

LENS

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

Kodachrome's Lasting Color, and Memory

By [MATT MCCANN](#)

On D-Day 1972, fresh and ready to begin a photo internship at National Geographic, Nathan Benn, hitherto a black-and-white photographer, was delivered his marching orders:

You shoot Kodachrome now.

“I hardly ever shot color until I shot for National Geographic, and then I shot all in color,” [Mr. Benn](#), 63, recalled. “Ninety-nine point nine percent of my photography up until June 6, 1972, was done without color.”

It was a good thing the decision was made for him. Kodachrome was known at the time for rendering rich colors, but also turned out to be remarkably durable: while Ektachrome photos faded and warped over time, Kodachrome images resisted deterioration. So while Mr. Benn didn't set out to assemble a book 40 years later composed exclusively of Kodachrome work, it happened that that work made up the bulk of his best-preserved images.

“That was not a calculated decision in 1972 that when I do my legacy book in 2013, I should use Kodachrome,” he said in a telephone interview from his home in New Mexico. “I'm not that forward thinking. I was lucky.”

By the time Eastman Kodak [discontinued its production in 2009](#), Kodachrome had long been a thing of the past for Mr. Benn, who had not taken a picture professionally since 1991. While some

photographers, like Jeff Jacobson, reacted to the film's dreaded but anticipated end by buying up a cache for a final hurrah — he turned the resulting pictures into a book, "[The Last Roll](#)" — others, resigned to the inevitable, picked up their DSLRs and went back to work with a sigh.

For Mr. Benn, the demise of the [beloved film](#) wasn't so much a funereal knell as an invitation to peek into the boxes of transparencies from his days at National Geographic. He had ignored his archive for so long that, to him, the images were hardly even there.

"It was like a one-hand clap, or other metaphors like a tree falling in a forest and no one's around to hear it," he said. "The picture does not exist unless it is looked at. Those pictures did not exist."

They do now, in his book "[Kodachrome Memory: American Pictures 1972-1990](#)," to be published in September by [powerHouse Books](#). The book collects 108 prints taken from the 350,000 transparencies Mr. Benn shot for National Geographic over nearly 20 years. But it features the pictures he treasures, not the ones his editors did — only a handful were published in the magazine. These images blend what Richard Buckley in the foreword calls Mr. Benn's "painterly understanding of composition, light and color" with "the formality of their framing and the looseness and spontaneity of a snapshot."



Nathan Benn Helena, Ark.
1983.

In the years since Mr. Benn put down his camera, he has busied himself with other aspects of photography. In the early '90s, he founded an online portal to sell stock photography — the first service of its kind, back when the Internet was not yet carried around on phones or wearable on faces. He directed Magnum Photos from 2000 to 2003 and is a trustee of the George Eastman House.

But he hasn't taken a picture, even for himself, in 22 years.

"I would have continued," he said, "but I ran out of support. Emotional scaffolding, I guess, is the term I've learned, having a 13-year-old boy now. Emotional scaffolding is a good educational term. I

just felt the scaffolding wasn't there anymore and I had to put the cameras down.”

But the self-described “Jewish fat nerd,” who didn't fit the mold of National Geographic photographers at the time — they “came from Missouri or from places where they grew up learning to ride horses, and that was not me,” he said — is happy to have had the experience. Revisiting his pictures, he found he not only enjoyed what he saw, but remembered it.

For instance, recalling a photograph taken in Pittsburgh on the Fourth of July (*Slide 1*), he said: “That's the picture that, in retrospect, they might not have published. It's not a classic National Geographic picture. But I'm grateful that they liked it. There's some nice serendipity.” And, he said: “It was a limited color palette. I much prefer pictures with a limited color palette.”

That photo had another happy association as well.

“That was the first day that we had a young intern from Boston working with me on this assignment,” he said. “Usually I worked by myself, especially on domestic stories. But this was the Fourth of July, and that night I was planning on doing fireworks and it was helpful to have multiple camera positions, so they sent out an intern from Washington to be my second shooting position. She was a cute redhead from Boston who was in her graduate program at Yale.”

This time, he made the decision himself.

“And I married her.”



Nathan Benn Pittsfield, Vt.
1973.