



#### EXPRESSIVE QUALITIES OF LIGHT (Interview by Sean O'Toole) – May 2008

The differences and distinctions between painting and photography, obvious as some of these might be, have been remarked upon often in writing. Still, looking at the work of Pretoria-based photographer Martin Osner, one is reminded that when it comes to depicting visual experiences, whether through paint or with light, the two disciplines – painting and photography – nonetheless share certain attributes. Perhaps the most important of these is the act of looking, the action of experiencing and interpreting the objective world through the retina. Looking is something that precedes doing. This is important.

Although he is not a painter, Osner sees and experiences the world in ways that are, if you'll excuse the expression, painterly. The way in which he speaks about his photographic vision reminds, in particular, of Henri Matisse. "What I am after, above all, is expression," the French painter wrote in his famous 1908 treatise, *Notes of a Painter*. "I am unable to distinguish between the feeling I have for life and my way of expressing it." Osner adopts a similar attitude in his approach to photography. Whether photographing botanical subjects or recording the Highveld landscapes he grew up with, Osner, like Matisse, ensures that the whole arrangement of his photograph is expressive.

Like Matisse, Osner is also a stickler for composition. Precise and often laboured, this habit manifests itself at various intervals in his portfolio. It is visible in the compositional clarity of his studio-lit abstractions, groupings of photographs cryptically titled *Oeuvre* and *Panache*; again you can see it in his botanical studies, including the madly colourful *Vibrant Pallet* series; even in his modernist study of pedestrians, *On the Move*. But, at the end of the day, Osner is not a painter, even if he prefers to see like one. He is a photographer with a defined sense of purpose.

What prompted the idea of pursuing an exhibition career?

I teach at the National College of Photography and have over the last few years focused on teaching the fine art component. I have to put a lot of research and practice into these classes; it is a necessary part of being qualified to present a workshop or a lecture. Through my research I discovered a world that really started to appeal to me; there was a realness in the work I was looking at, a solid foundation. This appealed to me, also the longevity of the photographs. It offered something very different from the world of commercial photography, which is all about the idea, the brief, the immediate present. I would like my work to be more mature than just this.

It couldn't have been easy slowing down on your commercial photography to pursue a more speculative fine art career?

I think people have seasons in life. Sometimes the money versus the love needs to be weighed up. At a stage I really enjoyed commercial photography, the vibe, the pressure, being able to deliver to the client's expectations and beyond. The decision was actually very easy. On a day I realised that the season was here. Done.

In your view, what were some of the positive lessons commercial photography taught you as a photographer?

There are lots. Commercial photography demands that you work to a high standard in order to even compete. Of all the insights I learnt, lighting was certainly the biggest. Anyone can pick up a camera and shoot, but to master lighting is one of the biggest lessons a photographer must learn. It has taken 15 years of practical experience to get to an acceptable standard. Lighting still plays a really big part in my art photography.

Were there any particularly memorable jobs from your commercial career that stand out?

I remember one; it was technically very difficult and involved staging a chemical spill. I wanted to shoot it on the highway over a weekend but couldn't get permission to close it for six hours. Eventually we had to stage it in a factory. The set was about 200sq/m, which had to be lit. It had to be shot at dusk and involved cinema-style lighting. It was around that time I became good friends with Koos van der Lende, a renowned landscape photographer who also came from a commercial background. He is probably one of the finest lighting photographers around, and assisted me on that job.

How many days preparation did that take before you finally pushed the shutter button?

Two weeks for one image. It is perhaps an extreme example but it is through commissions like this that you learn. Turning to your fine art photography, I'd like to begin by looking at two bodies of work, Abandoned and Extremity. The former is perhaps grittier than some of your other work, and yet it still retains some of the essential features of your photography. What prompted your interest in photographing these rather dark landscape studies?

It was probably the result of spending too much time in the studio. Last year I had two exhibitions, back-to-back: one at the Voir Gallery in Pretoria, and shortly thereafter another at Imaging Hub, in Waterkloof. I spent a lot of time in the studio in the lead up to these shows, completing my abstract studies. Abandoned, for instance, was born out of a frustration, of me wanting to photograph outdoors. I also wanted to shoot in a less controlled environment; abstract imagery demands controlled lighting. The same goes for the Extremity series.

Where did you photograph the broody landscape with the immense storm clouds?

I had been eyeing that picture for a number of years. It is an abandoned marina in the Free State. The lighting was just never quite right every time I visited, but I kept on eyeing it. Around Christmas last year, I visited it again with my family. Two days before the 25th I was given an early Christmas present. At about three in the afternoon, the weather suddenly changed. I had a sense something was bound to happen – and it did. I got three shots and that was it. It is times like these that bring the most fulfillment.

So it is a straight shot?