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HORSES IN ART

Tony Bonanno: Hooves & Dust

by Sarah H. Crampton

Tony Bonanno played with photography as a boy and later as a hobby while working in a national park in Virginia during the summers; the scenery and landscapes were inspirational. Many years later, when living alone on assignment as a ranger of Cape Cod National Seashore for the national park service, a change occurred. Tony remarks, “Perhaps because of the solitude, being alone a lot, and the incredible light and views of the water and salt marsh behind my house, I found myself wanting to capture the ‘feeling’ of what I was seeing and experiencing.” He started shooting the scenes from his backyard.

Two years later, Bonanno had his first gallery show called Backyard Landscapes at the town hall gallery in Orleans, Massachusetts on Cape Cod. Within a short period of time, he was showing at other northeast galleries and began some commercial photography. It wasn’t long before he made the transition to become a full-time professional.

Mostly self-taught, Bonanno learned from his father who taught photography in the Army during WWII. Tony recalls, “He gave me my first real camera when I was twelve, an old Kodak folding camera which took roll film, don’t remember the size, but perhaps 120 film. You had to pull out the bellows, set the aperture and shutter speed on the lens that was mounted on the front of the bellows. He taught me the basics of good photography and those lessons are still valid today.”

His series titled Hooves & Dust came about from a brewing desire to express his own personal vision with the camera. Years as a professional photographer on assignment, taking photos for other people and clients, left little time to shoot for himself, which is where the spark for his photography all started, in the backyard on Cape Cod.

Through a friend, Tony discovered an opportunity to photograph horses at Rock Spring Ranch in Oregon. His family had horses on and off through the years and he had always admired their strength and versatility.



It was a sunrise shot. I was positioned on a rocky slope about 100 yards from these two horses. The rising sunlight was coming through the trees with a slight mist hanging in the air. It just all came together - the mist, sunlight, trees, dust, and hooves. But the two animals clearly had a connection that is very visible in the image. – Tony Bonanno

Bonanno explains, “I was really hungry to do something with my creative energy, but the juices just didn’t seem to be flowing and I couldn’t nail down what I wanted to do. The more I thought about the horses and going out to Oregon and spending some time on a ranch free of clients and business, letting myself get immersed in a new subject totally free to shoot it as I desired, the more I wanted to do it. So I did.”

Needless to say, the conditions were not ideal from a technical perspective.

Tony comments, “All of the Hooves & Dust series were taken with only one camera body and one lens. The reason I did this was I knew that I would be in clouds of fine dust and I did not want to change lenses. I also knew that I would probably find the action of moving horses to be fast and I wanted to be able to shoot fast myself, moving along the fence lines or changing positions as needed. Everything was shot from the ground; I was never on a horse or anything other than my feet. All the images were shot handheld without the benefit of tripod or monopod.”

“All the lighting was natural light,” he continues. “No fill flash or any supplemental light. No filters other than a skylight filter on the front of the lens. Every image was taken at sunrise or sunset. There is a lot of strong side lighting and intense color as a result.”

Tony reflects, “The memorable images are those that stimulate your curiosity, take you into an emotional space with the subject, challenge you to understand, and perhaps give you a glimpse of what it was like to be there.”

The Hooves & Dust series was an opportunity to bring together light, dust, and movement in a way that focused on the power, grace, and beauty of the horses. It also gave Tony Bonanno the opportunity and the freedom to compose the photographs that reveal his own unique vision through the lens of a camera. s

Tony Bonanno is a professional photographer based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. His work encompasses a broad range of commercial, editorial, and fine art photography. Tony’s specialties include event and assignment photography, architecture, interiors, travel and documentary work. Visit his web site <http://www.bonannophoto.com/>.

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