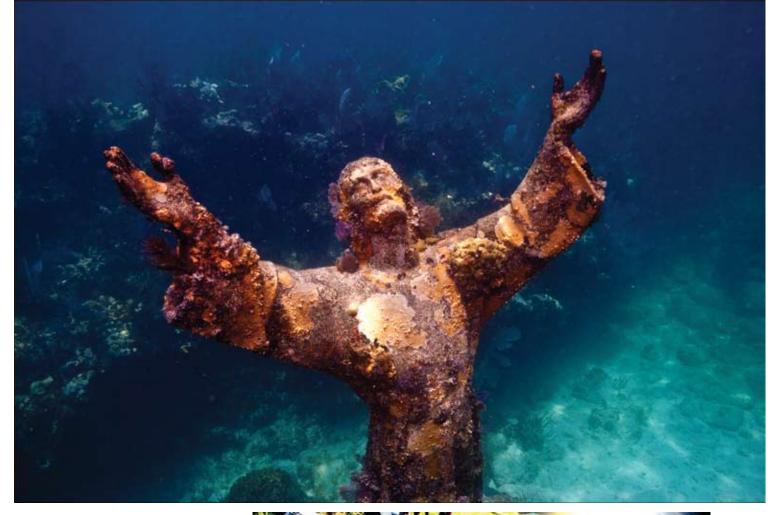# Seeing the Light

Eddie Tapp

by Kate Stanworth

Acclaimed Atlanta-based photographer and Photoshop guru Eddie Tapp never doubted that he would dedicate his life to photography. "As a teenager, I fell in love with photography before I knew anything about it," he says. "It was the 60s and I didn't know anyone with a camera apart from my father, who had helped me make simple Super-8 animations when I was young."

In high school Eddie was inspired to start a photography club, and at the age of 17 his teacher asked him to photograph a wedding for money. "I tried to talk my way out of it since I'd never shot a wedding before, but I did it and it went really well," he recalls. After that he asked a wedding photographer in Atlanta if he could accompany him on shoots. The experience paid off. After graduating in fashion photography at Massey Jr. College, now the Art Institute of Atlanta, he opened his own studio in 1973, photographing weddings and portraits, and eventually, catalogues, advertising and fashion.

With so many options at the disposal of digital photographers today, Eddie encourages them to find a particular set of elements and be consistent with them and to learn one step at a time. "Become familiar with a certain setup. Master that and move on to the next," he advises. He believes you should understand what to expect from your exposures. "What new photographers need to learn are the characteristics of how they are shooting and processing. With film you had a specific color temperature and certain contrast ratio, and once you became sensitive to the characteristics of a particular film you could master your results."

Being able to change the ISO, white balance and so many other elements on the fly might change the way we create images, but Eddie stresses the need to be sensitive and familiar to those same characteristics that were important with film. "There are so many options with digital workflows today that it can actually become intimidating to a lot of people," he says. "In my opinion it's easier to go digital from a film background, but it doesn't really matter where you come from, the message is the same—develop consistency in your workflow."

Eddie reflects on his first experience with digital photography when the choices of product were very limited. "The first time I used a digital camera was for a job for the KEH Camera catalogue cover. That camera would take six to seven minutes to create a single exposure. Naturally, you couldn't shoot people with it, but it was an amazing camera device and one of the very first on the market. After that, came scan backs and finally a camera that we could use for portraits in the mid 90s." Eddie embraced the digital revolution early on. "My early digital projects were pretty interesting and by 1993, I no longer shot film," he recalls.

Being a digital pioneer led Eddie to help companies including Sony, Epson, Foveon, Kodak and Polaroid in beta testing equipment, developing products, defining workflow solutions and training. He also helped government agencies make the transition to digital photography and worked as a consultant for many professional photographic labs and studio operations.

Early on he made himself an expert in Photoshop by teaching himself techniques and "by making a lot of mistakes." This went on to open up many opportunities.

Three and a half decades later, the career he has carved out in photography and photographic training has seen him enjoy some of the highest accolades in the photo industry. Selected as a Canon Explorer of Light and Print Master, as well as an X-Rite Coloratti, he was also inducted into the Photoshop Hall of Fame in 2006. He credits his success to continually learning and working hard. Although he had a great portfolio upon leaving college, he realized his best images often arose from happy accidents and wanted to know how to recreate these fortuitous moments. "I took time to teach myself what I thought I already knew and learned how to redo image techniques that had previously been mistakes because they happened to be really great."

His greatest revelation in photography, however, came the day he actually "saw the light" for the first time. Although he learned how to use light in college, it was later that he experienced a dawning: "I remember the moment. I was in Tennessee and I saw this beautiful light coming across a hill. I realized I was seeing the light and the light quality and there was just something that changed me forever—it was [almost] a religious type of experience."

Seeing light is one of the main elements featured in his specialized photographic workshops. "Light creates shape—the shadow creates depth, so learning light and how to recognize light quality, direction and shadows is crucial. During classes, Eddie often asks attendees to go through a magazine and stop at something that grabs their attention. "When they analyze the image it is always a mastery of light that draws you in," he says.

Eddie also pays a lot of attention to composition—looking for element structure, color coordination, texture and eye flow to give an emotional impact. He considers composition, light and exposure the main ingredients of an excellent image, no matter which tools are used to create it. "When you put those three elements together you are creating great photographs," he says.

Eddie started teaching catalogue classes at colleges and seminars in the 80s and at Winona School of Professional Photography and classes in Photoshop in the early 90s. "Digital was so new that very few people were teaching it, so it just led to one request after another," he recalls.

The way he approaches Photoshop is in terms of productivity. "The techniques I develop save production time so there is more profit," he explains. "In today's digital workflows there are many different software packages: Photoshop, Lightroom, Canon's Digital Photo Professional, Phase One Capture One, etc." Eddie characterizes Photoshop as a very specialized program that is "at the center of the digital universe. Its primary existence today is for masking and advanced retouching—nothing can mask quite as brilliantly as Photoshop."

Eddie considers the best thing about teaching to be learning and the reward of having someone say to you, "You've changed my life." Eddie says, "I'll get an email twice a week from people saying 'Thank you for what you did for me.'"

Over his career, he has taught all aspects of photography and Photoshop in work- shops and seminars around the world. "I've taught in various locations in Europe, Dubai, Russia, Japan, Philippines, all over the states, Mexico and Canada." He even became a certified diver in order to help teach a class on underwater photography with Steven Frink.

Eddie has seen many changes in the world of photography. "When the Instamatic was first introduced, the pros thought it would ruin everything," he recalls. "But what's happened is that you have the weekend warriors and then the pros." Accordingly, professional photographers need to be true craftsmen in order to be successful. "What separates the pros from the amateurs is the ability to capture the essence of a person," he says. "Photography is truly an art."

Asked where he sees the industry going in the future, Eddie replies: "The industry is widening its gates. The pros are going back to a higher level of quality with more craftsmanship involved." He predicts that photography will return to the basic princi- ples of lighting, composition and exposure. "We're on our way back to a higher level of imaging," he says. "There's new energy and new thought in our industry and it's like waves coming in from the ocean—it is fantastic."

It is the ease of digital photography that does a disservice to the new photog- rapher, explains Eddie. "We get into the mix of generating images without know- ing how we did them, but there's a point when we have to understand what it is we're doing."

Though the industry continually changes, nothing has ever distracted Eddie from his original goal. "When I decided to go into the photographic industry I didn't care what part of it I would be involved in as a photogra- pher. I adored it and wanted to learn it all. It was just a great passion of mine, even before I knew what an f-stop was."

You can find out more about Eddie's work by visiting www.eddietapp.com.

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