

Evoking Culture

by Lisa Waterman Gray - *Urban Times* - October 2007

Mike McMullen says one of his 'luckiest' black and white photo images is from Kansas City's Jazz District. Neon from the club and the Gem Theater glow in the dark. A 1954 Cadillac, with its passenger door open, hides modern vehicles from view outside the Blue Room, giving the illusion that the image came from another time. It's moments like these that inspire McMullen when he gets behind the camera.

"I just happen to see something and think it would be a compelling black and white," he says. "It's really liberating to recognize something's character, but you have to work fast. Black and white photography is good for capturing once-in-a-lifetime moments or something that is timeless. Sometimes you go out looking for a specific image, and sometimes you do something compelling at the time and you don't screw it up."

McMullen was a history major at Stanford University and many of his photographs capture architectural details such as polished floors and lit clocks inside Union Station, heavily shadowed columns at the Nelson-Atkins Museum, or an antique doorknob at the Jackson County Courthouse. He takes many photos after dark, such as a downtown image of the Western Auto sign and glowing streetlights amidst a blanket of snow, or a dramatically lit Liberty Memorial shot from the ground up.

"The past has a lot of beauty," McMullen says, "but it also evokes our culture. And night photos reveal patterns and shadows that give a structure a lot of character." No matter which McMullen print grabs you, you'll never see another one like it because he develops and prints each image by hand, which may result in variations from one print to the next. Each is limited edition--signed and numbered--and the first print of each image he keeps requires three to four hours in the darkroom.

"Not many people do hand-printed images anymore," McMullen says. "With black-and-white fine-art prints, every image is an original, which is why I don't use digital professionally. There is no computer between the artist and the art--there's a direct connection." It's a connection he has appreciated since he built his first darkroom below the basement stairs, in ninth grade.

McMullen was photo editor and editor of his Shawnee Mission East yearbook, and a staff photographer for Stanford University's newspaper. He took photography courses during college, and was a summer intern with the United Press International (UPI) at Royals stadium. McMullen also won a photojournalism contest sponsored by KU's William Allen White School of Journalism. But it was an afternoon spent in renowned photographer Ansel Adams' Carmel studio that solidified his passion for black-and-white photography.

"We had a small class and my professor knew Ansel Adams," McMullen says. "Adams went into black and white photography in his '30s, [inspired by] Paul Strand, and he was remarkably understated. He said, 'If you want to know what something feels like, shoot in black and white.'"

When McMullen wanted a medium format Hasselblad camera in 2000, his wife, Bonnie, suggested they start Mike McMullen Photography, merging his passion for photography and her creative, marketing and merchandising background. Since 2000 they have participated in shows from Minneapolis to Austin as well as locally in Westport, Mo., Prairie Village, Kan., and the Country Club Plaza.

Yet this is McMullen's second job. He received his law degree from the University of Missouri and currently works full-time in a Manor Square office, on explosion and fire cases. Both professions require, patience, persistence, attention-to-detail, and knowing what works and what doesn't.

"Photography is my escape," McMullen says. "It's great to do something you want to do, when you don't have to, and I like my day job too."