

# Sam Abell

## THE PHOTOGRAPHIC LIFE

TEXT BY RUSSELL HART, EXECUTIVE EDITOR, AMERICAN PHOTO MAGAZINE

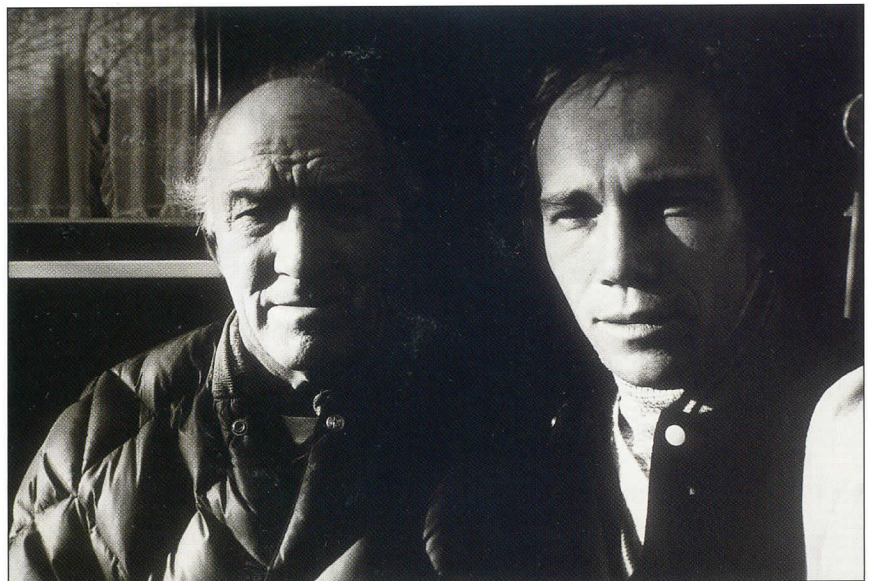
**Photographer Sam Abell** has traveled far and wide for *National Geographic*, and achieved a unique artistic vision in the process. But he always comes home to Albemarle.

Thirty years have passed since the familiar yellow border of *National Geographic* first framed Sam Abell's pictures. Since then, on assignment for that venerable magazine, Abell has photographed everything from aboriginals swimming in billabongs (the natives' name for a seasonal pool in Australia, one of Abell's favorite places to shoot) to blue-footed boobies nesting in the Galapagos Islands. But when he's at home and feels the need to take a picture, he just opens his back door and walks a hundred feet, to the south bank of Moorman's River. "It comes out of Sugar Hollow Reservoir in the Shenandoah," says Abell, who has lived between Free Union and Crozet for 25 years. "The rocks along the river have an ancient and warm feeling."

Abell's far-flung *National Geographic* photographs are seasoned with subjects close to home in an impressive retrospective at the University of Virginia Art Museum, on view from July 19 through September 15. The show, called *Sam Abell: The Photographic Life*, should be required viewing for anyone who still doubts that photography can be Art. Soft-spoken but articulate, Abell calls his pictures "quiet." That judgment is typically modest. His pictures are about color, but don't have the supersaturated hues we associate with commonplace travel photography. They are about form, but don't have the visual density we've come to expect in photographs of exotic cultures. And while they are about their subjects, of course, their poetry – the word composition seems prosaic – tells just as much about Sam Abell.

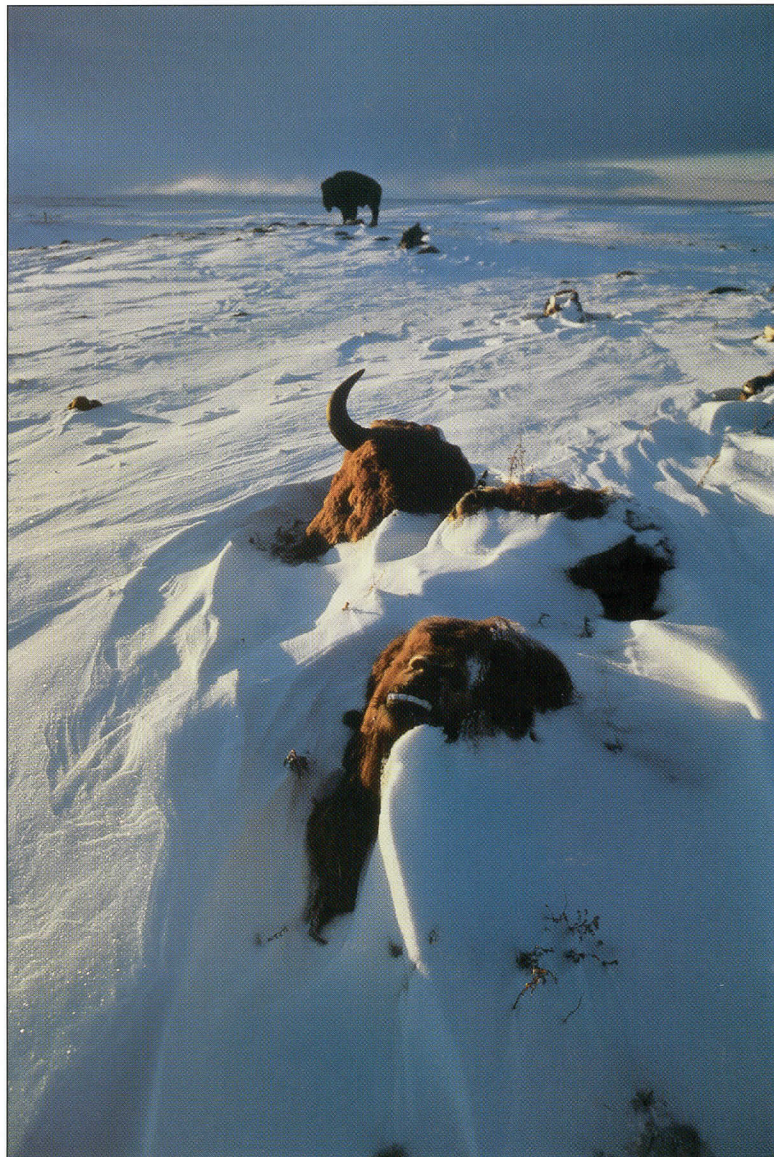
Abell's retrospective, which will travel to museums around the world and be published this September in a sumptuous monograph from art book giant Rizzoli, has been eight years in the making. Those years have drawn

Abell into a major reevaluation of his work, with an important second opinion provided by longtime *National Geographic* colleague Leah Bendavid-Val. The book and show, edited and guest co-curated by Bendavid-Val, share a four-part structure that reflects this appraisal, tracing not just Abell's career but the evolution of his creative process. The first part is essentially autobiographical, and, together with Abell's written reminiscences of how his private life became the photographic life, is moving but unsentimental. It starts in the early 1960s with photos Abell took on forays around his hometown, Sylvania, Ohio, with his father, an avid amateur with a basement darkroom. "He was



a teacher but never instructed," writes the photographer. "He'd just say things from time to time, like 'Look for strong diagonals,' 'Remember the 'S' curve,' 'Keep the sun at your back,' 'Bad weather makes good pictures,' and a favorite, 'The unusual wins out over the usual.'" It may be putting words in Abell's mouth, but after the better part of a career in photography he might be tempted to offer a corollary to his father's credo, and say that the unusual can be found in the usual.

Abell joined his high school's camera club (founded by



his father, who taught geography, sociology and calligraphy at the school), and went on to become editor and principal photographer of its yearbook. His early work was strictly black and white, then the staple of amateur photography and high school yearbooks, which continued through college at the University of Kentucky, where he shot for the school newspaper. Abell never took a photography class, ironic given that he is now in great demand as a teacher of photographic workshops. "Seeing bad photographs published with your name under them is the most powerful learning experience you can have," he says.

It was during college that Abell made the decision that would realize his gift for color: he applied for a summer internship at *National Geographic*. He almost didn't get it. "I spent a lot of time and every cent I had on my portfo-

lio, and shipped it to the magazine in two parts," he recalls. "Unfortunately, I used water-soluble ink on the mailing labels, and somewhere along the way the packages got wet." Only one package made it through, with a barely legible label. (That smudged label, which Abell kept as a testament to the quirks of destiny, is reproduced on the dedication page of *The Photographic Life*.) Adding injury to insult, when the magazine's director of photography opened the surviving package it exploded, depositing tiny foam chips all over his office. But the recipient, *National Geographic* legend Robert Gilka (Abell's dedicatee), saw the promise in half a portfolio and gave Abell the job.

Gilka then presented Abell with a singular opportunity: to photograph the voyage of a U.S. Coast Guard ice cutter



through northern Europe, Siberia, Alaska and the Canadian Arctic, a passage that had never been completed. Along the way, Abell's ship was stopped first by ice and next by the Russians (the Cold War was still being waged), then tossed around by a North Sea gale that made the photographer "profoundly" seasick. Despite the misery, Abell wanted more. When he finished college in 1970, Gilka promptly hired him as a contract photographer and dispatched him to shoot a story in Newfoundland. The austerity of the island's life and landscape was a do-or-die test of Abell's ability to make the transition from black-and-white photography to color, *National Geographic's* stock-in-trade long before other magazines could afford it. "He knew that color film was unforgiving," Gilka writes in *Stay This Moment*, Abell's handsome mid-career monograph, published in 1990 by Charlottesville's own Thomas-Grant. "More intimidating was what he calls the

'chaos of color,' the switch in seeing and composition a photographer must make when he moves from black and white to color." Gilka calls Abell's transition "shaky."

But Abell's color work wouldn't stay shaky for long, as the rest of his retrospective gloriously shows. As it turned out, the match between Sam Abell and *National Geographic* was made in artistic heaven. The photographer seems constitutionally unhurried; his speech is so measured that you can practically hear the thought behind each word. And that nature is in keeping with the character of a *National Geographic* assignment. *Geographic* photographers spend whatever time it takes to get to know their subject intimately. They're usually given months, sometimes a year or more, to shoot a story. No other magazine in the world can afford that editorial luxury, and it's one reason *National Geographic* photography is always so good. "I once saw a man reading the mag-



azine on an airplane, just thumbing through a story I'd spent a year shooting," says Abell. "I'd taken 25,000 pictures, and in the end, eight were published. I wasn't sorry it was eight, because they were all good ones. So I knelt down in the aisle beside the man and said, 'Friend, slow down.' And I started telling him some of the background behind each picture."

One of the images in that 1984 story, about the life and times of cowboy artist Charles M. Russell, shows dead buffalo buried up to their necks in snow. Animal skulls are an overexposed icon of the American West, yet Abell managed to push beyond the cliché in his photograph, which was taken just across the Canadian border from Russell's Montana stomping grounds. But the picture is also a classic example of how patience pays off in photography – and, in this case, a degree of patience that wouldn't have been possible without the deep pockets of *National Geographic*. On his third trip to Montana Abell made a series of photographs of buffalo remains; they were some of the last pictures he took before returning to the magazine's Washington, DC headquarters to do a final review of the story, already a year in the making. But the problem with



being a *Geographic* photographer is that you have to ship all your exposed film to your picture editor from the field, and go on shooting based on what he or she thinks of the processed results. You usually don't get to see your finished photographs for weeks, even months. And when Abell came home and saw the buffalo pictures, he wasn't satisfied. "They were flat," he says simply. So six months later he convinced his editor to send him to Montana one more time (*Geographic* photographers call it a "go-back"), and this fourth and final trip was in the middle of winter. "I went back to the same lot of skulls," he says. "But this time they were covered with snow." And the snow made all the difference, visually simplifying the subject and adding a stark symbolism. Yet the new photographs' success didn't depend entirely on the change of season. While Abell was investigating the skulls, taking dozens if not rolls of pictures, a live buffalo wandered into the background. He quickly pressed the shutter button and the image was complete. "It took a year and a half to get that photograph," he says.

To illustrate the persistence, patience and decision-making that go into Abell's creative process, the second



part of his UVa exhibition and Rizzoli book, called “Seeking the Picture,” pairs 40 of Abell’s best images with what photographers call “outtakes.” Outtakes are the photographs, many of them perfectly good (and sometimes better in less editorially useful ways), that weren’t actually published – the ones that led up to and/or followed the picture that was printed. This section of the show tells the visual story behind the making of specific images, including some of Abell’s greatest hits. In some cases the outtakes are just subtle variations of the final shot, the better part of a single roll of film in which Abell finessed his point of view, perspective and framing, and, as he puts it, “hunkered down and waited for light and circumstance.” In other cases, they’re variations more spaced out in time, as Abell returned repeatedly to the same subject and saw new ways to compose it, or found it in a better light, or simply caught it at a more revealing moment.

That said, Sam Abell’s pictures are less about specific moments than those of his talented *National Geographic* colleagues. They have an overarching graphic power that captures the soul of a place. Abell thinks it goes back to growing up in Ohio. “It was so flat, with the horizon line

dividing everything equally wherever you looked,” he says. “That line persists in my photography. I see the world structurally, and on that structure I put other shapes, whether it’s the shape of a canoe or of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. Most documentary photography pursues content. But I tend to pursue the form of a thing and then bring the content into that.” Ever self-critical, Abell doesn’t necessarily see that habit as a virtue. “I think sometimes I go to the point where in trying to find the best structure, I actually risk losing the moment,” he says. “And I know other photographers who consider that unforgiveable.” They’ll forgive Abell, we think, when they see the fourth part of his retrospective, dubbed “The Life Behind Things.”

It says a lot about the life around Charlottesville that an inordinate number of America’s top photographers, some but not all of them from *National Geographic*, have chosen to settle in the area. Among them are such Geographic stars as William Albert Allard, Michael “Nick” Nichols and Chris Johns. Abell was one of the first, moving here shortly after marrying his wife Denise in 1976. (He met her a few years earlier while shooting a *National Geographic* story on

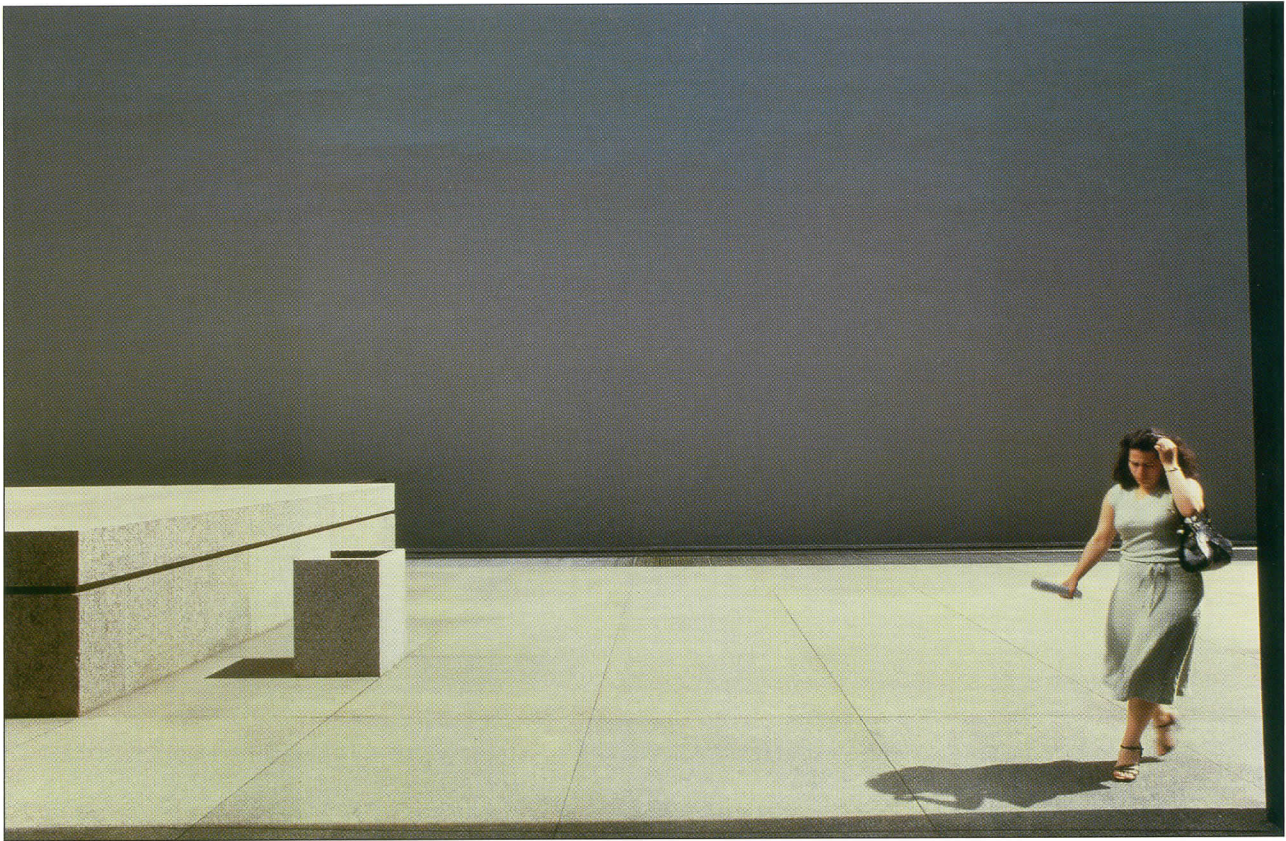


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GREAT SANDY DESERT  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA, 1989

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BRANDING  
UTICA, MONTANA, 1984



the Pacific Crest Trail, where she was laid up with blisters.) “My parents put a big emphasis on the life of learning,” says Abell, who used to drive north from Sylvania to Ann Arbor, Michigan, when he craved the cultural amenities of a college town. “So I knew I wanted to be in that

kind of environment, and Charlottesville was far enough away from Washington that it wasn’t a bedroom. It was its own place.”

As work on his book and show have intensified and Abell’s traveling has lessened, he and Denise (who has accompanied him on many if not most of his *National Geographic* adventures) have spent more time in town. “I’ve very happily taken advantage of Charlottesville,” he says. “I think it’s a physically beautiful place. And the little valley where we live, if you can believe it, has actually gotten better in the last 25 years. We’re surrounded by people



who haven’t just protected the place, but have really refined their way of living.” And what if (God forbid) Abell ever stops working for *National Geographic*? Will he and Denise stay in Charlottesville? “Yes, absolutely,” he says. Will he be able to make

good photographs without the *Geographic*’s resources – in his own backyard, so to speak? Abell thinks so, and not just because he has been the go-to photographer for *Geographic* stories on Jefferson, Madison, and the Appalachian Trail. A case in point is the sad but beautiful Abell closeup of a blood-red cardinal blown to its death by a spring storm. The image illustrates one of the conclusions Sam Abell has drawn from the photographic life, that “surprisingly little endures.” And it was taken in his own backyard, just a stone’s throw from the ancient rocks of Moorman’s River.