

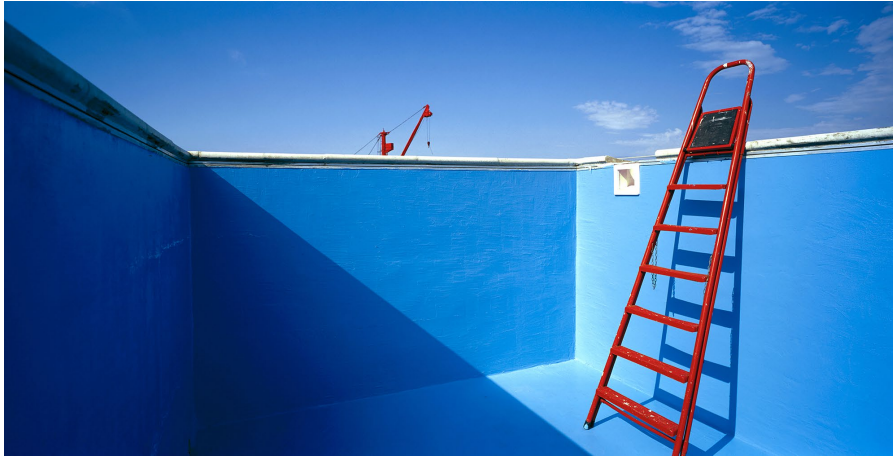
# MEDIUMFORMAT

JANUARY 2023



PHIL BEKKER  
KARL TAYLOR  
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CHARLES CRAMER  
BRUCE BARNBAUM

**INTERVIEW:**  
MATTHEW JORDAN SMITH



Phil Bekker

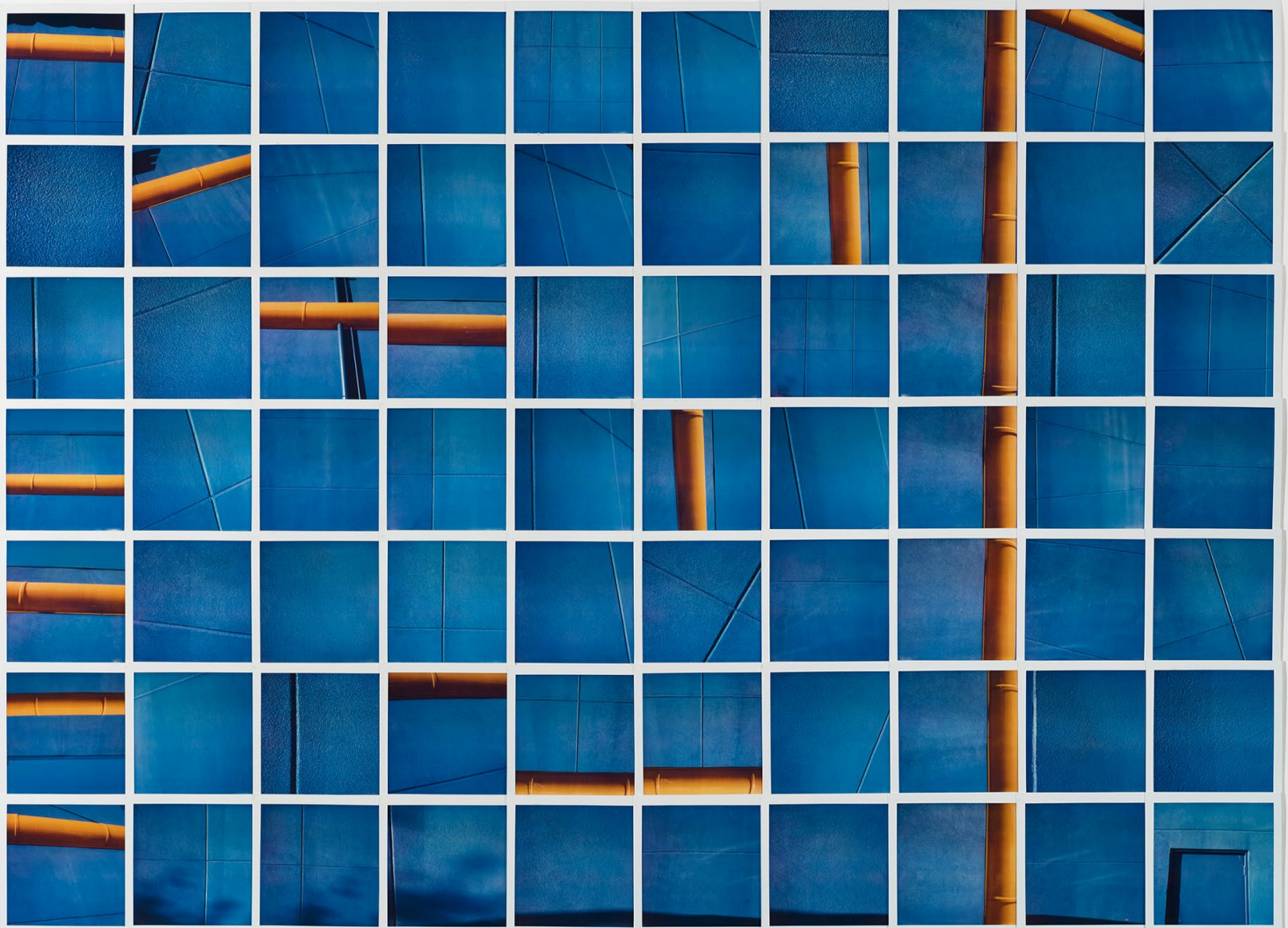
**Could you please tell us a story from your youth which would reveal the young Phil Bekker?**

Boarding school in Rhodesia from Kindergarten through to high school on the Mozambique border, with most holidays spent walking barefoot with rifle and dogs through the mountains and bush on our farm. (I inherited a Box Brownie roundabout this time). This was followed by compulsory military service in the Rhodesian Air Force, often riding shotgun in doorless helicopters. And then four years of photographic studies in South Africa and London, to running a studio in Durban, South Africa and emigration to the United States. Africa adieu but the bush remains.



**Do you have one image which is especially important to you and which paved the way for your later work?**

A hard choice really, but perhaps “Multi Red Flight,” which was the first multi-image composite I did (in South Africa) and then continued the series after having moved to the United States (see “Multi Blue” showcased here). It offered an opportunity to tell a substantial story, to go off at a tangent and experiment and to invite a subjective interpretation of a usually abstract reassembly of a deconstructed everyday subject or location.





**How do you know when your image is complete and whether it is exactly what you want?**

You get the feeling when you listen to the introduction of a particular piece of music you immediately respond to, whether it's Led Zeppelin, Leonard Cohen, or Beethoven and you know it has those ingredients that appeal to you and which you will not easily tire of, and it will probably always give you pleasure.



**With so many tools and lighting choices, what is your advice to someone who is starting in commercial and conceptual photography?**

When I graduated after four years of commercial photographic study in South Africa, there was very little if any choice in commercial photo equipment. There were also no rental houses and as a result, most of us invested in Broncolor and Sinar, which fortunately for us, was an incredible investment.

I still have all the equipment I bought in the early 1980s and swear by it, although I only use my Sinar 4x5 now with a Fotodiox adaptor and the Hasselblad X1DII attached to the back of it, especially for doing extreme “Reverse Scheimpflug” applications. Lately for still-life work, tungsten lighting may be preferable at times and if so, I use the modeling lights on my Broncolor or Hazy Light and other Broncolor heads in conjunction with a 300W tungsten focusing spot, mirrors and odds and ends.

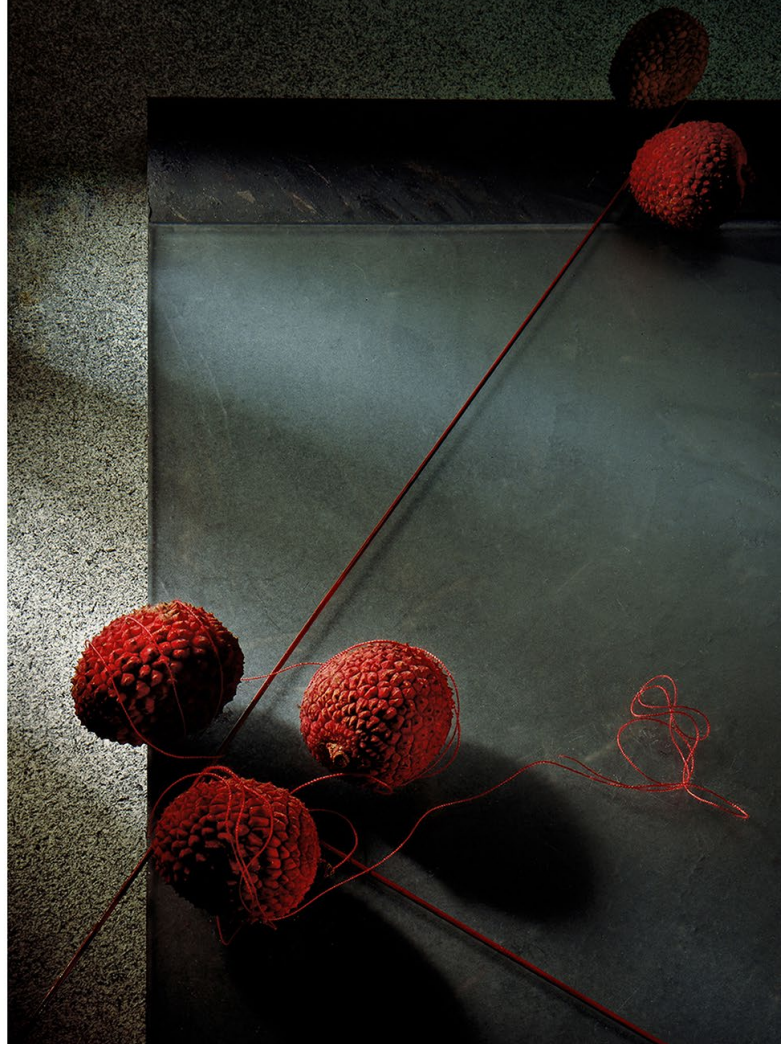
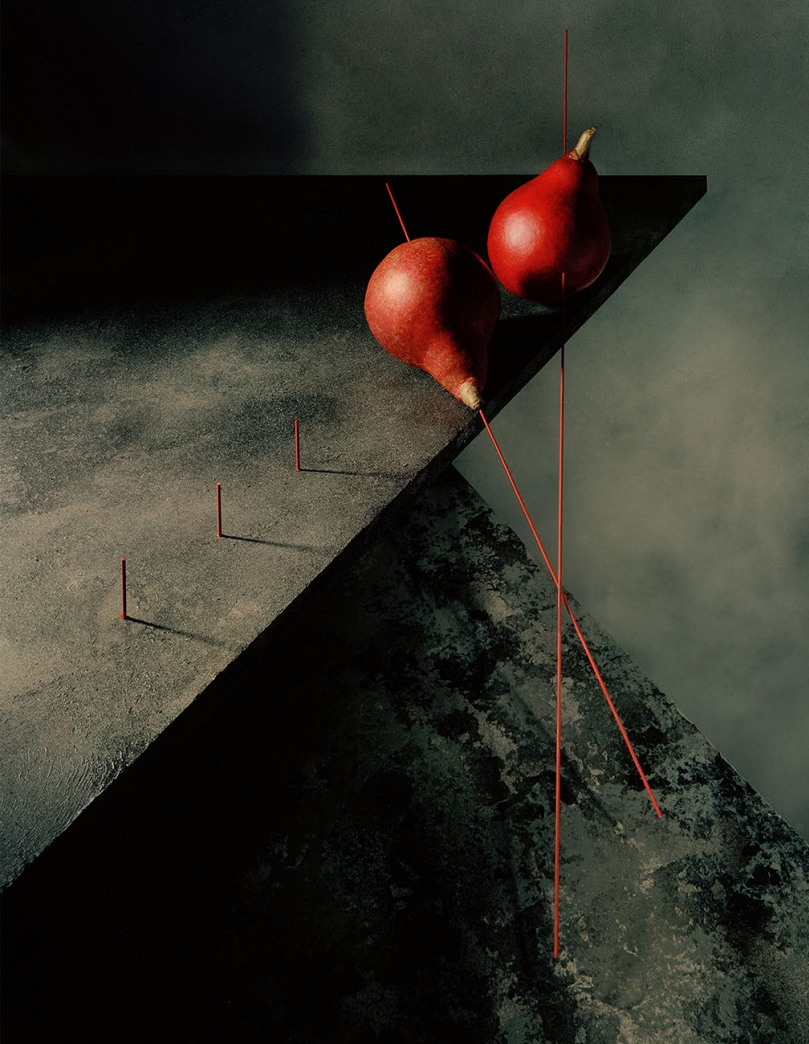
Nowadays you could start with very little and pretty basic lighting, reinvent the wheel and once you have established a direction, see what would work best and would be a good long-term investment for your needs. There is a good used market out there and if you know what you’re looking for, you can find it. In my experience, quality always pays off.



**What is the most common focal length you use in your work and why?**

At the moment, the XCD 45m lens on my Hasselblad X1DII, which is the only XCD lens I currently own. It's a convenient all-purpose lens and is good for a lot of the work I do. It forces you to adapt and be creative when you don't have a bag of choices.





### **What's your favourite lens?**

I've tried out most of the lenses for the X1DII and know that the 21mm would be a favourite choice and suit what I would like to achieve. Until then, I use a converter with the old medium format lenses I already owned, which unfortunately are all non-autofocus but do the trick.

**Do you have a technique or photographic common truth that you subscribed to at the beginning of your career but now completely reject?**

Hard to think of those offhand, but rules are there to be broken, trends change, and everything related to the profession and indeed to life, changes. It's therefore a good idea to be open to and investigate and experiment with techniques and what you may previously have thought was written in stone.



**The variety of clients and publications you've worked with say it all. How has the business of photography changed over the years? In your view, what is the major change about how you find, approach and close with clients?**

It has become increasingly difficult, over time, to pop in to an agency and show your physical portfolio (especially in the US in my experience). The reps I had often had to deliver breakfast or lunch as a condition for the presentation appointment. A lot of major agencies would not do a personal meet but would have you drop off your portfolio, which was then left in the lunch room for creatives to view.

Things have changed a lot over the years but having a strong personal signature with work that will fit a particular vibrant market that you are passionate about and then target that market through the appropriate avenues and to the right people is still the same strategy but updated to meet current trends.

Apart from needing to have exceptional creative, technical, and digital skills, ultimately you need to be hugely personable, reliable and someone clients want to be with repeatedly on assignments and then for an extended period of time. Also research your clients and their needs, then present ideas and strategies that help in their decision to work with you.



### **Which photographs and themes are most important to you personally?**

As with music, I am drawn to different themes and styles of photography and am amazed at the gems that are constantly being produced. The most important to me are those that are exciting, demand your attention and thought, even make you a bit uncomfortable, take chances and veer away from the safe and the obvious. I'm particularly interested when the result looks less like traditional photography, especially on the surface of the image. Photographers who immediately come to mind are Doug and Mike Starn, Rosamond Wolff Purcell, David Hockney, Luis Gonzales Palma, Andy Warhol and Joel Peter Witkin, to name a few.

Arthur Tress wrote:

"So much of today's photography...fails to touch upon the hidden life of the imagination and fantasy which is hungry for stimulation. The documentary photographer supplies us with facts or drowns us in humanity, while the pictorialist, avant-garde, or conservative, pleases us with mere aesthetically correct compositions—but where are the photographs we can pray to, that will make us well again, or scare the hell out of us?"

We could all bear this in mind.

Phil Bekker

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