

# Power of play

SOME 16 YEARS AGO, *PHOTO REVIEW*'S 7TH EDITION FEATURED THE STRIKING AERIAL ABSTRACTS OF A GOULBURN PHOTOGRAPHER NAMED JACKIE RANKEN.

Don Norris





Macrocarpa Tree.



**B**y the time her profile appeared in *Photo Review* late in 2002 Jackie Ranken was an established photographer who'd been taking pictures since she was a teenager and had been teaching landscape photography at the Goulburn TAFE for the better part of six years.

As it turned out, 2002 was a watershed in her career. In June she won both the AIPP Professional Photographer of the Year and the AIPP (Australian) Landscape Photographer of the Year. She's continued to rack up Photographer of the Year awards along with other prestigious accolades, year in and year out.

In 2005, Jackie and fellow photographer Mike Langford moved to New Zealand's South Island where they set up – and still run – the Queenstown Centre for Creative Photography. Both she and Mike, who were married in 2008, have earned Grand Master of Photography Awards in NZ and Australia.

At the heart of the QCCP are personalised photographic tuition sessions, five-day photographic workshops and small group photographic tours in New Zealand and overseas.

'Mike and I work together so well on our workshops,' said Jackie. 'I think that that is our secret ingredient. We offer different ways of solving photographic problems and this instruction allows the student better personal navigation and a broader base of knowledge from which to develop their own styles and preferences.'

'Mike is from a commercial photography background, his compositions are deliberate and specific. He thinks much more before he fires the shutter, where I tend to move into the shot and feel it. I have taught him to loosen up and play much more and he has taught me to see the shapes in the landscapes and to be aware of what is in the frame before I hit the shutter.'

Jackie and Mike may not get many opportunities to pursue their own respective photographic projects when they're in the thick of a workshop or tour, but as their awards, publications and exhibitions underline, over the course of a typical year, their personal portfolios continue to develop. Indeed, since 2006 they've produced annual exhibitions under the name 'Symbiosis'.

'We show photographs alongside one another that we have made of the same place but with totally different interpretations.'

Creating a series of images on a particular subject is arguably photography's most durable tradition and it's something Jackie has been doing more or less continuously since she started earning an income from her picture-taking in the 1980s. Her very first exhibition at the Goulburn Regional Art Gallery in 1988 was the culmination of a project to photograph people around her town. 'My street series came from a desire to follow in the footsteps of many great photographers by photographing on the street – and to do it in my own way because it was my own hometown,' she said. 'It was a desire to understand some of the history of photography and to get it into my veins. Having goals, like an exhibition, helps a series of work to hold together because it has intent.'

'These days I have many series that keep developing alongside one another. These various series are linked to photographic techniques that I am exploring,' Jackie noted, adding that the techniques she's currently working on include multiple exposures, 'where I make various captures of the same place at different angles as a way of communicating to a viewer in two ways at the same time. [I'm also making] use of intentional camera movement mixed with the movement from a vehicle at slow shutter speed [in order] to interpret the experience of travelling through the landscape.'







Hokkaido Lake, Tokyo Japan.

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She also has a long-running interest in the use of found objects in her landscape photographs which are part of a series she calls 'Other Realities'.

'The various series develop from experimentation and repetitive practice of particular techniques,' she said. 'Practice is really the key, so that when I find myself in a situation to use a technique, I can draw upon a huge amount of experience in knowing what works and perhaps what won't work in any given situation.'

The accumulation of photographic experience has its own timeline and its own progression, but in a sense, it's always a kind of exploration. As Jackie put it, 'Exploring the New Zealand landscape from a ground perspective was what I needed to do. I am still exploring and with small groups of photographers, Mike and I revisit our favourite places over and over again. Most likely this is why I keep pushing my photographic techniques to find new ways of seeing familiar landscapes.'

Essential as the actual landscape is, it is what one brings to the photographic process

that matters most. 'I think that the sense of being in the right place comes from believing in intuition and practicing to use that intuition,' said Jackie. 'It is important not to get stressed about it but to let things flow along and to make the most of it.'

A strong believer in getting your image right in-camera rather than at the computer, she noted, 'you can do an unlimited amount of stuff on an image on a computer. But I like to have it always come from the origin, from the actual capture. That's why I push my multiple exposures and my movement photographs. I'm really interested in the surreal nature of having kitchen utensils in the landscape [for instance] and it's been nice to be reunited with them in recent weeks.'

If you had to choose a word to summarise Jackie's photographic approach, it would be 'playful'. 'It's about getting rid of seriousness,' she said. 'Play is about experimentation. It's about bringing back that childhood freedom of having a go at something – and not worrying about what other people are going to think about it. The idea of making mistakes is okay, 'cause we learn from those. That's part of play.'

The secret to successful photographic play, is to learn how to play 'constructively', said Jackie, 'so that as you're playing, you're not going off in all directions. When you constructively start to play to learn, you only make one change at a time. Not too many changes, otherwise you can lose your way. That's part of what we do in the workshops. We encourage people to make sure that they're learning as they're playing and that they constructively use that knowledge to get back there again in the future. Playing is great because it opens up creativity. It's a sense, a way for your mind to just free up. Play is about that freedom to not be scared. Don't be scared. It's photography. It's supposed to be fun. Enjoy yourself.'

While it's one thing to encourage constructive playfulness, learning to 'see' the landscape in monochromatic terms doesn't always come naturally, so Jackie said that when she takes her students into the field she has them set their cameras up properly for the task at hand. 'I have the student change their picture style to monochrome and then to add a little contrast to the recipe.'



**Other Realities Series and Kitchen Series**

I am strongly influenced by the mindful approach to everyday life, where beauty can be found in ordinary everyday things. I explore my relationship with 'found' objects, by photographing them being held or tossed in the landscape. As I throw these objects into the air I feel a sense of freedom and enjoyment. Through these frozen animated moments, I hope to not only connect with the viewer's memories but to challenge their perception of ordinary and familiar experiences. Perhaps the best response is a smile. Left: Standing Forks. Below: Kaikoura.

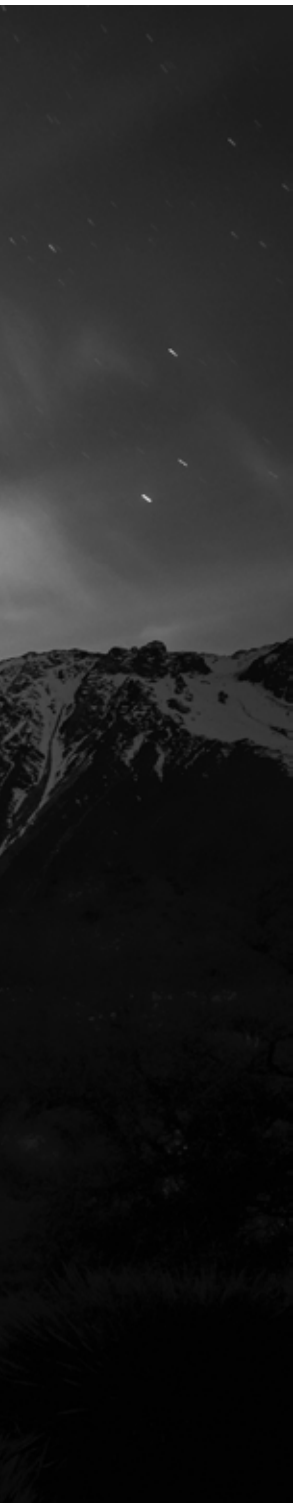






 JR 2016 Light 454





Catlins Waipapa  JR159





Below: Kashgar, China.

Right: Cambodia, temple cut and paste.











Sheep, Kaikoura Coast.

In my DSLR I can also choose a filter option that changes the tones in the monochrome image. For instance, I'll choose the red filter setting to help make my blue-toned skies darker. I also encourage students to shoot a JPEG alongside a RAW file. The JPEG will stay monochrome and is often a great file to use for printing on **it's** own.

'I encourage people when they're thinking of black-and-white just to shoot for the shadows and allow the highlights to blow out – 'cause you're gonna have white anyway,' Jackie said. 'People get too hung up on their histogram because they think, "Oh, I can't lose my whites!" But there are occasions when it's great to just push it a couple of steps beyond so that you actually really start taking a different looking image. When people start to get an in-camera capture exposure that looks different, that's exciting too.'

With her depth of experience in the darkroom, it's no surprise that for Jackie a photograph isn't complete until it's a print.

'I walk into the room and often say hello to my prints. It is so easy for images to disappear

into my computer unless I do something with them,' she laughed. 'An image in the computer is very different from a print in my hands.

The walls in my office are covered in pinned up prints. I have layers of matte fibre A4 prints hanging up on clips and I change them around constantly. On the back of each of them I have written the file name and the date. These prints give back to me. They remind me of that moment in time when I was, "in the flow, away with the fairies playing with my camera". I love being lost in the moment.'

Asked what her students most often want to learn, Jackie said, 'People often say they want to be "more creative". I think that they just need to remember to allow serendipity into their creative process. They need to push the techniques that they already know and take them to places that they have visited before. Creativity is a natural part of each of us, but we are all different. To open up to new ideas takes a certain amount of bravery but it is best not to be too serious about it.'

**w** To see more of Jackie Ranken's work visit <http://jackieranken.co.nz>

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