

American

PHOTO

ON CAMPUS

March 2010

The MAGICAL REALISM

of
ALEJANDRO
CHASKIELBERG

GO PRO

STUDENT CONTEST
WINNERS

W. EUGENE SMITH

IN HIS OWN WORDS

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TO SHOOT VIDEO WITH YOUR DSLR

Photo by Alejandro Chaskielberg, from *The High Tide*

BEAUTIFUL DREAMER

ALEJANDRO CHASKIELBERG REIMAGINES THE LIFE AND LANDSCAPE OF AN ARGENTINE RIVER DELTA. BY RUSSELL HART



© ALEJANDRO CHASKIELBERG



Young photographers are often tempted to try too much at once in their pictures—burying any nascent vision under layers of competing special effects. Emerging Argentine photographer Alejandro Chaskielberg is an exception worth noting. Shooting with a 4x5, he combines some of photography's most shopworn techniques into a remarkably sophisticated vision—one that illustrates how important technique can be in achieving real artistry.

Chaskielberg's skill is especially evident in a lush body of work called *The High Tide*. In the images, which document the life and work of the native Guaraní people of Argentina's Paraná River Delta—an area not far from the photographer's native Buenos Aires, yet full of islands accessible only by boat—he relies on at least three familiar techniques. First, he uses his view camera's swings and tilts to create a shallow band of sharpness that runs at unexpected angles across the scene, making much of it softer than would be possible with shallow depth of field alone. (The effect turns people into doll-like figures in a seemingly miniature set.) Second, he lights portions of the scene and its inhabitants with carefully-positioned off-camera flash units sometimes



Top, "Burning Willows" shows Paraná Delta men taking logs to market; above, "Paiva's Radiance," also from *The High Tide*.

CHASKIELBERG BLENDS HIS EFFECTS SO SKILLFULLY THAT THEY CREATE THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EQUIVALENT OF MAGICAL REALISM.



Top, "Double" shows a delta fisherman carrying his wading suit to work; left, "Golden River", also from *The High Tide*.



Above, "The Mute Ones" shows a father and son at their riverside fuel station in the Paraná Delta; opposite, "Sofia," also from *The High Tide*.

hidden in the field of view, combining the flash with post-sunset light or moonlight captured with long exposures. Third, Chaskielberg selectively increases color saturation in post-production. Yet he blends these effects so skillfully, and with such a quirky eye, that they create the photographic equivalent of magical realism—the affecting mix of real and surreal said to have begun with *100 Years of Solitude*, the 1967 novel by Columbian author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, which more recently has made its way into Spanish-language films. “I try to explore the limits of documentary photography, using technical processes to transform the natural perception of light, colors, and spaces,” says Chaskielberg.

Yet in its content, Chaskielberg’s project begs comparison to *Life and Landscape in the Norfolk Broads*, Peter Henry Emerson’s 19th-century photographic study of England’s East Anglian marshlands. As with the current-day Paraná delta, where fishing and logging are the mainstay, life and work in this watery region were often conducted by

CLOSE-UP: ALEJANDRO CHASKIELBERG

Home town: Buenos Aires, Argentina

Studied at: Argentina’s National Film Institute

Exhibits at: Ruth Benzacar Art Gallery, Buenos Aires

Awards: *Burn* magazine Emerging Photographer Grant (2010); Leopold Godowski Jr. Color Photography Award from Boston University’s Photographic Resource Center (2009); SCAN Talent Latent award (2009); *National Geographic* All Roads Photography Award (2008); Curriculum Zero Prize for young artists (2006)



boat. “I am interested in the visual and poetical power of the water, and the relationship between people and their environment,” says the photographer. Yet the 125-year bridge between the two artists goes beyond content to aesthetics: As did Emerson, Chaskielberg treads the boundary between realism and pictorialism. The difference is that his pictorialism is entirely modern in style, replacing Emerson’s warm, subtle platinum tones with dramatic contrast and bright colors. And like Emerson—though for logistical rather than technical reasons—Chaskielberg poses and shoots his subjects based on behaviors and locations he observes in daylight hours. “My intention is to work with photography in the border between reality and fiction,” he says.

Chaskielberg started photographic life as a newspaper photojournalist in Buenos Aires, detoured into music, then went on to shoot television documentaries. Accolades for his recent still photography have come fast and furious. In 2008 he was chosen to participate in *National Geographic*’s All Roads Photography Program, which promotes three or four native shooters who are documenting important aspects of their own cultures. Last Year he won the Leopold Godowsky Jr. Color Photography Award, which is overseen by Boston University’s Photographic Resource Center. And this year he received *Burn* magazine’s Magnum-supported Emerging Photographer Grant for *The High Tide* project. Administered by *Burn* editor and respected *National Geographic* photographer David Alan Harvey, the grant will allow Chaskielberg to continue his work in the Paraná River Delta—or anywhere else that objective reality holds the possibility of magic. ■

CHASKIELBERG POSES AND SHOOTS HIS SUBJECTS LATE AT NIGHT,
BASED ON BEHAVIORS HE OBSERVES IN DAYLIGHT HOURS.