

Quang-Tuan Luong

Photographing America's National Parks

By Cathleen Burnham

Hiking, flying, paddling and driving to the most remote treasures of the U.S. has become a way of life for Quang-Tuan Luong in his quest to photograph America's National Parks. The ruggedness of the man is mirrored in his images, which give glimpses of lands both secret and sacred. His landscapes appear as places where it seems no human has walked before. Those images don't necessarily lie. Tuan, an ex-



► Canham KBC 5x7, Fuji Astia, Schneider Apo-Symmar 210mm, 4 seconds at f/45; Deer Creek, Grand Canyon National Park, AZ.

▼ Nikon FM2, Fuji Velvia, Nikkor 24mm, 1/60 second at f/8; Giant's Tooth, Mont Blanc range, France.

pert mountaineer, spends days reaching his chosen spot: the topmost, craggy peak; desolate salt pans; or some location in the Arctic won only by days of hiking.

And then there is his scope. Using almost exclusively a large format approach, Luong is able to lay the world before his audience. It's an approach that's garnered this deliberating scientist/photographer stunning results time and time again. "Using the large format camera requires a slower working method. You think more about each shot because of the time it takes to set it up. The more contemplative approach that this type of exacting and demanding photography promotes and the extremely detailed photos it produces are perfect in conveying the visual richness of the landscape. When



▲ Canham KBC 5x7, Fuji Velvia, Schneider Super-Symmar 110mm, 4 seconds at f/32; Grant Grove, Kings Canyon National Park, CA.

▼ Canham KBC 5x7, Fuji Astia, Schneider Super-Symmar XL 110mm, Heliopan Polarizing filter, 1/8 second at f/26; Fort Jefferson, Dry Tortugas National Park, FL.

I photograph a wide-angle scene (with an angle of view equivalent to that of a 24mm lens on 35mm camera), I am using a 110mm focal lens on my large format camera. So it means that a tree in the distant background is rendered as clearly as if I had focused on

it with a telephoto and framed it tight. I do not need to direct the viewer's attention to it, but they can discover the tree when they explore the image for themselves."

Luong continues, "Therefore, I can produce images that are complex, taking the





▲ *Canham KBC 5x7, Fuji Astia, Schneider Super-Symmar 110mm, Heliopan Polarizing filter, 8 seconds at f/32; Left Fork of the North Creek, Zion National Park, Utah.*

▼ *Canham KBC 5x7, Fuji Astia, Schneider Super-Symmar 110mm, 3 stop GND Hitech filter, 15 seconds at f/22; Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, Hawaii.*

whole scene in without a singular point of focus; viewers can take time and read it, look at all the features and discover highlights and interrelationships for themselves. In that sense, those photographs give a sense of place and time by letting the

viewers see through the images as much as I saw myself?

This self-taught photographer didn't begin life as an artist or an outdoorsman. He had been trained as a scientist in France, but felt called to the mountains. "More than 20 years ago, my life, which so far had been largely urban, was transformed by the wilderness of mountains. Much like [famed wilderness photographer] Galen Rowell before, as a climber and mountain guide, I was initially interested in photography as a means to communicate to people the wonders I had seen on the high peaks of the Alps and, subsequently, other mountains of the world. This photograph [Page 94] was from my last mountain climb in the Alps, in 1992. I would move to California in 1993. I had been guiding a group up to the Dent du Géant (Giant's Tooth), a peak with two distinct pinnacles at the top, which allowed me to frame that view of the other members of the group from the main one, as they stood from the secondary one. I always felt that although so close, the High Alps were a world apart."

Luong eventually planned a temporary stay in the United States and was imme-



diately grabbed by the vastness of its wild places. “What kept me in the States was really that I became unexpectedly captivated by the natural environments—in particular the National Parks—and never felt I was done with them. Another turning point happened 10 years ago when I learned to use the large format camera. In the process, I happened to create www.largeformatphotography.info, considered by some to be the primary technical resource for large format photography on the Web.”

For years Luong pursued a career creating artificial intelligence and spent all his free time in nature with a camera. Gradually, his photography work eclipsed his scientific career. “By the summer of 2002, I reached the goal of visiting each of the 58 national parks at least once, when I set up my camera on the Great Kobuk Sand

▼ *Canon EOS 3, Fuji Provia F, Canon 28–135mm, 20 seconds at f/8; Muir inlet, Glacier Bay National Park, Alaska.*

► *Canham KBC 5x7, Fuji Astia, Schneider Super-Symmar XL 110mm, 1/2 second at f/22; Second Beach, Olympic National Park, WA.*

Dunes in Arctic Alaska. I self-financed the entire national parks project. This made it possible for me to realize most fully my vision, free of any commercial pressures. When I started my Web site, www.terragalleria.com, in 2001, the common wisdom was that one could not make a good living out of shooting scenic images, and that the Web was not a viable medium for photographers, certainly not as a sole marketing platform. Yet, as I had planned, less than five years later, I was already deriving a higher income from photography than from my scientist job.”

That being said, Luong enjoys the patronage of such high profile clients as *Time*, the National Geographic Society and *GEO*, although he’s never advertised and does not use an agent. “They all made contact with me after seeing my Web site, which I designed, programmed and now maintain, including system administration. My business comes almost exclusively from that Web site, so it is something I must control tightly.”

When asked about material preferences,

Luong says, “For nature landscape, I prefer to photograph using 5x7 film when possible. My favorite lens is the Schneider Super-Symmar XL 110/5.6, the equivalent of a 24mm lens in 35mm when shot with 5x7. This lens is very demanding because so much of the scene is included that all the elements have to fit together, but those are the compositions I am striving for, as they draw the viewer into the scene.” To learn, in detail, what Luong carries on location, go to www.largeformatphotography.info/camera-bag/. As for a tripod, Luong says, “For travel and hiking I have been using Gitzo Series 2 carbon-fiber tripods since they were first released. They are adequate even for a 5x7 camera, although a Series 3 is better.” When it comes to postproduction, “I use Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop as well as DxO Optics Pro. I use mostly Apple and occasionally Windows platforms. Both are nowadays adequate for imaging work, and both have their own strengths and weaknesses. I probably wouldn’t be using the Mac if it wasn’t a UNIX OS, but as it is, it provides a



platform where I can do both imaging work and server development work.” In general, Luong uses an 8GB card to last him throughout a day of shooting since, he says, “I photograph with discrimination, and review and erase in-camera the most obviously imperfect images. In the evening, I download the images to two or three hard drives.” Specifically, dedicated downloading devices include his two HyperDrives. “I prefer those devices to a laptop because of the weight and bulk savings, and the ease of use,” he says.

If pressed, Luong names his top five favorite destinations as the French Alps, Alaska, Yosemite, the Amalfi Coast and Paris. As to dream destinations, he lists “everywhere, but especially the Himalayas, South America, Africa and Antarctica.” Dream endeavor: “an extended travel project, like photographing all UNESCO World Heritage Sites.” Luong’s photographic heroes include Eliot Porter, whom he considers the pioneer of color nature photography, and who also left a career as a scientist

(medical) to become a photographer, as well as Bradford Washburn and Galen Rowell, “who combined adventure and photography, vision and insight.” Luong says, “Rowell became seriously involved in photography for the same reason that I did: to record his experience as a mountaineer.” Finally, Luong values David Muench, he says, “for his lifetime dedication to landscape photography. I sometimes feel like I am walking in his footsteps in the national parks, using some of the techniques he made popular.”

Luong’s great, scenic shots highlight Earth’s primordial element. Yes, they show the land’s present glory, but also its timelessness due to the points of focus he chooses: the crater from the volcano long since blasted; cliff dwellings of ancient, bygone peoples; an elk already passed through. These are skeletons of the land, but valuable even in skeletal remains. The photos so well present the case for conservation. The land itself seems to say, “See? We were here millions of years ago. So beautiful then!

So beautiful now! So beautiful a thousand years from now... if you’re careful.”

In the history of photographers like William Henry Jackson—whose “photographs were instrumental in convincing Congress that the wonders of Yellowstone were real” after scores of painters were previously thought to have exaggerated the region—Quang-Tuan Luong has dedicated himself to documenting the wild wonders of North America and the remote corners of the natural world. But he’s gone one step further. As the first to photograph each of the 58 United States National Parks in large format, his work as a body can be lent to the cause of wild land preservation. After all, it wasn’t just Congress who lobbied for federal status for vast tracts of lands. It was the photographers, who, through their images, spoke to millions of Americans and made them passionate about preservation too.



Cathleen Burnham is a travel writer based in upstate New York.