

## Ship Rock - Creative Fine Art Magic

*Ship Rock is testament to one man's continuing search to create fine art magic. Numerous judges provide Ship Rock significant tribute. Digital darkroom work attests to firm resolve, growing creative perceptions, and statewide magazine and state fair respect. A client's ANMPAS gallery purchase capped this wondrous fine art journey...*



### **Art, History, and Culture**

From my vantage point along the ancient dike, the sun had just dropped below the western horizon, casting long shadows down its backside. Yet, direct sunlight was reflecting from Ship Rock. A slight front was trending southeastward from Utah, up north past Four Corners. Highest cirrus clouds, seeming to consolidate the eye, jaded from Ship Rock's beauty, trailed to the edge of the world.

High desert places that strike deeply me have features in common. Harsh powerful grandeur, graduations of colors, tortured eroded shapes... All are empty and lonely. They invoke a sense of both space and strangeness. All have a fierce inhospitality, an infinite variety of wild, desolate beauty...

Ship Rock, that ancient almost Gothic spire lit by the setting sun's golden hues, assists in silent wonder and bears prolonged silent witness to man's wanderings across this dry, semi-arid desert. The distant Roman nose shape of Sleeping Ute Mountain is another famous, dominant Four Corners landmark.

The basalt dike, Mother Nature's bold brickwork wall, trending from the upper right edge toward distant Ship Rock, acted as an arresting lower frame for our image. Magic Hour's quickly shifting sunset pastel lights, some direct, some reflected, add a softer, evocative upper glow of a.

### **Ancient History**

Ship Rock was formed as the throat to an ancient volcano 30 million years ago. A volcanic ray - thirty or forty feet high but only about three feet thick - wanders like the Great Wall of China southward from Ship Rock. Molten magma squeezed up through the cracked earth. Up the wall to the north, the core of old Ship Rock volcano rose a thousand feet against the sky, like a free-form version of a Gothic cathedral. Gothic, too, was the color — the stone reflecting soft sunset umbers. Balanced on the wind just over the wall, a red-tailed hawk hunted a rodent to kill. A million years of frost and heat cracked this dike as chunks have fallen out.

### **Anasazi Culture**

From 700 AD to ~ 1300 AD, the Anasazi lived all over this land. Their time honored legacy of remarkable stone dwellings is legendary!

The Navajo call Ship Rock *Tse' bit' a'i* - Rock with Wings. What about deeds done by Monster Slayer here in the time of Navajo myth? Monster Slayer, climbing the vertical stone of Ship Rock toward the nest of the Winged Monsters to kill them and make this landscape safe for the Navajos. Monster Slayer, at the nest, taught the Monsters' chicks to become the eagle and the owl. Monster Slayer rescued from his impossible perch by the sacred Spider Woman.

"I love the place," Tony Hillerman wrote of vast tribal lands that span the northeast corner of Arizona and straddle the borders of New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado. "I need only drive west from Ship Rock into that great emptiness to feel my spirit lift."

### **HDR Capture**

Let's talk about *Ship Rock's* digital development history...

One October evening, I climbed the dike which runs south from Ship Rock. I had not actually been to the site where this picture was taken, so I had to explore. I finally got there about an hour before Magic Hour light was best. I set up the tripod, put camera in manual mode, dialed in an aperture, set automatic exposure bracketing for 3 images 2EV apart, and took a few practice shots. Looking westward, I could easily see when the sun would drop below the mountains.

As the Lukachukai's obscured the sun's direct rays, light was fading fast. I quickly captured those critical shots, packed up gear, lashed it securely to my

backpack, then carefully wended my way down the dike's dark, treacherous backside. The oh-so-scary aspect reminded me of some conflicts Tony Hillerman mastered in his Navajo mysteries... matter of fact; Tony wrote a fascinating mystery about Ship Rock called *The Fallen Man!*

Somehow, coming safely off that dike, a slight premonition seemed to settle in on the way home. I thought, "Perhaps - I've got a truly special shot..."

### **Digital Darkroom Development**

After driving until late hours that night, the next morning I got a first peek in my studio at Lightroom 2 high dynamic range (HDR) images to become *Ship Rock's* final award-winning fine art. With repeated forays through Photomatix, Lightroom, and CS4, I would ultimately evaluate some 25 versions on three diverse paths before pleasure found a final image. I couldn't begin to say how many hours went into *Ship Rock*; it's become a holy grail for sharpening my tone mapping skills and learning HDR!

### **Early Signs of Awards...**

There's a cadre of digital photographers in New Mexico, all at different growth levels. In late May, 2009, some 2008 state fair judges invited Enchanted Lens Camera Club members to show images for critique. *Ship Rock* was an 11 x 14 Costco print cased in plastic. I'll never forget the day ~ one judge was very positive and optimistic about *Ship Rock*; another said I should present in Professional Category at state fair - size matters. Until then, I didn't realize I was seen as a better than average digital photographer.

To step from a camera club single judge environment for digital images to a printed, matted, framed fine art professional print in one awesome bound. I never framed before NM State Fair, 2009. Simply put, it's a leap of ambition, of faith...

### **1<sup>st</sup> Professional Competition**

One night, as five judges, two women and three men, judged the Professional Category for Scenic Class prints, *Ship Rock* was placed on the easel under strong tungsten lights. To my amazement, it garnered the highest score of the night - to that point. Immediately, I knew *Ship Rock* was that special image my intuition had suggested in that cold ride home many months before. So, it really didn't matter quite as much when another image won first place - *Ship Rock* won 2<sup>nd</sup> Place.

In October, I submitted *Ship Rock* to 1<sup>st</sup> Annual New Mexico Photographic Art Show held at New Mexico State Fairgrounds, December, 2009. Fairly quickly, I was informed *Ship Rock* was a *Juried Entry* to ANMPAS. With this second acceptance, it was already quite clear *Ship Rock* found a fine art path of its own.

In late September, I submitted *Ship Rock* to the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual New Mexico Magazine Photo Contest. Fairly quickly, NM Mag wrote to inform me *Ship Rock* was a *Finalist*, I would be notified by December 15, could I please send a large image?

### **Big News...**

Three weeks before their news release, I wrote the New Mexico Magazine art director asking "I have some upcoming fine art events where I need to know *Ship Rock's* status. Can you provide any early indication on its contest rank?"

The same morning, she replied, "Joe, *Ship Rock* is *Winner*, Landscape Category, 9<sup>th</sup> Annual New Mexico Magazine Photo Contest. Your image will appear in the January 2010 issue of New Mexico Magazine."

*Voilà*, perhaps not just a path, but now, an ascending trajectory...

### **Once Before...**

How did *Ship Rock* differ from the first competition I entered? In 2005, I submitted a Bisti image; imagine my surprise when it appeared as the January, 2006, Cover of New Mexico Magazine. Oh, yes...

There *is* one other achievement - as Winner, *Ship Rock* is entitled to a prize suite consisting of workshop support, software, gear, and a magazine subscription.

When I spoke to Fabian West, Art Director, New Mexico Magazine, she said she wanted to put their *Ship Rock* copy on her wall. I said, "Fabian, that's a great idea! Please put my name on it in case other people you show it to like it...!"

### **Creating Fine Art Magic**

*Ship Rock's* meteoric history was complete in late December.

On December 26<sup>th</sup>, I got an unusual phone call,

"Joe, *Ship Rock* sold today" said Bob Barton, an excited friend and fellow camera club member!

From capture through awards to final result, our path took 15 months. They say, "Creativity is one part Talent, nine parts Hard Work!"

For me, Creativity was finding that right place and right time to shoot *Ship Rock*. In following Hard Work, a series of experiments helped me with problems created by Photomatix, repeated efforts between Lightroom and Photoshop to add rich, yet subtle contrast, then a final push to submit a framed image for very competitive judging.