

MYTHIC PASSAGES

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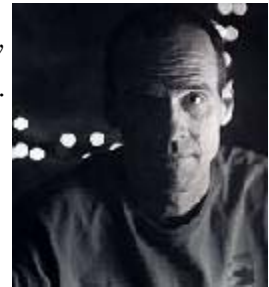
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Owl's Head

by Stu Jenks

Stu Jenks is an award-winning artist and photographer. His images of fiery spirals capture mystery in the desert and forests of the American Southwest.

His photo, Catalina State Park (The Ikon), became the logo for Mythic Journeys 2004.



Read here an account of the tricky and difficult path of this artist.

I bought the '88 Nissan Pathfinder just so I could go to these places like this. Turn left at the windmill at the old cow tank, put it into 4-wheel drive and go. Not a tough one-lane track in which a lot of rock hopping is needed, but tough enough that my old King Cab would have high centered going across some of the washes. I've come out here before. It's just a few miles in to my spot.

The Catalina Mountains cradle Tucson in the north, rising up to 8,000 feet and impressing all the tourists who fly in. To the east of Tucson are the Rincons, high enough but with no roads, only foot trails. To the west stand the Tucson Mountains, thick with saguaros and palo verde trees; equally thick with tourists and their rental cars. So I have traveled to the Tortillitas, an unassuming mountain range just north of the city. The Tortillitas have neither tourists, nor spectacular views, but they do have many saguaros, cows, tortoises, lizards, woodpeckers, cactus wrens, prickly pears, ocotillos, coyotes, frogs, ravens, red tail hawks, and javelinas, the wild pigs of the desert. The Torts are often thick with javelina bow hunters, but it's not hunting season now. On some nights, young ranch town lovers seek out these lonely tracks to make out and fuck in the hills. The decreased number of discarded beer cans and spent condoms in the past few years make me think that the teenagers have found an easier place for sex and drink.

This night I drive out with the waxing Almost-Full-Moon just beginning to show his face above the Catalinas to the east.

Man, that windmill is hard to find. Where is it?

I see the silhouette of the blades.

Oh, there it is.

Turning onto the dirt track, I engage the 4-wheel drive and slowly make my way past the palo verde and mesquite trees. It's summer frog season. The toads jump away from my tires and headlights as I cross the washes. On nights past, I've caught the gleaming eyes of javelinas in my lights. Not tonight. Just frogs jumping.

Owl's Head is a prominent rock peak in the Tortillitas. Nothing really special to most folks, but very special to me. In my opinion it looks more like a thick thumb pushing through the ridge, and has yet to ever look like an owl's head. No matter. It's still a fine peak.

I drive up and down the dirt track, in and out of washes, through the trees that hug the track. The saguaros are so close to the road that, even in this dim light, you can see details of the saguaro shoes the woodpeckers inhabit. A bit more driving and I park my 4x4 in a familiar spot, a sacred place I share with the animals and the trees and the bow hunters. My apologies if I don't tell you exactly where it is. I plan to have a friend put some of my ashes there some day. You understand.

It's so quiet I can hear the blood pumping through my veins. That's the way it is here. Ten miles or so to the west, a freight train blows its whistles as it charges across a distant crossing. Two longs, a short, and a long. The full moon is rises higher above the eastern ridge. Owls' Head rests in nearly full shadow.

I find the small fire pit for the cool winter nights dug by me a time or two before. No campfire tonight. A hill to the north holds prayer tokens and such among the rocks. To the southeast stands a flat circle of ground where a ring of Christmas lights will one night lay, but that's another story. Tonight is a night of spiral and flame.

I'm going to try a little experiment tonight, something I've never tried before. Using a stick, I dig a spiral in the ground. Into the trough of the earthen spiral, I pour Coleman White fuel. I want to light the fuel, let it burn down a bit, and shoot it with flames gently lapping in the spiral. That's my idea.

Now, I know that white fuel is very volatile, but I have my fire extinguisher close by just in case things don't go as planned.

I strike a wooden match from a safe distance and lazily toss the match onto the ground spiral.

FAA-TOS-SHEE-YA-YAA!

I swear to God, the white gas explodes with a sound that has at least five syllables. Flames shoot up fast and hard to about seven feet high, and they don't look like they are going to die down any time soon.

Shit. Shit. Shit!

I grabbed the extinguisher and just stand there holding it in my hands.

Ready. Ready.

I can see the headlines now. *LOCAL ARTIST ADMITS TO OWL'S HEAD INFERNO*. The accompanying article says something like "Stuart Jenks, local Tucson artist and photographer, turned himself into the Pima County Sheriff's Department yesterday. Jenks admitted to starting the Owl's Head Fire, which to date has consumed 100,000 acres of virgin desert land. The fire threatens, and many head of cattle have perished in the flames. Smoke can be seen as far away as Phoenix..."

After what seems like five minutes (but is probably only two), the flames die down to a gentle roar. I take a couple of exposures with my Rollei while the flames are still high, with the extinguisher within arm's reach. After a few more minutes, I touch the ground.

Still hot. Damn.

I use some water that I always store in my Pathfinder for side trip hiking to cool things down, and splash it softly on the spiral. An interesting byproduct occurs. The water softens the ground spiral very nicely.

Hmm. Maybe one of my flame spirals will be nice here instead. A hell of a lot safer I can tell you that.

I quietly laugh at myself.

My old Rollei stands on its tripod, no worse for wear from the fire and the smoke. My trusty Zippo is in my pocket.

I'll wait a bit longer for the Moon to rise and for the ground to cool down some more.

A few minutes later, I open the shutter of the Rollei. I ignite my Zippo to light-paint a spiral above the ground spiral, leave the frame, leave the spiral, and step behind my camera.

Time must pass before I can close the shutter. Some nights I dance to music playing from my Pathfinder's CD player. Other nights I pray, or meditate in silence, or read a book, or just sit. This night I wander down the dirt track, listening to trains and the sound of my own blood still pumping a bit louder due to *The Coleman Fuel Experiment*. I'm thankful I didn't set the desert on fire, and hopeful that I've created a bit of a mystery on film. Hopeful that this shot works out and scared that it won't. (I don't sweat the shots that I know aren't right from the start, like tonight's first shots. I knew those negs were blown all to hell. It's the shots that my intuition says are god that hurt if they aren't.)

Fifteen minutes more, and I close the shutter and I advance the film. Like shampooing, I repeat as often as needed. Some nights it's just a few exposures. Other nights it's a roll or two. Tonight it's only three or four exposures.

More trains in the distance.

After an hour, maybe two, my heart rate is down to its regular 70 beats per minute and my camera is full of images. I pack up and drive back along the single track, trying my best to miss the frogs. And knowing I'm never going to fuck with Coleman Fuel anymore.

The next day, I take a cursory look at the developed negatives. I can see immediately that I have a couple of good exposures. I won't know for sure until I get the proof sheets done, but it looks good. I look through a loupe at the flame spirals on the negs.

Yep. I think I got a winner here.

I pump my fist slightly and say a quiet and succinct "Yes!"

I also look at the first Coleman Fuel Spiral negs, almost entirely black. Then I look at a Coleman Fuel shot after the fuel had burned down some.

Hmm. This one neg is pretty cool.

(Note to the authorities: The Coleman Fuel Experiment happened five years ago and hasn't been tried since. No need to worry. I'm just out in the desert and in the forests with my Zippo and my Hula Hoop with battery powered Christmas light attached. I have a feeling that doesn't make you feel much better though. Try not to worry. I'm more careful. Usually.)

View more of Stu Jenks' photos and read more Circle Stories at StuJenks.com

