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ART PHOTOGRAPHER ALAN SISLEN

# A World of Beauty

RECORDING THE MOODS OF NATURE

BY JANET SHARP



Alan Sislen

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— Alan Sislen

As I was chatting with fine art photographer Alan Sislen, a song kept running through my mind, one that those of us who have reached a certain age will remember: the theme from the 1956 movie, *Around the World in 80 Days*. The song begins, “Around the world I’ve searched for you...” Like Jules Verne’s hero, Alan has traveled the world—yet he took all the photographs for his current show in his own backyard.

Alan began pursuing photography as a hobby over forty years ago, even building his own darkroom for both color and black-and-white photographs. He took it up seriously about ten years ago. In 2001, he went digital and sold all his film photographic equipment. When he retired from the financial services industry in 2005, his hobby became a second career.

“I always enjoyed photography. It was always a great creative outlet for me,” says Alan. “Now, it consumes me.” Seven years ago, he joined fourteen other photographers in the Multiple Exposures Gallery on the third floor of the Torpedo Factory Art Center in Old Town Alexandria. While Alan has been juried in to the Torpedo Factory as a resident artist, a distinction that would allow him to have his own studio, he prefers to remain part of the group gallery.

*Variations*, Alan’s solo show that runs through June 18 in the Multiple Exposures Gallery, features ten large panoramic prints, all showing the same scene of trees, all taken at sunrise, but at different times of the year—for example, in summer, in winter, in winter with more snow, on a foggy day. Each panorama consists of several images stitched together, but the stitching is transparent to the viewer, so the prints look like a single shot. He took them all from his back deck, with the tripod placed on the same mark. “Every one has a different feeling and a different sense to it, and it took almost three years to



capture the photographs for this project,” he says.

Alan concentrates on landscape photography but also enjoys architectural photography because of all the interesting buildings in the D.C. area. One particularly striking shot on his studio wall is a black-and-white image taken from the Hirshhorn Museum looking at the Washington Monument past the roof of the Smithsonian Castle. He took this photograph using an infrared camera that sharply defines the various triangular and other geometric shapes in the scene. Except for infrared photographs, which ideally are taken in bright sunlight,





Alan takes almost all his images near sunrise or sunset because “that’s when the light is most beautiful.” He doesn’t worry about the weather: “Fog gives everything a different feel and a different mood. Inclement weather can be great.”

Primarily self-taught, Alan has been taking one-week workshops from outstanding teachers once or twice a year for the past ten years. “You’re constantly trying to hone your skills,” he explains, “always trying to improve both the art and the craft of your photography.” The workshops have taken him around

the country and around the world. One of his favorite workshop leaders is Charlie Waite, a British instructor, whom Alan has joined on photographic trips to the United Kingdom, New Zealand and France, among other places. Alan especially loves Italy’s Tuscany region and has returned there several times. He has been to Chile and Iceland. He has also visited much of the United States, including Death Valley and the Northern California Coast, Oregon and Washington State, as well as the southwestern U.S. and Hawaii’s Big Island.

*From Sands of Time series: "Zabriskie Point Sunrise," Death Valley National Park, California. fine art photograph*





The purpose of the workshops varies, from promoting creativity to honing technical skills, including image processing and fine art printing. Some sessions are more visually oriented, teaching participants to see differently or to see different things. “I try to continually improve, try to reach,” says Alan. He likes the workshops because “they allow you to pick and choose the people from whom you can learn the most and whose work you admire and respect.” When he travels to photograph, that is the whole purpose of the trip. The only exception occurred just a few months ago, when he and his wife went to Pretoria, South Africa, to visit one of his sons, who is living there with his family on a three-year work assignment. During the trip, Alan and his wife made a weeklong photography excursion to Namibia.

Alan does all his own printing and framing in his home studio. His Epson 9900 large-format professional printer takes up several feet of wall space but allows him to print high-resolution, poster-size photographs. With the aid of a Fletcher 2200 mat cutter, he does his own matting. He always uses a white or off-white mat and black frame, leaving a window, or “reveal,” around each photograph inside the mat to create a double-matted effect. Of his photography, he says, “I have control from the choice of equipment all the way down to the finished print.” Alan holds classes in his home studio, including individual tutoring and







Above: From A Capital Idea series:  
 "Smithsonian Triangles, Washington, DC;  
 and from Bella Toscana series: "Old Well,"  
 Siena, Tuscany

Opposite, top: from Bella Toscana series:  
 "The Clump," Cypress trees near San Quirico  
 D'Orca, Tuscany; and from A Capital Idea  
 series: "Monumental Cloud," Washington,  
 DC



group classes for six students typically, but occasionally up to twelve or fourteen students. He prefers a small group, as this provides more hands-on experience for the students. Class schedules can be found on his Web site. In recent years, Alan has been invited to speak at several local organizations and photography clubs, including the North Bethesda Camera Club, of which he is a member. He has received many awards from that club, but no longer competes there.

A native of the D.C. area, Alan grew up in Silver Spring and Bethesda. He lived in Chicago and New York but came back home to Bethesda about ten years ago. Both of his sons are grown—the other son lives in California—and both are musicians, in addition to having other careers. Alan, too, is a musician, a saxophone player, but now only occasionally plays. Instead, every day he does something related to photography. On days when he isn't taking photographs, he is processing images, reading photography books or magazines, or visiting Web sites or online forums. "I just love photography; I get immense satisfaction from it," he says. When asked what advice he might give to budding photographers, he replies, "You follow your passion, wherever that may lead you." é

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[www.AlanSislenPhotography.com](http://www.AlanSislenPhotography.com)