



The Flowers of Insomnia & other photographs: a retrospective by **Rob Kangas**



Rob Kangas

Curated by Dick Goody

MBAG

Rob Kangas is working in a rapidly shifting field; photography has never enjoyed so much prestige or so much upheaval. Twenty years ago painting was the dominant form of expression, seemingly unassailable. Photographers were practitioners of a medium that flourished chiefly in specialized galleries giving rise to great institutions like the International Center for Photography in New York, The Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago and the Photographer's Gallery in London. Particularly in Europe the balance has shifted. If London is the current nexus of the international art world, with new institutions like the Tate Modern and the Saatchi Gallery to support this view, then their programming certainly presses the point that photography is now the medium of precedence. With startling recent exhibitions in 2003 like *Cruel and Tender* at Tate Modern, the magnificent Wolfgang Tillmans exhibition at the Tate Britain and the spectacle of Cindy Sherman's retrospective at the Serpentine Gallery - not to mention Sam Taylor Wood's extraordinary wrap-around photograph encircling Selfridges department store on London's Oxford Street (the largest photograph in the world - ever - and one that echoes Kangas's own fascination with the panoramic), photography has apparently deposed painting. Can this be possible?

In hindsight, back in the 1960s Andy Warhol's hybridist painting/photo work should have indicated that a shift was already underway, but the subsequent dominant neo-expressionist excesses of artists like Julian Schnabel and Georg Baselitz, for the time being, kept painting firmly on center stage. Paradoxically, the high priest of the movement, Anselm Kiefer, like Warhol, was fully engaged in using photographs as a springboard and sideline to his monumental paintings. And where would Gerhard Richter be without his laconic photographic images? Painters have been in bed with photography for a hundred and fifty years. Artists like Warhol, Kiefer and Richter, and to a greater extent Gilbert and George, and younger artists like Sara Lucas and Tracy Emin, use the camera, but were never trained to be photographers. Up until recently painters and sculptors were artists but photographers were held in a cultural limbo. For nearly forty years postmodern hybridists: video artists, performance artists and conceptual artists have risen with their caveat, newly invented appellations, but photographers, practicing for a century and a half, tended to remain *photographers*. The relatively long history of photography - long in the context of video art, etc. - has allowed the field to encapsulate the subtleties and nuances of a diversity of practitioners. The fact that photography is not exclusively an aesthetic medium has not abetted its fine art cause; it has specific functional applications whereas painting does not. Nonetheless, by the end of the 19th century, with organizations like the Linked Ring, fine art photography had

certainly come of age. One hundred years on, to call Turner Prize winner Wolfgang Tillmans a photographer appears archaic, yet that is precisely and exclusively what he is, albeit in the hip, autobiographical, contemporary realm of artist as *documenteur*. In this part of the world, largely because of organizations like College for Creative Studies and Cranbrook Academy of Art, photography is a vital art form. This is providential and attests to the vitality of photography in Detroit. However, photographers in Detroit have still had to band together. The *Detroit Focus 2000* exhibition is a case in point; a major event, it is difficult to conceive a parallel exhibition in painting achieving the same impressive result, partly because painters are more fractious and have no sense of negative hierarchic marginalization endured by photographers, but look out!

Rob Kangas is one of a legion of artists who was educated in the photography department of a university fine art department, but when he went to school the barrier between high art (painting/sculpture) still tended to annex photography. The technical domain of the darkroom - perhaps the penumbra world of the darkroom itself - may have been partly responsible. In the 1960s when photographers, particularly commercial ones, started having prints made from transparencies instead of negatives, the influence of the darkroom, or the craft associated with darkroom techniques, waned in some circles; this can be viewed as premonition for the so-called ease and accessibility of digital photography. But ask Rob Kangas and he will tell you that he is a photographer and that the darkroom is integral to his vision. Artists like Kangas are preserving the highly skilled craft of darkroom photography, but there can now be no doubt that the ascendancy of the darkroom is being questioned. In some university departments, beginning students do not even enter a darkroom in their first semester indicating the growing schism between the enlarger and computer screen. In the realm of newspaper photojournalism the conversion is complete; now everything is digital.

Kangas, working chiefly in color, is a photographer who is technically, conceptually and emotionally immersed in the milieu of darkroom photography. His work of the last twenty years could fill a museum with technically perfect, aesthetically wrought photographs. He works cyclically. Each body of work fills out an episodic span of several years, often without definitive closure; he tends to initiate a new sequence of work on the tails of the preceding one. He will tell you that life impacts art sometimes. For a while, in the nineties, an injury meant he had to make smaller work, but his output kept pace. The unversed might, at first, see his work as seamless, without transition between one body of work and the next. This is because he has been continuously

absorbed by the oblong - the thin horizontal image. Often this has taken the form of a stretched exposure of several frames of thirty-five millimeter film in a staccato parade of images. Like David Avison's panoramic photography, requiring the need for newly invented equipment, Kangas had to invent new techniques to create these startling images. They are invariably at least twice as long in width as they are in height. Before reaching conclusions about the artist's themes and process it should be revealed that he photographs constantly. This brings to mind the title of Wolfgang Tillmans's Tate Britain exhibition: *If one thing matters, everything matters*, meaning that Kangas, too, photographs *anything* and *everything*. A camera is always close at hand. He has a certain reluctance to show these photographs, but at the same time an enthusiastic delight in their intimacy and exuberance. His private photographs are moving, but it is his large panoramic images that resonate longer in the mind.

The *Flowers of Insomnia Series*, Kangas's panoramic photographs, which he began in the late 1980s, are passages. As we read them, our eyes travel across the time and space of the photograph, recording the surface, with its geometry and abstractions, in a way that is different from the perception of a single iconic image. It is this effect, this passage, which is not unlike the "passage effect" in Duchamp's paintings *Nude Descending a Staircase, No 2* or *The Passage from the Virgin to the Bride* (both 1912), that makes these works so unusual and unique. Duchamp was influenced both by Etienne-Jules Marcey's chronophotographs that appeared in *La Nature* in 1893 and by the earlier *The Human Figure in Motion*, 1885, by Eadweard Muybridge. Similarly Kangas is deeply interested in the history of photography (which he also teaches) and the way in which photography's technical innovations have unlocked the secrets of motion in space. In his work transformation over time is ever-present; the time may be transitory - a second or two, or may, as in his portraits, be several minutes, but it is always palpable. His camera pans, or rather the negative film is traversed by time, recording time across space.

There is also a collage aspect to Kangas's photography and, amid the brouhaha about whether cubism or collage should take precedence as the most important innovation in 20th century art, it might present certain avenues of discourse - the former would be hard to imagine without the invention of photographic realism, which liberated painting from the figurative. The latter, with its tendency to combine appropriated, disparate elements, suggested new relationships between reality and abstraction to reveal new paths of expression, but this is too digressive because Kangas's work is more related to montage than collage. Montage is the photographic equivalent of collage (that is to

say, mounting pictorial fragments or off-the-rack photographic images to create a new pictorial language) and it has clearly held considerable fascination for Kangas. The *Flowers of Insomnia Series* are not made from cut fragments, but are instead sequential passages or a procession of readymade viewfinder images juxtaposed next to one another. This is particularly important because Kangas is not what could be referred to as photographer of icons - the single arresting image is not part of his vision. It is the combination, the iconography rather than the iconic image to which he is drawn. Even in his ironic portraits (where the sitter is to all intent and purposes invisible) he mocks the iconic, forcing the viewer's eyes to traverse across the surface of the surrounding environmental background.

Kangas most often photographs the hinterland between suburbia and the urban landscape. He is a photographer of the exterior rather than the interior. The banality of concrete and chain link fence in the proximity of daylight and dusk is his usual *mis en scene*. Often, but not exclusively, the grainy surfaces of his images provide an atmospheric membrane between image and viewer. This is the manipulated reality of surface and form, but it is also a window, a long seam - a perceptual slash for us to see through from the inside, but never to enter. There is something foreboding about this world too: no storyline - nothing that allusive, but a genuine sensation that something precarious loiters just offstage. Kangas photographs anonymous places - places we drive by unthinkingly on route to somewhere else. He gives his scrutiny to this curbside "no man's land" capturing an intimacy which normally goes ignored. This version of Americana is pervasive - the unoccupied zone - the insecure domain between factory, strip mall and office block; perhaps something ominous always lurks in this prosaic American hinterland. It is a world reachable only by car. If the car did not exist, neither would these images; in some ways, especially in these works, Kangas is a landscape artist whose subject is defined by the automobile. However, the viewpoint of his images is invariably that of the sidewalk rather than of the auto window.

The long format also allows Kangas to explore another preoccupation: counterpoint, that is to say opposing views in what he refers to as his *Yin-Yang Series*. Somewhat reminiscent of the photographs seen recently at the Meadow Brook Art Gallery by A. & J. Bool from the late 1870s (*Dickensian London and the Photographic Imagination*, October 2003), showing the opposite two ends of a back alley or street, Kangas places his viewpoints at a swivel of one hundred and eighty degrees providing two views from opposing perspectives. Here his framing of the image is slightly more particular. In his time/space panoramas, although the image is always a dynamic rush of

sequential vertical forms against the parallel lines of the horizontal frame, the composition is indivisible from the process, but in the *Yin-Yang Series* the choice of image, while still compositional, is more concerned with the binary counterpoint between two site-specific viewpoints. To some extent this body of work acquitted Kangas of his earlier apparent desire in the *Flowers of Insomnia Series* not to actively photograph people. Their appearance is sudden and startling in these works. However, the people are curiously flattened and integrated into the image as a whole and never actually portraits against a background; he seems to be able to merge people and architecture into one form.

In what Kangas refers to as his "missing years," a period in the nineties, people and architecture make an appearance in a series of black and white images of what he terms "street photography;" this telling phrase acknowledges that what he is actually photographing is asphalt and architecture with its inevitable accompanying corporeal presence.

In his most recent work, the *Spotlight Portraits*, his phobia for the fully realized human image has been circumvented by obscuring the figure using either darkness or light. It may seem absurdly ironic to make portraits of people who are made invisible by shadow or hotspots, but it is fascinating foil to the banality of portrait photography and an extraordinary challenge to the candid bluntness of current portrait photography like that of Rineke Dijkstra. Kangas's portraits shares the same perverse presentiment as Michael Hall's salon in the *Artists Take on Detroit* exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts (2001), where easel paintings were hung face to the wall, revealing nothing except the distressed labels and scribbles of their canvas backing. Kangas's silhouette portraits face us, but are blocked out in both shadow and light, through underexposure, overexposure and lens flair. Otto Steinert's disturbing *Appell*, 1950, springs to mind. The extreme chiaroscuro of this new body of work also recalls the implacable light and dark sequences from the film *The Third Man* (1949); the effect of the cinema is never far from Kangas's mind, except, of course, his portraits are enacted in the insidiously familiar subdivisions, parking lots and backyards of *Hockeytown*, USA (not the sewers of Vienna). Inevitably, a figure saturated by an intense backlit light tends toward the dramatic; against this banal suburban backdrop Kangas's perverse, threatening act of deletion/iconoclasm seems all the more ominous. Also reminiscent is the erased, disembodied face in Ernest Bellocq's *Storyville Portrait*, 1912, but Kangas's figures are clothed, even if their visages have been wiped, and their surrounding landscape provides them with a weighted context - in order to read the person we are forced read the landscape. Interest-

ingly, the *Spotlight Portraits* are not panoramic indicating a clean break. This new work suggests a new phase in the artist's life and work.

In the *Flowers of Insomnia Series*, *Yin-Yang Series* and *Spotlight Portrait Series*, there are noteworthy parallels with the early work of Lee Friedlander, more in format than in regard to Friedlanders's well documented authorial presence. For the most part, Kangas is more reticent about presenting himself in his work, but he does frame his images within the camera, composing through the viewfinder, maintaining the integrity of the negative frame. Both artists reveal a dispassionate narrative and utilize the presence of vertical devices like doors, posts and windows to break the progression of horizontal space, providing a diptych or triptych effect. There is also a shared aspect of disparate images colliding within the picture; the disintegration or discordance this might engender is prevented by a tacit pole or perpendicular doorjamb. With this collision effect, Kangas's massive flat formal compositions unfold from a central fulcrum presenting the dynamic motif of two opposing viewpoints.

Friedlander's 1966 *New York City*, portrait of a woman in a fur coat with the photographer's shadow cast on her back, is another startling portent of Kangas's recent surreptitious portraiture. Kangas, however, uses color and his work is arranged and organized in a more formalistic and sequential manner than his predecessor. There is no sense of "laying in wait" that is such an intrinsic part of Friedlander's photographs. Kangas loiters rather than stalks.

The uniqueness of Kangas's photography lies in the way that it captures time and space during passage and metamorphosis. Always, in another *Duchampian* parallel, he allows chance to influence the outcome - in the sense that he is using film, on foot, loitering, not quite certain of the outcome. There is also a compelling deconstructive element in his work. While he does not reject narrative, he favors the elemental - the rudiments of light, exposure and composition. This is particularly true of his panoramic work. Now, with his burgeoning, if oblique, interest in the figure, and the domain within which the figure operates, his latest work shadows, in an acutely ironic manner, the contemporary fascination with the biographical and the lure of personality. The people in these photographs are Kangas's friends and acquaintances; when we view his portraits, even in their masked state, our insatiable inquisitiveness invents a subjective biography from the skewed evidence of their surroundings, and in doing so we learn episodically, implicitly and surreptitiously something of the artist's own ethos.

Dick Goody, 2003



Untitled, Spotlight Portrait Series, 2002, 14.25 x 22 inches, chromogenic print



Light Up Yo-Yo, 1996, 12 x 18 inches, silver gelatin print



Untitled, Spotlight Portrait Series, 2002, 14.5 x 22.25 inches, chromogenic print



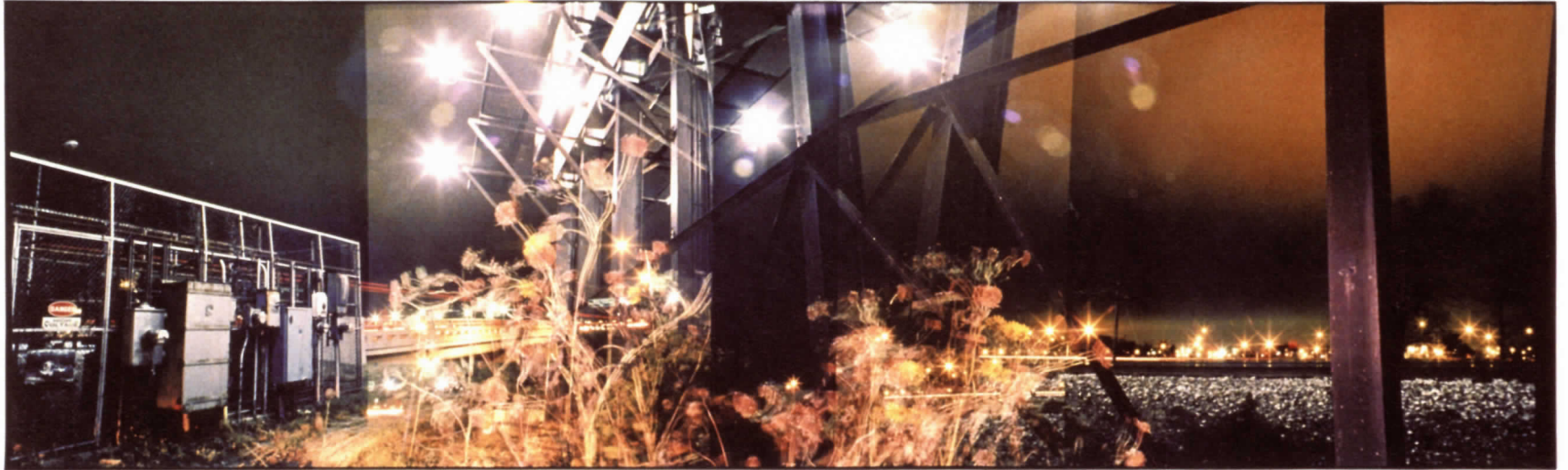
The First Gulf War; from the *Flowers of Insomnia Series*, 1991, 14 x 44 inches, chromogenic print



Untitled, Yin Yang Series, 2003, 15.5 x 46.75 inches, chromogenic print



Untitled, Flowers of Insomnia Series, 2003, 14 x 46.5 inches, chromogenic print



Untitled, Flowers of Insomnia Series, 1991, 14 x 45.5 inches, chromogenic print



Untitled, Flowers of Insomnia Series, 1995, 14 x 48.5 inches, chromogenic print



Untitled, Yin Yang Series, 2000, 10 x 28.75 inches, chromogenic print



Untitled, Yin Yang Series, 2001, 14 x 41.25 inches, chromogenic print



Self-Portrait, 1999, 8 x 28 inches, chromogenic print

DICK GOODY: Who was the first photographer that you remember when growing up?

ROB KANGAS: I grew up looking at Life and Look magazines. W. Eugene Smith was the first one I actually paid attention to.

Do you remember any specific images?

The ones of the Japanese fishing village Minamata - "Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath" is the famous one - this chemical company had been dumping mercury into this bay for years. They tried to cover it up.

It inspired a burgeoning social consciousness?

Everyone had a social consciousness back then. I was more drawn to topical issues than photography. Photojournalism was documenting all the issues.

This was in the late sixties, early seventies?

Yes. That particular photo essay was in 1972.

At what point did you know that there was something about photography that interested you?

My father had been an amateur photographer. I grew up in the era of slide shows as a family ritual. The living room would be darkened and we'd look at slides.

So you were looking at large images, rather than photos in an album?

Slides were cheaper than prints back then. You could look at 200 images like that - Uncle Arnie's vacation in Tawas City!

Was that pervasive?

Sure. After WWII color slides took over the market because people liked color. Print film really didn't get going until the mid 1960's - it was more expensive, the colors weren't as saturated or as good in quality. There's something to this day that's very beautiful about the projected image - the scale, and the collective hypnosis you get with motion pictures when you're all looking at the same image. Slide shows were common from the late 50's to mid-60's.

And you thought: "I could do this."

There was no grand epiphany. I was given a camera when I was nine. My father had passed away and my mother wanted to encourage me to get into some of the things he'd done as a way of remembering him. As a teenager I'd take my camera on outings with friends, sort of documenting concerts and things.

Were they doing the same sorts of things? Did they have a camera too or was it just you?

No, just me. There's this pattern that exists where people say, "Oh god, you're not taking pictures again!" Of course, later on when you show them the pictures they are rapt and totally

interested, and then they'll say, "Why didn't you take this or that?"

Did you have an idea what you were going to do with these photographs?

No, they were strictly for myself.

Had you started printing them yourself at that point?

No. I later switched to my father's rangefinder camera. An Argus C3 nicknamed "the brick" - that's what it looked like - made in Ann Arbor, Michigan. A lot of photographers around here used Argus cameras, but it's got a frustrating viewing and focusing system so I saved up and got a better camera - by then I'd graduated from high school. I took a photo class at Macomb Community College.

Did you have a job?

Yes. I was working at Henry Ford Hospital in emergency surgery. Both my parents had worked at Henry Ford and my mother said: "I can get you this job in the operating room." I worked the afternoon shift - we did nothing but emergency - a whole lot of gunshot wounds, surgery gone sour, that sort of stuff.

You were in there with rubber gloves ?

Yeah. My job was communications desk specialist. They'd buzz me: "We need blood! We need oxygen! Alert the anesthesiologist!" I booked all the emergency cases, I answered the phones, I contacted all the nurses, doctors and anesthesiologists and coordinated them to a particular room.

It sounds like a pretty crucial position in some ways.

We were understaffed. Before I was eighteen I'd scrubbed in and passed out instruments.

Were you thinking about a career at that point?

Not at all.

If someone had said to you: "You're going to be a photography professor in ten years time..."

No, I was just living in the moment.

So what happened?

People said: "If you don't go to college straight after high school, you'll never go." So I took this photo class. I had a new camera, but by mistake I showed up the second week of classes. The professor said to me: "You're a week late, you've missed three classes: either drop the class or see if one of the other students will show you what you've missed." Then he went back to his newspaper. So I found this girl who showed me how to print, and made it through the rest of the semester. I really liked the darkroom so I took the second class - shooting models - different instructor. He brought in women that he wanted to seduce. It was such a waste of time. I dropped the class, but I'd noted all the equipment they had and I set up my own darkroom. At Ford Hospital I showed people my 8 by

10's. There was a 35mm camera in the narcotics cabinet, which nobody on my shift knew how to use. Occasionally they'd say: "Rob, grab the camera we've got an interesting case!" But after 3 years on the afternoon shift - going to the bar across the street every night after work until it closed - with all these people older than me - I felt like I was working on a MASH unit or something.

This was when you were around 21?

Yeah. I was completely burnt out and I'd developed this really bleak sense of humor that everybody had from working with people that came in with stab wounds, gunshot wounds and horrible car accident injuries.

Gallows humor?

Yeah. Delivering bodies to the morgue and telling jokes! And I'm thinking, god, there's got to be more to life than this. Then I thought, perhaps I could be a medical photographer. I showed my prints to the guys up there - Center for Creative Studies grads - they were very kind; they encouraged me to take classes at CCS. Since my father was a WWII veteran and deceased, there was some funding available, so I quit work and went to school to be a photographer. Soon I realized that the level of my work was improving and I started taking myself more seriously.

How much has being in Detroit shaped your work?

A lot. My best photographs come from inside my comfort zone - my home base. Okay, occasionally, when I'm at a truck stop or out in the desert where there's just one or two things I can focus on, then I can make a photograph, but not if I'm pulled in eighteen directions at once.

What sort of sense of place are you interested in?

There's a genuine human quality in the middle and working class areas that I photograph. I was born in the city of Detroit, I worked in the city of Detroit, and I went to school in the city of Detroit. More affluent areas are too concerned with appearances - everything's too detailed. Occasionally I make photographs in these areas - where people are projecting this calculated image of themselves - but I prefer it where things aren't so polished.

When you travel, do you have a different attitude about photography?

I'm not someone that can go into a brand new situation and be able to make really good photographs of it.

You mean serious photographs?

Yes. In my serious work I am allowing people to see through my eyes. I am saying: this is how it looked to me. In a new situation it's difficult to know where to begin. It's just too overwhelming - there's a hundred things I find interesting all at once. But once I'm familiar, then I can make serious photographs. Of course if I'm in New Orleans or something, like every other tourist, I love

shooting film - the physical act of being in the moment - that's fun.

You teach the history of photography, but have other things shaped your vision such as art history?

You go through art school, you take art history classes. Do I think about what I learned from studying renaissance perspective or mannerism or anything else like that? Sure. On the other hand art history has tended to focus on painting and sculpture. In college none of the painters were required to take photo history. Photography is interesting because of its "new kid" status as an art medium; people have always ranked it lower within the hierarchy.

How much does a photographer need to know about things before 1826 when photography was first invented?

Knowing too much is never a problem. It's less of a hindrance for me than for artists fifteen years younger than me. There wasn't the absolute fear of cliché that I see in contemporary students of photography when I started out. They are taught that you have to avoid cliché at all costs; you have to do something that's absolutely new and so forth. It's a general trend in our education.

Is it something that you find yourself doing?

No - only to a certain extent. That's why I think art history is extremely valuable - nobody creates something new out of nothing. If you're doing similar things, it's good to recognize that Harry Callahan or Walker Evans did it first. You're referencing it. "Has this been done?" It's all been done! But it's never been done by me, or by you. The education process makes you aware of your choices. When I first started out, before I took art and photo history, I had a narrow window of what I thought photography could be. I knew it could be journalistic, pretty or decorative. I try to open my students up to all the things photography can be. You make them aware.

What was your thought process when you started making larger photographs?

I purposely started to work in a more idiosyncratic way. I knew I could compose in a subtler way through the panoramic scale. I was in transition from a documentary to a more personal and expressive approach. I wanted my images to wrap around the peripheral ends of my vision. It probably came from my love of movies - the way movies wrap around, take up your peripheral vision and I love the grain of the film on the big screen.

How has working in a darkroom influenced this work?

The darkroom is exhilarating. I have to print my own work. It doesn't lend itself to being handed off to someone else - they wouldn't know how to do it and I couldn't explain it to them. I really like the

physicality of the darkroom - crawling around on the floor in the dark! I print on the floor. I bought a new car because my photos couldn't fit. If I were to work any larger I couldn't print them myself and I'd lose that excitement.

A lot of people are saying that because of digitalization everything is going to change. How do you see the future?

I fell in love with darkroom practice. There's something magical there. Jerry Uelsmann spoke about the fact that you're doing alchemy in there, you're turning lead into gold. It's fun and addictive. When students develop prints for the first time, they can't suppress skipping out of the darkroom, they love it so much. The digital process isn't as gratifying or unique. Digital people aren't even calling it photography anymore; they're calling it "imaging." I've been told for years that this was coming. People ask why I haven't switched to digital photography - my first thought is: the images don't look as good. From a commercial point of view I understand it. Sure it's expedient, but there are things you can't do right now with digital cameras that you can do with film cameras. But my area is going to become antiquated. The materials will become scarce. I might find that when I'm older, I can scan my negatives and make a big master set of prints. I'll evolve, but I'll probably still teach some silver printing the way platinum printing is now taught.

You also make photographs that document your private life. How do you differentiate between that work and your gallery work?

The conceptual component is the distinction. If I'm making personal photos, documenting my family, travels, etc. there's a certain amount of intellectual processing, but I'm working like a photojournalist. I find it useful in my own teaching to take other kinds of photographs. I deal with new situations, different lighting situations, etc.

What's behind the irony of your recent portraits?

In art, the portrait has been a building block, and a way to make a living - especially in the case of celebrity. How many mediocre photographs of celebrities exist? In my case, I wanted to photograph people because I hadn't done it, not overtly - I tend to like to photograph landscape - with landscape you don't need anyone's cooperation. Since identity is so important to a portrait, I was interested in the question; can you make a portrait that doesn't rely on identity? The idea was intriguing to me, but I wanted to work independently, one on one. I first used the person I'm most fascinated by - my wife. Connie is someone I've photographed hundreds of times, but never in this context.

What are some of the technical issues with this body of work?

I'm dealing with long exposures - the model's goodwill and attention span are one thing. Exposures are

several minutes. I have to compose quickly. I look for light. I resolve pictorial issues quickly. I can completely overexpose the subject in relation to the background, underexpose in relation to the background, utilize the lens's tendency to flare and control what's normally a fault. All these things you normally avoid. I use these as stylistic devices, to take away the identity of the figure.

Are there photographers you absolutely detest?

Sure. William Eggleston work is bipolar. Some of his work is brilliant, some of his stuff is bull—
— In Stephen Shore's work, I can't find the key to the decision making process - what made him stop and put his tripod here? When certain photographers celebrate banality - when it becomes more intellectual than visual - that can be tiresome. And sometimes I find things offensive. Larry Clark for example. I love his work from Tulsa, but in his "Teenage Lust" book he was an off-camera cheerleader. I find that creepy.

What about Lee Friedlander?

I love his early formal experiments. How he organized his street photographs was brilliant - although he squandered his gift in later years.

Do you consider yourself a Detroit artist?

Art critics focus their attention on one place - like New York. The other thing is that people don't necessarily speak of certain artists who work in one place as being regional - like Frederick Sommer who created his work in the desert of Arizona. I've never looked at Jerry Uelsmann coming out of northern Florida and said he's a regional artist, related to the south. I am comfortable working here.

What do you like about 19th century photography?

In the 19th century there was a rush to document everything - the great pyramid, every building, etc. There's great exhilaration in the photographic record.

What sort of non-photographic exhibitions do you enjoy?

Well, everyone is telling me I have to see Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle*. I can see I'm going to have to go and see it, but I don't need to go looking for things to influence me. I'm observing things from life; I hear a conversation in a bar, something that spins me off. I don't need to go looking for the next source of inspiration.

How much do you know about what's happening right before you start shooting?

I actively invite chance into the process. It's one of the things that keeps it interesting and exciting. I've watched digital photographers constantly checking their LCD. To me, to keep checking up on what you just shot breaks the creative process. When I work out in the field, it's about the performance of the moment. There's an infinite number of possibilities in any moment.

Is the darkroom part of that performance too?

Sort of, I defer to Ansel Adams's description - where he talked of the negative being the score and the print as being the performance. In the darkroom I'm working from a prepared score.

What kind of techniques have you had to invent to achieve the uniqueness of your images?

I built my own easel for the panoramic prints. The way I overlap frames within the camera is fairly unique to me, as far as I know. I had to figure out how many frames I could overlap and where they're going to have double density. The important thing is that these are relatively simple processes; when things get overly complex they interfere with the creative process. There've been times I've worked with toy cameras.

What do you mean, toy cameras?

A Diana camera - it's plastic - very anti-technical. They have three exposures settings (laughs): sunny, partly cloudy or a picture of a cloud! They're very direct. I do like problem solving, but since my medium is so science/equipment based already, sometimes you want to go the other way. Color photography existed from 1907, but next to nobody practiced it in the art world until 1974 because it was such a technically exhausting process - photographers found all kinds of reasons to refuse to do it. Cameras through the eighties and nineties introduced more and more menus and buttons. You had to work the buttons with your fingernails - totally unintuitive. Now they have started to introduce cameras with big knobs again so you don't have to take your eye from the finder to change the setting.

What kind of camera do use most?

A Canon F1 from the 70s - it's brilliant - does everything I want it to - flawlessly - no microchip. Contemporary cameras all have microchips; the idea is to let its brain do part of the driving, but I don't want anyone driving but me. The first thing I do with my students is have them turn all that stuff off.

If the Canon F1 is the perfect camera, what's the perfect ASA?

Four hundred. I haven't used a light meter in at least fifteen years. I could walk outside any time of day or night - I know what the exposures are. I'm totally free to do my work.

This would be color film?

Yes. I use black and white at times, but when I take away that one layer of information I miss it. I like work that's layered and color is part of that.

What are you reading at the moment?

I always have a stack. I have something here on Duchamp. I just read *I Can't be Satisfied* by Robert Gordon - about Muddy Waters - I like musicians' biographies. I read magazines. My students

bring me articles all the time. I can't keep up with it all. I'm reading something on Serge Gainsbourg. I'm all over the place. But if it's art and photographic criticism, I don't want to have to read the same paragraph three times to make sense of it; it takes all the joy out of it.

Who's your favorite writer on photography?

A. D. Coleman. He brings a common sense approach. I don't want to have to deal with someone's egotistical intellectual calisthenics.

Do you have a sabbatical coming up?

I don't like being away from things. Okay, it's possible to have too much of a good thing. Like this show! It's really gratifying for me because people don't usually get to see all my work. Usually they see it in little windows - this period or that period. As far as taking time off is concerned, this is my life. I have to run a program - a program that's incredibly needy. For instance, I have a digital photo lab we put in four years ago that is already approaching obsolescence! Crazy! It cost \$100,000 and now I have to fight to get it replaced. Now I have to go to all these meetings because they're not going to give you seventy grand unless you go to the meeting!

I sense you don't like meetings.

I dodge as many as I can. I'd rather be out there, on the street.

Rob Kangas/Dick Goody/Royal Oak/MI/October/2003

Cover image: *Untitled, Spotlight Portrait Series*, 2002, 14.25 x 22 inches, chromogenic print

Inside cover and title page images: *From The Passenger Side*, 1997, 14 x 14 inches, silver gelatin print

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Major Exhibitions

The Flowers of Insomnia and other Photographs: A Retrospective by Rob Kangas, Meadow Brook Art Gallery, Oakland University, Rochester, MI, 2004
Cleaning House - Detroit Focus 2000, Lila Jones Theater Gallery, OCC, Royal Oak, MI, 2000
The Flowers of Insomnia, Pierce Street Gallery Birmingham, MI, 1992
Public Park, Creative Art Center, Pontiac, MI, 1988
In Front of the Sky, Cade Gallery Royal Oak, MI, 1988
Carnival, Paint Creek Center for the Arts Rochester, MI, 1984
December, Detroit Public Library Detroit, MI, 1983
Figures and Spaces, Light Fantastic Gallery, Lansing, MI, 1979

Group Exhibitions

The Thing Itself: From Daguerreotype To Digital, Dennon Museum, Traverse City, MI, 2004
Faculty Exhibition, Smith Theater Gallery, OCC, Orchard Ridge, Farmington, MI, 2002
20 Years and Counting, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI, 2002
Made in Michigan, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI, 2001
It's All Academic, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI, 2001
MFP Members Show, Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center, Birmingham, MI, 2000
Body and Soul, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI, 1999
Michigan Friends of Photography Members Show, Xedos Cafe, Ferndale, MI, 1998
Between the Eyes, Bookbeat, Oak Park, MI, 1997
Images 8, Metropolitan Center for the Arts, Detroit, MI, 1997
Photo Transitions, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI, 1996
Resonance, Urban Park Gallery, Detroit, MI, 1995
Veiled Vision, Pierce Street Gallery, Birmingham, MI, 1995
Photonational I, Traveling Exhibition, 1992
Environments Through Photography, Adrian College, Adrian, MI, 1991
Summer in the City, Joint Ventures, Creative Art Center and PCCA, Pontiac/Rochester, MI, 1991
Traveling Exhibition, Michigan Friends of Photography, 1991 & 1990
Twenty Years of Photography at Center for Creative Studies, The Center Galleries, 1989
Belle Isle Invitational, The Front Room Gallery, Detroit, MI, 1989
Urbanology, The MCA Gallery, Detroit, MI, 1989
After Ten Years - Detroit Focus, Detroit Focus Gallery, Detroit, MI, 1989
Third Members' Touring Exhibition, Michigan Friends of Photography, 1988 & 1989
Present Tense/Photography, Detroit Focus Gallery, Detroit, MI, 1988
Michigan Friends of Photography, Michigan Gallery, Detroit, MI, 1987
Photoimages 86, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI, 1986
Photography, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI, 1986
Detroit Photographers Project City Limits, Urban Center for Photography, Detroit, MI, 1986
Faculty Exhibition, Paint Creek Center for the Arts, Rochester, MI, 1986
Center for Creative Studies Alumni, Detroit Artists Market, Detroit, MI, 1983
Michigan Photography Exhibition, The Scarab Club, Detroit, MI, 1982
Detroit Summer Months III, Park West Galleries, Southfield, MI, 1982
Michigan Photography Exhibition, The Scarab Club, Detroit, MI, 1979
Figure, Detroit Focus Gallery, Detroit, MI, 1979
Photography, Detroit Focus Gallery, Detroit, MI, 1979



The Flowers of Insomnia and Other Photographs: A Retrospective by Rob Kangas
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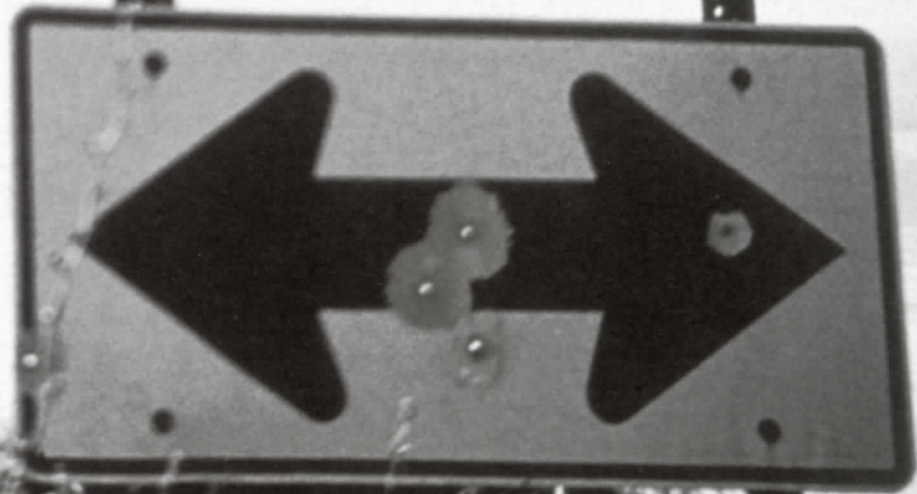
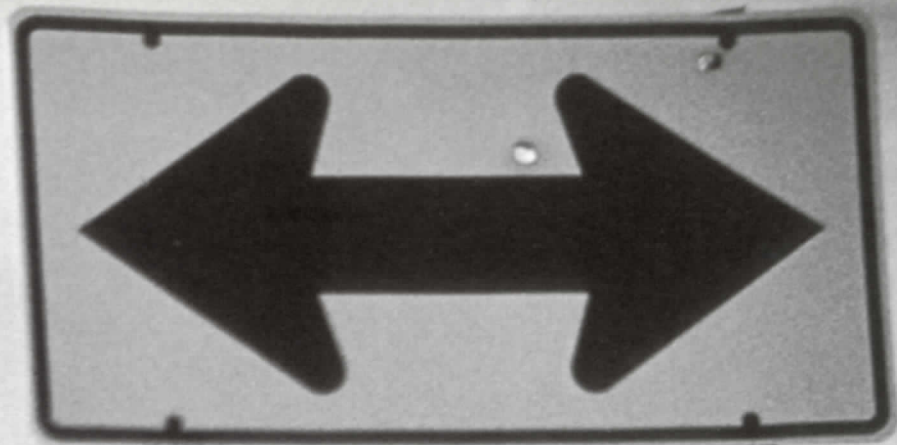
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