

Fred Skupenski

“TRACKS”

By Peter Skinner

The words “railroad tracks” can conjure up a multitude of mental images—so many, in fact, that it might be fair to say that the variety would be as diverse as the cross section of people asked what the words mean to them. Puffing steam engines, wide-open plains, jumping the rattler, the Orient Express—you get the drift. And for Los Angeles fine art photographer Fred Skupenski, railroad tracks are an endless source of inspiration and subject matter, a veritable treasure chest of objects discarded or lost by the tracks that take on a character and personality of their own when lighted and photographed in Skupenski’s own inimitable fashion.

Skupenski admits that selecting a subject to photograph is akin to a spiritual exercise. “I’ll pick up an item, be it a bottle cap, bolt, a can, whatever, and look at it. If the object in some Zen-like fashion says, ‘I want to be in a black-and-white abstract photo,’ I take it home. If not, it stays on the



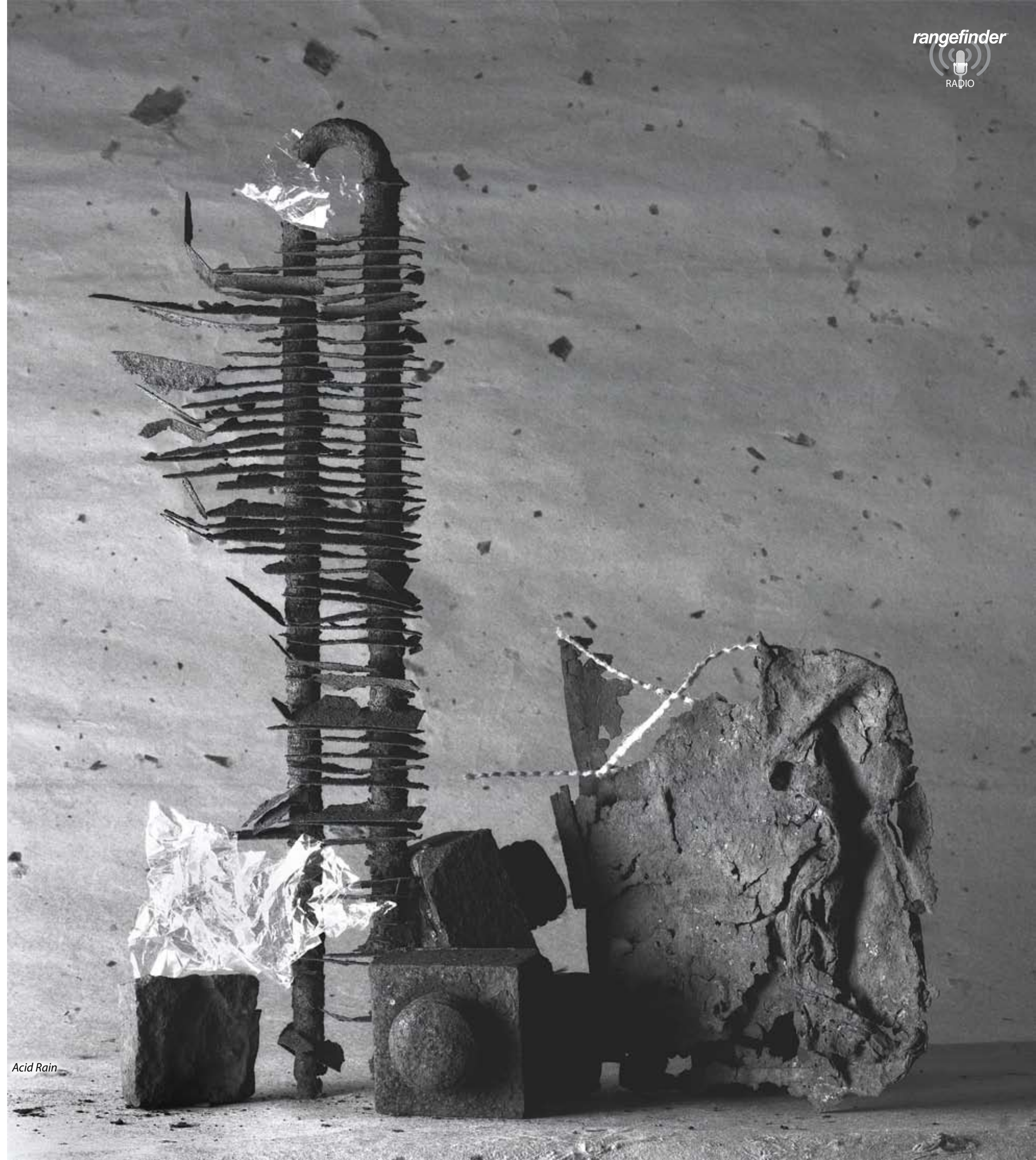
Tracks

ground. The concepts come later,” he explains.

Skupenski is not alone in soliciting the subject’s advice—spoken or otherwise conveyed—on how it wants to be photographed. In fact,

his approach is based on a pearl of wisdom received from a sage instructor about 30 years ago. Skupenski, a 1981 advertising/illustration graduate from Brooks Institute, recalls that while he was contemplating a bottle of cologne in the Brooks’ Illustration Department, instructor Bob Smith—renowned for his black-and-white portraits, fine art approach and dry sense of humor—inquired how Skupenski was going to photograph the bottle. Admittedly, he had no idea. “I have never forgotten his answer,” Skupenski says. “‘If you look at it long enough and the right way, it will tell how it wants to be photographed.’ I had never before approached anything in front of the lens in that fashion, but from that point on I always have. I did it

when I was a student testing with Los Angeles modeling agencies and with just about anyone and anything I photographed that did not have classroom or client restrictions.” Smith’s approach was one of many



Acid Rain



Box of Chocolates

lessons—technical, aesthetical, inspirational and hard-nosed that Skupenski and his fellow students received at Brooks. Around the time he graduated, a contingent of New York-bound illustration/advertising students emerged from the illustration department. While Skupenski was not a classmate of most, he was from that era. “A group of grads headed for New York City—guys like Mark Ferri, Bill Kramer, Michael Zeppetello, Ruedi Hofmann, John Fortunato and Kevin Schochat were friends of mine and later Paul Meyer, now a teacher at Brooks, came to New York. A Japanese student, Yasu Nakaoka, who is now based in Tokyo, was also part of the Brooks crowd in New York.

“We were all told the value of assisting established shooters and knowing the business of the business. Dick Atamian,

Wasted Moments



our department chairman at Brooks, was always telling me it's a business but it wasn't until later that I understood his full meaning, especially when I encountered the words 'cash flow,'" Skupenski says.

“My original intention was to work for Victor Skrebneski, and I went to Chicago to talk myself into a job. It didn't happen, but I had great chat with him. He stopped shooting to talk to me for hours and that was great," he adds.

However, Skupenski did get to New York and worked as an assistant for four years—by his estimation, two years too many—before returning to Los Angeles. While there he assisted Richard Avedon and many *Vogue* fashion shooters and leading still life photographers. But he realized the Big Apple was not for him. “I had a strange experience with one of New

York's big guns. This person didn't know any photography, didn't want to know any photography—which is why this person needed a Brookie assistant—but did have a great eye. That experience, and having realized that my business sense and bank account were both limited, made me well aware that I was finished with assisting and could not set up shop in New York. So back to the sunshine. However, I do recommend that any student truly serious about photography in any style spend a few years in New York—it's a great experience," he says.

Undoubtedly, Skupenski's background as a geologist gave him the resilience and confidence to take significant changes in stride. While stationed with the U.S. Army in Washington, DC, attached to a



Achilles Heel

topographic command, he was introduced to photography at the Fort McNair craft shop. A civilian supervisor who recognized raw talent when he saw it encouraged Skupenski to keep shooting. Years later, when Skupenski realized that life as a geologist—by that stage with a drilling fluids company working on land and offshore—was lacking something, he again picked up a camera. He needed to satisfy an itch for expression. One phone call to his former shop supervisor changed his life. "He told me I had two choices—go to New York and assist or go to a good photo school. But going to New York without any experience was going to make it tough. What I really wanted and needed was technical knowledge so what [I visualized] could be produced without worrying about

Doughboys





Garage Band

what was actually put on film,” he says. Thus followed his years at Brooks Institute and a subsequent stint in New York.

Since returning to Los Angeles, Skupenski has made his living in a variety of photo industry offshoots. “I custom printed for a while; operated a Durst Lambda, which is a very high end laser printer; did dupes of major film studios archives and scanning work for major publishers. I also do a variety of images for musicians—CD covers, publicity and normal headshots—and I’m working on some new concepts for model and actress headshots that are conceptually driven, more poster-like than just a photo,” he says.

Skupenski embarked on his “Tracks” project as an on-going self-assignment—a “visual pushups” exercise if you will. “I picked up some objects off a set of vacant tracks and started doing basic black-and-white discard photography. However, once I stumbled on the fact that my imagination could take those objects into the human world in an abstract form, I realized I could make a photograph that stated something about the human condition, be it love, death, sports, religion, family and kids. So, that’s what I did,” he says.

The North Hollywood railroad tracks where Skupenski embarked on this visual journey are now gone—paved by a Metro bus route—but they were the catalyst that ignited other avenues for his abstract vision. “I didn’t know if I would succeed but I’m taking that experience and going to the next level, which is abstract images commenting on our lives using any object to convey my thoughts. My intention is to photograph them so the viewer gets it but is not really sure what they are looking at. One way to do that is to eliminate anything that offers the viewer a true sense of scale. If a large print, say 11 x 14 inches has bolts seven inches tall it forces the viewer’s mind to determine if what they are viewing is actually a bolt. Should you put something familiar next to the bolt like a coin, the viewer’s mind will immediately calculate the size relationship and not be pulled further into the image,” he explains.

This “clicked” for Skupenski when a woman in Beverly Hills saw his work and thought he was documenting sculpture. “She wanted to buy a piece for her backyard, having no idea that the objects could fit in her hand. As a side note, I’ve taken care of that so if that happens again I have

a good friend who is mechanical engineer who does the structural work-ups for most of the really big guns in the art world. Yes, sculpture, no problem, I can do that.”

Yet, as intriguing and as well crafted as they are, Skupenski’s “Tracks” abstracts have not fired the imagination of commercial clients. “I tried to interest galleries and commercial outlets in the work and several years ago the chain store outlet Restoration Hardware licensed a few of the images. I talked to a marketing consultant who liked them but he was told by clients, ‘It’s too much of a gamble with this kind of photography we’ve never seen.’ Other typical replies were: ‘The work is too sophisticated for the mass market; ‘It’s not art, it’s commercial;’ or ‘It’s not commercial, it’s sort of arty’ or ‘It should be marketed toward men as decor for their den,’” he says.

Skupenski perseveres, however. He aspires to have a book published and continues to search for means to place his work more in the public eye. “I think it will take someone sharp and savvy enough to know how to market the work. The response is positive to the images and I’ve sold a number of prints to folks who do get it, but I’m

still trying to figure how to get the work out there and I'm always looking for a gallery," he says.

With most of the "Tracks" images, although not all, ideas were formed once the compositions and combinations of subjects were in hand. But now it's the reverse. "I guess due to the experience of producing over 60 images from 'Tracks,' my mind is firmly wrapped around the size and texture of objects I like to work with. Now I'm coming up with concepts and

front of me I will always shoot and I never censor myself at any particular moment. I believe the adage that thinking too much can kill the creative process," he says.

In keeping with equipment and technique ingrained at Brooks Institute, Skupenski uses a 4x5 view camera, a 210mm lens, shoots and tray processes black-and-white film and concedes he will probably never use digital equipment to shoot his abstracts.

Lighting is usually from a single source,

know how daylight acts at certain times of the day and in certain weather conditions, you can get close to duplicating it, especially when you photograph very small objects as I do," Stupenski explains.

The "Tracks" series, which contains about 60 images, ended only because the tracks were pulled up, but Fred Skupenski's search for abstract images continues unabated. "I have just completed two images—"The Match," made from tea bags, wooden buttons and a piece of Atomic



Loss of Innocence

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attempting to discover what objects we see and use everyday that I can turn into an abstract image," he says.

The humor implicit in many of the "Tracks" images is enhanced by clever captions and, while many photographers eschew verbiage or titles insisting the viewer should get out of the image what they see, Skupenski maintains that is not why he captured these images. "I made the image[s] because I felt and saw something in the objects. Sometimes it's immediate, but most of the time it's like watching clouds move. I see something and the way I move the light I attempt to enhance it. When the feeling is anchored in the shot, the titles come. At other times I can't exactly articulate the feeling, and a close friend and I bounce words off each other until it clicks. If I feel or see something in

supplemented and controlled with a fill ratio from white cards, mirrors or Mylar. He adds a secondary light source only if a white background is needed. Stupenski also uses a special paper that mottles to different degrees and intensity when cross-lit and the lighting ratio is altered. "I hate softboxes because I can't control the strobe head. When working with an independent strobe head and small objects, feathering the light the least bit will alter the shot. I will diffuse a light source behind a certain sized subject, I vary the diffusion material, because, and this is really picky, it changes the edge shape of the shadows.

"For me, at least the way I think, the lighting is everything. It's all strobe. Some photographers thought certain images were done in daylight because if you really

FireBall candy; the other, titled 'Disciples,' is made from patches of burlap, old 35mm Kodak film tins, rusted pop tops and a railroad spike. It's all very Zen," he says.

To see some of Fred Skupenski's work online, please visit www.photoinduced.com or www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zul2PedNJE0.



Freelance writer/photographer and author Peter Skinner, who relocated to his native Australia in 2003 after living for 23 years in the U.S., has more than 25 years experience in the photo industry in public relations, media liaison, corporate communications and workshop production and coordination. His magazine articles and photography have been published internationally and he has co-authored or edited numerous publications and books including the 5th and 6th editions of the authoritative ASMP Professional Business Practices in Photography (Allworth Press). His latest book is Sports Photography: How to Capture Action and Emotion (Allworth Press). He can be reached at: prsskinner@bigpond.com.