

Bill Quinnell - Biography

I came to photography quite accidentally.

In 1970, I was hired into the Humanities Department at Western Connecticut State University to help develop an philosophy curriculum. The chairman of that department, Dr. Hal Greenwald, spent his spare time photographing with a large view camera (this was the age of film) making beautiful images.

In the late 60s and early 70s the majestic photographs of the American west by Ansel Adams were everywhere - large posters, calendars, date books - and they were the only photographs I'd seen that weren't birthdays, weddings, or vacations.

In my 4th or 5th year, Dr. Greenwald had a showing of his photographs at a local art gallery. I wasn't quite sure what I would see, but I was politically astute enough to know if my boss was having an opening, I was going.

There were no Ansel Adams look a likes nor were there any birthday, wedding, or vacation pictures. It was immediately apparent that he was using bits and pieces of the world to show us how he saw that world. His images were about him not just the things in the pictures.

I was seduced. It was as if someone opened a door and said, "Welcome to what you want to do with your life". Hal introduced me to some of his photographic heroes - Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz, and others who practiced what was called "straight black and white photography".

I bought myself a decent camera, some basic darkroom equipment and got to work teaching myself how to use all that stuff. My aesthetic model were those photographers Hal had introduced me to.

I was very fortunate that Western allowed me to teach an Introductory photography course in addition to philosophy and humanities courses. But I wanted more. My heart was clearly in making images. However, to teach more meant I had to get a Masters of Fine Arts degree. So, in my late 40s I enrolled at Pratt Institute and for three years commuted to Brooklyn.

Pratt change me. By trying to mimic the works of Weston, Strand, Stieglitz and others of that same ilk, I had locked myself into only one way of making photographs. The teachers at Pratt worked hard to open my eyes to the fact that by doing so, I was not only limiting myself, I was trying hard to be someone else. As one teacher said to me, "If I want to see pictures that look like Edward Weston I'll look at Edward Weston. Why am I looking at you"? Humbling.

Because of my three years at Pratt I read photographs more thoroughly and make photographs with a greater sense of adventure than I ever did or even could have before Pratt.

The challenge is always the same. Keep your eyes open! Not just to what's going on around you, but to the light - especially to the light. And don't just record what you see. Camera images are like words in a dictionary, you need to use them to make your own sentence.

Career: Worked at Western Connecticut State University from 1970-2003 and was the Head of the Photography Program in the Art Department when he retired.

Education: BA in Philosophy from Eastern Baptist College, MA in Philosophy from Temple University, and an MFA in Photography from Pratt Institute.

Solo Shows: Western Connecticut State University, University of New Haven, The Canterbury School in New Milford CT and The Gallery Space at Sterling Sound Studios in NYC.

Group Shows: Washington Art Association in Washington Ct , Pratt Institute in Brooklyn NY, 123 Watts Gallery in NYC, Gallery 56 in Memphis Tn, McNeese State University in Louisiana, Aura Gallery in Santa Fe NM, and The University of Texas in Austin TX.