photographer with my own distinct vision. My ‘Real Indians’ photograph wasn’t your typical Brooks shot, and my fellow students really liked it, which was atypical for lots of critiques because we’d nail each other for every little thing, but in a good way.”

Larry’s work is inspired by photographers Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie; Diné (Navajo); Patrick Nagatani, his mentor; and other artists such as Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith (Flathead Salish/French-Cree/Shoshone), C. Maxx Stevens (Seminole/Muscogee) and Robert Rauschenberg. Larry says, “If you’re an imagemaker, you should study all these photographers and artists if you want to learn how they problem solve to create wonderful images that transcend it all. The late Jim Pepper’s (Creek/Kaw) jazz masterpiece, ‘Witchi Tai To,’ on his CD *The Path*, showed me that we could indeed si-

multaneously honor our traditions while breaking new ground with our art. Wow! That was a complete revelation, especially for a young kid right out of photography school. The shackles placed on my creative energy fell right to the ground.”

Larry continues, “Photography is all about creative expression and making a visual manifestation of what story concerns you and what you have to say with it. I have taken that truism and run with it. People want to know what you had to do to over-



Opposite: Yéil **Above:** *In the Spirit of White Man*

made it a reality.”

Initially interested in the artistic merits of photography, Larry almost enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute. Instead, he eventually chose to attend Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara, CA, an institution focused on photography as a profession. With a B.A. from Brooks, Larry launched his career as a photographer based on his artistic successes in school. “My first great photograph from Brooks is the one titled ‘Real Indians’ from 1977, and [it] set the foundation for all of



Above: RezNet 3076-2

come life's challenges, which is at the essence of all good art, because that is where passion and the profound come from.

"To be a photographer it is critical to get a good education in photography. Your style—or creative abilities—is going to make you stand out from the crowd." He continues, "You need to develop your own visual aesthetic and be able to speak intelligently about it in a very succinct manner that is a reflection of your photography."

Larry has dealt with issues of racism in his life with the same humor that he incorporates into his work. It's a part of his personality. Larry's entire body of work for the last decade, called *Fly by Night Mythology*, is about trying to figure out the mythology that Americans make for themselves. While it is partly a critical and serious look at us as a nation, it is full of puns and jokes that poke at both the mainstream and at Larry's own culture. When he makes photographs about certain race relations, they are satirical, because, as Larry says, "In reality much of it is just plain stupid and needs to be jabbed."

The raven character that frequents his

photography fits the bill nicely when it comes to representing the role of a trickster in the Northwest Coast culture. "I'm sometimes able to sneak stuff in under people's radar without them being aware of it until it's too late, which is another role that tricksters play," Larry says.

Cameras and Photo Gear

Larry's very first camera was a Brownie Holiday camera that used 127 film. It was a gift from his grandmother, Mary Brown Betts, when he was 10. He shot a whole roll of film of just neighborhood dogs and his grandma laughed when she saw them. It's fitting that his first roll of film evoked laughter, because not much has changed with Larry in all these years.

His first more serious camera was a Mamiya 35mm that he used in high school. That was the hook that snagged him with photography because all of a sudden he was able to make photographs that had a distinct look and feel. He thought he was the new Eugene Smith. Photography of-

fered a release from the mundane world and his camera became a metaphor of hope for something good in the world.

Larry admits that he is a camera junkie. He has owned Hasselblads, Minoltas, Nikons, and now, Canon Digital SLR cameras. He still shoots with a Contax G2 35mm system because of the Carl Zeiss Planar lenses. "These lenses are still the sharpest ever made for small and medium format cameras," says Larry. He uses an old, funky wooden 4x5 field camera with Schneider lenses and Polaroid Type 55 Positive/Negative film for a lot of his new digital work because it has more information than what you can get from digital cameras. He also uses a retro Rolleiflex SL66 that his uncle Judson bought back in the 1960s. Larry says, "It has the revered Planar lenses, and a very cool 40mm Distagon that has the widest undistorted angle of view of 88 degrees, which is roughly equal to a 20mm lens on a 35mm camera. I still love the vivid combination of TRI-X and Rodinal. It is simply magic and epitomizes the alchemy that is possible with photography."



Above: Yéil, detail

“The gold standard for black-and-white prints is a contact-printed 8x10 platinum print by Edward Weston. Seeing a Weston platinum print is nothing short of sublime,” says Larry. “In my opinion, grayscale digital prints finally came of age when Epson added the light, light black ink to its print engine. For the first time, photographers are able to make a black-and-white digital print that rivals anything made in a darkroom. When you get right down to it, photographers are only able to manipulate the contrast and exposure in the darkroom when they print, and can alter the tonal range of their negatives when exposing and processing the film. What is amazing with the computer is that photographers can manipulate the shadows, mid-tones and highlights independently of each other, so the dynamic range of scanned negatives can be used in their entirety for the first time.”

Larry sets minimum requirements for digital workflow: It has to be fast, precise and reliable. It starts with the camera so it is critical to have a good set of photographic skills that drives everything else. He believes in optimizing the photographic images in the camera and minimizing post-processing.

Larry’s workflow starts when he pre-visualizes the ideas for new work. He underscores the importance of great color calibrations to make all the peripherals

work well together. Aperture and Lightroom are used to edit volumes of RAW images right out of the camera. He uses a MacBook Pro with 4GB of RAM on the road and an iMac for a desktop. His printer is the Epson 7800.

About the future of photography in the digital age, Larry is clear about the basics. “Photography is still about the art of capturing an image; how malleable imagery is for each individual [as] a reflection, signifier or signpost of how they think; how we exchange meaning with each other. It’s still about neurons and experiences more than the camera of the moment.”

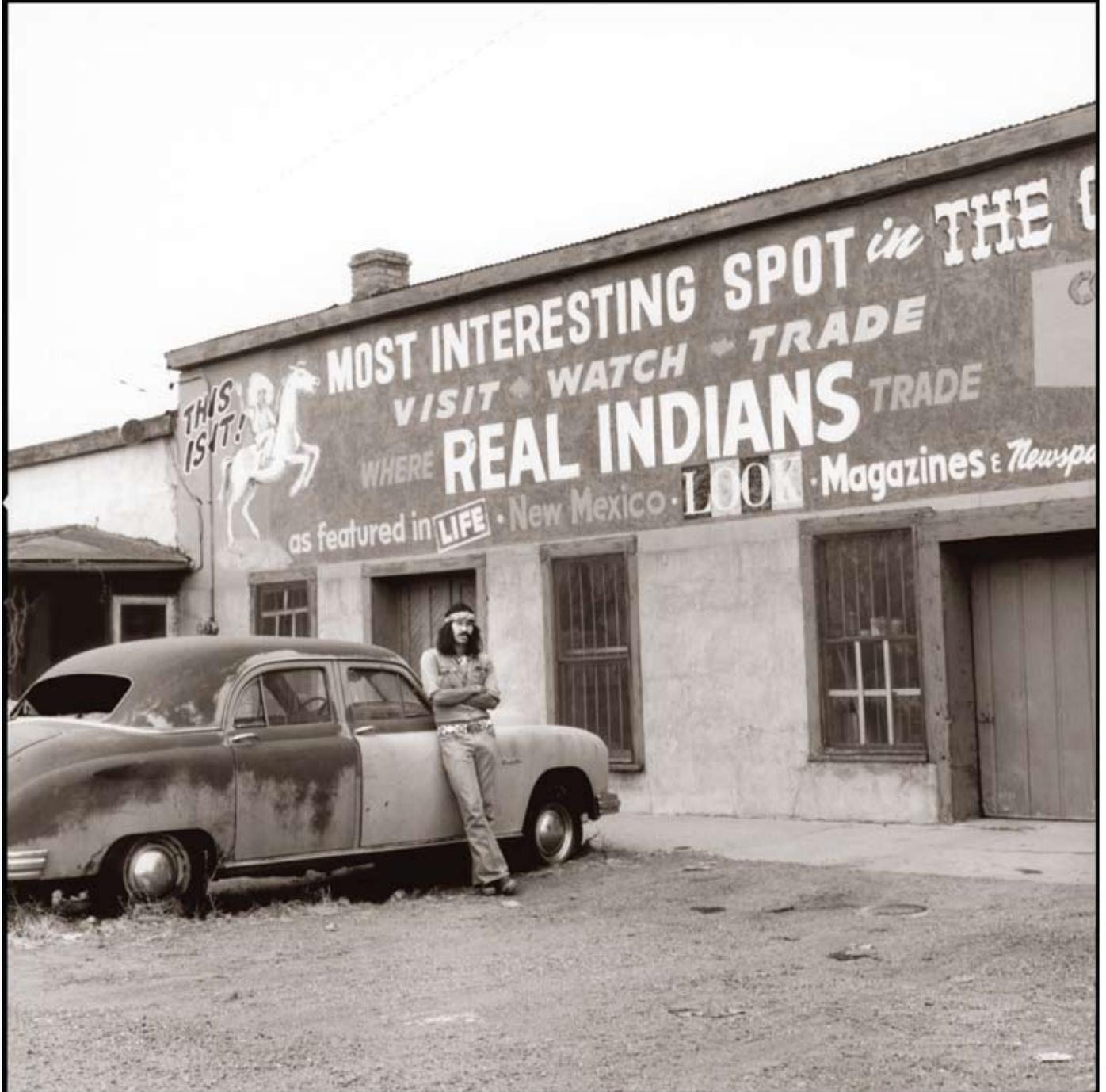
When I ask Larry what he would be doing today if he were not a photographer, he replies, “I always loved fishing on the ocean in Alaska and was very good at it. I think that if I wasn’t a photographer I would have pursued that profession. Captain McNeil has kind of a cool ring to it, and I would have followed in my father’s footsteps. He played a very significant role helping me with who I am today, and I made a piece about him and titled it ‘Dad.’ It was one of the hardest pieces I’ve ever made, because it was crucial to get it right.” He continues, “If I could do something else with my photography maybe it would involve family travel. Since I’m very good at teaching, maybe I could combine the two

in some way. How does a socially relevant photography workshop on the other side of the world sound?

“Our days are numbered here on Earth, so you’d better get off your behind and make your mark while you can,” says Larry. “I tell my students that if they are slackers, that’s okay with me because it will ultimately mean one less competitor for me. And besides, the world needs people to flip burgers too. They sometimes laugh, but I tell them I’m serious. It is critical to have purpose driving your work, that there is a substance to it.”

When it comes to his own photography, Larry has worked for years to find a certain visual aesthetic. Anything that wasn’t up to his personal standards, went in the trash. “Your toughest critic should be in the mirror. Making photographs that transcend the ordinary is my mission in life,” he says.

“I learned from my elders that when you complain about anything it means that you’re volunteering to fix it. When I was fresh out of college I complained to our regional tribal council about our elections, and all of a sudden I was the director of elections. That philosophy has found its way into my art and photography because it takes the idea of a passive whiner and transforms him/her into a proactive activist with their work. We can speak very



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plainly here and say that you certainly can be passionate about your subject and as a matter of fact, if you're lukewarm about it, your photographs will likely be mundane or average too. Take a stance and be fearless. Be an art warrior."

Larry McNeil was recently honored by the U.S. State Department by having his work included in the Arts in U.S. Embassies Program. He attended a reception at Blair House in Washington, D.C., hosted by First Lady Laura Bush. Participating Native American artists made limited edition lithographs for the project in conjunction with the National Museum of the American Indian and the Tamarind Art Institute. Larry has also received a Fellowship from the renowned Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art of In-



Above: *Real Indians*
Left: *Grandma*

dianapolis, IN; an All Roads Program award from *National Geographic*; and a New Works award from En Foco, a nonprofit dedicated to cultural diversity in photography. He has exhibited at numerous galleries including the Barbican in London. The Andrew Smith Gallery represents him in Santa Fe, NM. Learn more about Larry McNeil and view his most recent work at www.larrymcneil.com. CC

Paul Slaughter is a world-traveled photographer, writer and ASMP member currently residing in Santa Fe, NM. Paul specializes in location, stock and fine art photography. A special love of his is jazz. He has an extensive photographic collection of the legends of jazz. You can view portfolios of Paul's work at www.slaughterphoto.com.