

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.



37 / Gerco de Ruijter, kite photographer, Rotterdam, the Netherlands

He only came to America because he was dragged to America. He wasn't a willing traveler for two reasons. One: he wasn't a traveler at all and preferred to be stuck and do his art projects close to home in the Netherlands. Two: he wasn't interested in anything American and had no inclination to learn about anything American other than by watching a few movies or listening to some music; and especially by exploring the land while wandering through photo books. Because photography was and is his own art form, the camera his tool. He came to the U.S. because he was dragged by colleague artist Jeroen van Westen, who himself had explored America a couple of times and lived in Seattle for nine months. Their plane landed in Phoenix, Arizona; they drove in one day through "saguaro country," up the Mogollon Rim, across the Painted Desert, to Chaco's high desert and finally into New Mexico's red rock country—and he never looked back.

Since this first confrontation, eight years ago, Gerco de Ruijter has spent many months exploring America. First New Mexico, then California, Arizona, Texas, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Oklahoma—and Kansas. He came for long vacations with his wife Marjo and his daughter Juul; and he came alone, to work in Death Valley, in Plaza Blanca, in the Bisti Badlands, at White Sands, in the Dust Bowl, everywhere. Gerco was fascinated by what he discovered, and he discovered more than most Americans, or foreign visitors, ever have. He came to fly his self-constructed kite. On the line connecting the kite to his hands hung his camera, and its lens helped him discover a range of spectacular landscapes that, developed and printed, came out as detailed images of the American earth as seen from 200 ft up—images that, without a horizon in sight, often were pure abstracts. See www.gercoderuijter.nl.

Discovering America gave Gerco a taste for more exotic travels. He worked in Iceland, in Indonesia. His kite camera caught images of volcanos and sand dunes; of *sawahs* and crop circles; of rocky coasts and mesas rising out of lakes; of treed forests and grown-over swamps. In Iceland and America he discovered the similarities of both wild, undeveloped lands: the arctic desert and the arid desert. In Indonesia he found similarities with the Netherlands in the organization of the land: the well-designed rice paddies and the super-organized agricultural lowlands, with in both settings the water management of essential importance.

The organization of the land was Gerco's first fascination. In the Netherlands, everything is "engineered," man-made. There is hardly any space left for "natural nature." Gerco found what little that wasn't touched to the extreme and photographed their meetings with what man had constructed. The contrasts delivered a very Dutch story of development, of conquering water, of conquering and also of preserving nature. His unique images were recognized as not just photographs but accomplished art and began to conquer the Netherlands as they were shown in museums and published in books.

His Dutch eye changed in America, where for the first time he found wide untouched lands. But lately, after new travels, he managed to discover man's hand even at America's most lonesome locations, and the meetings of man and nature crept back into his work. Drive from county to county and from state to state, and the road surface and quality of maintenance changes with every "border" crossing—a series of Gerco's images are proof of the profound differences and become, as always, abstractions. Viewing his photographs can be a very frustrating occupation. Often, one doesn't know what one is seeing. Wind-blown white sands present themselves as a minimalist's painting; a forest of leafless trees at second, or rather at third glance appears to be formed by their shadows, because the camera is shooting their bare and barely visible tops from straight up. Water deltas create "paintings of the earth" just as well as fields of tomato plants do, or "schools" of newly planted trees, row after neat row—with maybe just one out of line, and that singled-out one heightens the suspense.

Gerco started flying his camera kite while still in art school, where he studied painting. Instead, the camera became his brush, the earth his palette. He built his own kite and keeps flying it; only now and then he prefers to fly a small "zeppelin," a blimp, at locations where the winds continue to desert him. He is an addict. Wherever he may be, as soon as he smells winds in the air he wants to—*has to*—grab his tools and head out and make his photos. Beating the winds is hard work; his permanently sunburnt face and strong arms prove his is an outdoors job; he looks much like a weather-beaten farmer. Gerco never knows what his lens is catching—he interprets the land from ground zero and has to wait sometimes for months until he's back in his studio before he can discover if he had any success. "Not knowing is part of the fascination," Gerco says. "I may discover that the camera stopped working well, or even at all. Coming home and seeing the negatives, man... that's a serious and sometimes dreaded moment. My joy and pride are the largest when I discover something in an image I couldn't have dreamt of when walking the land. I am so often surprised by what the earth presents, or by the unexpected and/or coincidental meeting of two extremes in the land."

No more than six copies are printed of each carefully selected image. "I don't want to see my images appear in fast-selling magazines, then disappear just as quickly. My images are 'monuments', to stay around forever at locations where they are understood, appreciated, loved. Most prints are 40" x 40", though some are much larger. One commission I got was to deliver prints expertly made into *gobelins* and carpets. Image, walking across a Death Valley formation on an office floor somewhere in Los Angeles."