

## After the Rapture

*only Michael Kenna remains as witness. (Introduction to a book of Kenna's night photographs).*

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Bill Jay

I missed my true calling. My school career counselor, confronted by a sniffing, skinny kid in short pants and scabbed knees, was visibly affronted when I declared my intention of becoming a spy-assassin. This admirable ambition might well have distracted me from a lifetime of pleasure in photography but for an unfortunate disqualifying trait: if captured by an enemy I would have gladly divulged names and secrets at the first threat that I would be deprived of sleep, to which I had, and still have, an inordinate attachment. I believe that most of society's ills would be solved by mandatory after-lunch naps.

This biographical tit-bit, otherwise of no consequence, partly explains why I admire Michael Kenna. He photographs at night, when I would not dream of venturing forth with a camera, let alone actually doing it.

Even if I find his motivation incomprehensible, I am delighted that Michael is sacrificing his own sleep in order to reveal what I am missing. His photographs confirm my suspicion. Night time is not the same old world minus sunlight. It is transformed into a totally different world, awesomely alien, a post-industrial planet where the inhabitants have been either enraptured prior to the sun's extinction or else cleanly vaporized and the remains lit solely by the diminishing fireball. I can wander around in this ghostly landscape, thanks to Michael's images, and feel its frightening weirdness while soothed by its implacable still beauty.

The power of his pictures for me resides in the contradictory emotions which they evoke: both calm and terror, a cold emptiness emitting grace, an urgent need to find fellow survivors, some vestige of humanity, yet a guilty pleasure that human sordidness has been erased, a post apocalyptic sadness at the dearth of people with a satisfaction that I can join Michael as a survivor.

This interpretation is a personal one, needless to say, and can be ignored. It is mine and in no way undermines whatever you see in the images. Its only pertinence is that I am writing this introduction and you are not.

On the other hand, I do expect us to share a gratitude that these images are not overtly about the author's angst. I am weary, oh so weary, of the emotional incontinents in contemporary art and photography forever chanting their petty philistinism. Michael Kenna is cool. His pictures are "out there" at exactly the right distance from self, oscillating at the interface between objective fact (this is what the camera sees) and subjective feeling (this is who I am because I made creative decisions).

I can remember the very moment that marked the beginning of art-photography's demise. It was in March of 1975 and Ansel Adams was asked to give a presentation at a national conference of photographic educators. His opening sentence affirmed that fine photography was inseparable from craftsmanship – and the audience of young academic "artists" erupted into boos! What unmitigated gall! The hubris . . . Still, Ansel was right, and it is significant that you have heard of Ansel Adams but everyone of the boosers never rose above oblivion so were incapable of sinking back into it.

How refreshing, then, in this era of vapid posturing, that Michael Kenna reaffirms the truth that revelation of the subject is achieved through careful craftsmanship which can only be reached through painstaking attention to detail.

And this takes effort, and a lot of time. One of the puzzling attitudes, unique to this medium, is the notion that young photographers can brainstorm a project for seconds on end before banging off a few frames and claiming the results as Significant. If only. Then I could buy a trumpet, blow a raspberry and call it music. It is a basic conundrum of modern photography that the antics of these young artists are not scorned. So I thank Providence that rare photographers like Michael Kenna exist to reaffirm that tenacity, long-term commitment, persistence in search of a vision and a steadfast focus on subject matter are the characteristics that lead to images of depth and significance. And surprise.

Since photography at night became possible in the 1890s, and therefore became something of a fad in that decade, with Paul Martin in London and Alfred Stieglitz in New York as leading enthusiasts, the weird and unexpected effects of long exposure times have continued to fascinate hardy groups of photographers in each generation. I have a great fondness for the camera's ability to reveal what the unaided eye cannot see and an admiration for those who engage in activities which seem, to me, to fly in the face of basic creature comforts. Like Michael, I spent my formative years in England, which was useful for developing my aversion to anything damp and cold. I have a similar respectful incomprehension of those who attend rock concerts when I spend so much of my time hankering for solitude and silence. So if Michael Kenna has the urge to prowl the night collecting his gifts of images on my behalf then I am thankful knowing I can rest easier in my bed.

***Written as the Introduction to Night Work, by Michael Kenna, 2000***