

Creative Creatures

The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.



25 / Dave Leiker, photographer, Emporia, Kansas

Although its image is far from spectacular, Kansas isn't any different from Arizona, New Mexico, Peru, or Iceland—thousands and thousands of locals and visitors take a zillion photographs of the landscape; and many hundreds of professional photographers, really capable of noticing the uniqueness of the land, do an even better job of bringing it to life on paper or as a web image; there even are a few star photographers famed from working for the Smithsonian and National Geographic. But I am convinced there is no one who can match Dave Leiker. This quiet man who never walks without his camera manages to notice literally everything including the tiniest details in the land and he shoots instantly, from the hip as it were, to catch unique moments, lights, shapes, faces, movements, stillness. His photographic *oeuvre*—and I have seen a lot of his work, but not yet one hundredth—delivers a natural history that finds no equal. Dave documents cultural history as well. He has *The Eye*.

He must be on the road seven days of the week on all hours of the day to “get” what’s out there. I know for a fact that as soon as he hears on the radio that “weather is coming” Dave is out and running. He must have more different Kansas skies on film than the Creator deemed possible to create. He must have tread in more mud, be stung by more insects, hit by stronger winds than anyone else with a camera. That’s just the physical part of his day, which he forgets about as soon as he points his lens, almost nonchalantly, and captures another unforgettable scene or scenery. Dave makes photography seem so easy...

He also shows you and me that we, nowadays aided by electronics that do all the work, may take nice pictures, but that these, whatever effort we put into it, are just snapshots. He shows, he proves, that photography is still an art and needs real artists—unique people with a unique eye and drive—to conquer life, all aspects of it. Not that Dave still works with simple cameras like when he was young. His current equipment is anything but simple and he believes in using all of the technical advantages available to him now. By second profession a web and electronic media manager for the Emporia Public Schools, he knows better what to do than most of us who play with a camera and a computer. Yet he still gravitates to a casual aesthetic, and prefers candid, un-posed studies.

“I am an eclectic photographer,” says Dave. “Photography is my tool for exploration and discovery. I’m possessed by a passion for snooping into natural phenomena in all of its manifestations. I find as much charm in the rich weediness of a Chase County ditch as in a formal garden. Vine-wrapped limestone ruins seem as beautiful to me as the most elegant modern architecture. I enjoy photography’s ability to uncover detail in nature that normally escapes our eye. I believe in becoming immersed in the subject. It isn’t uncommon for me to return home soaking wet, or caked with mud. The knees of my jeans have permanent grass stains. Chiggers and ticks know me by name.”

The first photo by Dave Leiker I saw was a scene from his series ‘Winter at the Arndt Ranch’ titled ‘Closing the gate’. It was hanging framed on the wall in my friend Elaine’s dining area—and it hit me smack in the face. This was Kansas as I know and love it, even though the cold jumped out of the frame. I contacted Dave and bought three prints; one of them is on the wall of my grandson’s room in Voorburg, the Netherlands; one is in my good Jamaican friend Harry’s casa in New Mexico. A third one I myself own. I’d love to own fifty of Dave’s photographs. More. His slide show introduces me to a world of beauty, a world of wonder, a world of surprise. Again and again he manages to be in the right spot at the right time. So easy. But you have to be out all the time to really get it; you have to put in as much energy and guts as a long distance runner. See www.flyoverpeople.net/galleries.

“Except for the companionship of the wind and crunch of limestone under tires, it’s quiet on the tallgrass prairie. The only other people I see are ranchers whose heavy trucks turn onto private access roads and disappear into the folds of the hills. The tough job of working the landscape is a daily ritual, watching out for the health and needs of the herds. My admiration deepens as I get to know them, to ride along as they do chores. An artistic documentation of the people who work the land has become the most meaningful thing I do with a camera.”

Anyone who states that Kansas is flat and dull and colorless and treeless and grey and boring should see Dave Leiker’s photographs. They should also be seen by Kansans, just to remind them of the exceptional beauty of their heartland. They, a proud people, may praise it all the time, but do they really get it? Most of it is in their cultural memory, and most eyes have closed on it since high school. Dave’s eyes... they perform laser surgery on ours.

Ton Haak, April 2013