

Opposite: "Sagittarius," 2000.
This page: "Rosette Nebula," 2000.



NIGHT VISION

Landscape photographer
Neil Folberg
turns his eyes to the sky.
By Russell Hart

Neil Folberg calculates that over the years he's spent close to 400 nights camped out in Egypt's Sinai peninsula. "After dark I'd just walk through that landscape and stare up at the sky," says Folberg, who reports that the Sinai's stars are more than bright enough to see your way by.

The photographer spent most of those starry nights in the desert shooting the richly descriptive color landscapes of *In a Desert Land* (Abbeville, 1998). "I'm very attached to traditional landscape," says Folberg, who studied with Ansel Adams and William Garnett. "But I'm not one of those photographers who just keeps working the same theme over and over again, so after a while I felt the need to do something totally different. I wanted to make pictures that didn't depend so heavily on subject matter."

At the same time, Folberg was rekindling an interest in astronomy. "I built a telescope with my boys and started to read books on astrophysics," he recalls. Then his artistic and scientific impulses came together. "I said, 'I've got to photograph the night sky.'" But Folberg didn't want to create





"First Light,"
Wadi Zawatin,
Sinai, 2000.

the streaky star trails that are the stock-in-trade of art-minded night photographers. Nor did he want to shoot the straight star fields favored by amateur astrophotographers. "People who live in cities never see the Milky Way," he says. "When you show them a picture of it, they think it's fireworks. So I realized I had to make images that would let them stand on familiar ground while looking at what's beyond."

His solution was to combine both landscape and starscape—as he puts it, the finite and the infinite. But for technical reasons, he chose to capture his landscapes and his skies separately, seamlessly fusing them in his computer with Adobe Photoshop software. That's less contrived than it appears to be. "Most of the scenes look pretty much the

way I saw them," says Folberg, who moved from San Francisco to Jerusalem in 1976. "Whether I'm sitting in San Francisco or Jerusalem, which are at roughly the same latitude, I see the same night sky. I just see it at a different time."

Once Folberg taught himself the techniques of traditional astrophotography—including how to use a clock drive to keep stars from forming trails, and hypersensitizing his Kodak Technical Pan film by baking it for 72 hours at 51 degrees Centigrade in a mixture of nitrogen and hydrogen—he shot most of his stars from the porch of the Wise Observatory in Israel's Negev Desert, using a Rolleiflex SL66 SE with lenses ranging from 40mm wide-angle to 250mm telephoto. But what makes Folberg's night skies so dazzling is



"Comet Hale-Bopp," 1997.

the same thing that gives deep-sky astrophotographs their scientific worth: long exposures that record hundreds if not thousands of stars that are invisible to the naked eye.

The landscape portions of the photos were often shot in early evening or early morning, when the available light was low-angled or diffuse. Folberg occasionally adds his own light. He uses one of four different films, including Kodak T-Max 100, Kodak High Speed Infrared, Konica Infrared 750, and, more recently, Ilford SFX 200. "The infrared film keeps foliage from getting too dark, and it adds a luminous quality," says Folberg. "But I try to tone down its effects so they're more realistic." Folberg was equally

concerned that his starry nocturnes, which have just been published in *Celestial Nights: Visions of an Ancient Land* (Aperture, \$40), would look too digital. "I wanted them to look like real photographs," he says. So instead of making inkjet prints, he output his files as 16x20 internegatives, then contact-printed them on Agfa Multicontrast Classic paper. "There may be a little bit of cheating to that technique," says Folberg, without apology. "But photographers are always pushing technology to its limits to make images that show what their eyes saw."

You can see more of Neil Folberg's work and order his books and prints at neilfolberg.com or visiongallary.com.