



# ROB SMITH

From sunsets of Port Macquarie to the streets of Cambodia, local photographer Rob Smith has a eye for capturing amazing images wherever his passion takes him.

## Tell us about your background ...

I was born and raised in Inverell, and one of my primary school teachers, recognising an artistic bent, encouraged my parents to put me through a correspondence art course for young people, conducted by a school in Westport Connecticut, USA.

After school I obtained an honours science degree through the University of New England, majoring in zoology/ecology. Upon graduating, in an era when there weren't as many jobs available in the natural sciences and eco fields, I 'accidentally' fell into a job as a computer programmer in the electricity industry.

Thirty years later, I'm still working full time in the electricity industry and developing a part-time freelance photography business. I'm a co-owner and founder of the Predatek lure manufacturing company here in Port Macquarie – a business we started in 1986 and which now sells products across Australia and exports overseas.

## > When/where did your interest in photography begin?

My dad died when I was 17, and I started using his 35mm Voigtlander camera. It was then that my interest in brushes, paint and pens started to give way to the camera as a way of expressing myself.

In the 1980s I began freelance writing and photography for national fishing magazines, gaining a following for my stories and the creative style of my photographs. A number were featured as magazine covers.

When we started the lure manufacturing business in a farm shed, it was a natural fit that I covered the product design, photography and marketing areas. These influenced my photography to become more commercial than artistic in approach for some years.

## > What types of photography do you specialise in, and why?

These days, when photographing for myself, I focus mainly on dramatic fine art landscape work, but I have a strong interest in abstract,

nature and photojournalism genres as well. During the past year or so I've become very interested in environmental portraiture – images that capture the character of people in the context of their environment – be that the home, a recreational pursuit or at work. There are not many kinds of photography that don't interest me. I've done corporate photography and commissioned family portraiture, but I'm not a wedding photographer.

## > Did you have any mentors or look up to anyone in the photographic world while you were developing your career?

Early on, I was inspired by the work of famous American landscape photographer Ansel Adams. But I'm self taught, and almost all of my mentors have been hardcovers and softcovers! My library is an important resource, and in recent years I've forsaken books on craft and technique for those that can give me insights into how famous photographers approach their work.

These days I find it more rewarding to try to get inside the heads of other photographers, to see what drives them and what I can take from those drivers.

Until recently I'd never been to a photography course. But in 2009 I attended a number of creative photography workshops in Sydney and Port Macquarie, leading to my accreditation as a judge. I met the eminent Professor Des Crawley, and I'm privileged that he has become a friend and mentor.

## > Where do you draw inspiration from for your work?

There are many answers to that question. As a visual artist, one is influenced consciously and subconsciously by all visual or emotional stimuli that can contribute to the making of images. Looking at and analysing the imagery of other photographers and artists is recommended homework.

Being alive to the emotions and impressions that one experiences in a time or place is also a rich source of inspiration. Translating those intellectual stimuli into images that resonate

with an audience is my goal.

In terms of more tangible inspiration, I love dramatic light, wild weather, the beauty of creation, the power and menace of the ocean, and the breadth and character of the Australian landscape and its people.

Generally I prefer the strong and dramatic to the subtle, though I admire photographers who do 'subtle' well.

## > Have you travelled anywhere interesting because of your photographic work?

Everywhere is interesting! You just have to teach yourself to see it. I'm amused when people say they need to travel to exotic places, because there's nothing interesting in their home patch. Familiarity breeds contempt. But a fresh view of 'home' can do wonders.

Nevertheless, I also enjoy travelling, and outback Australia is a favourite destination, because it's so different to living by the sea. But what a wonderful place is Port Macquarie ... to photograph the sea in its extreme moods. Ours is a wonderful coastline.

I've travelled the length and breadth of NSW on corporate photography assignments.

In 2008 I visited Cambodia and Vietnam with my family, and I particularly enjoyed the freedom to do unchallenged street photography and to make images of another culture.

## > What do you consider to be the best photograph you've taken?

Seriously, that's a bit like asking me to choose between my children! I can't do it! I've made many photographs that are satisfying and special to me for different reasons.

There's a distinction between 'taking' and 'making' photographs. In making a photograph, one puts something of oneself into the image, rather than pointing and clicking and letting the camera do the seeing.

The image 'On a Mission' is special, because it lived on my hard drive for 18 months before I really saw what it could be. I made it in Siem Reap, Cambodia one dusty night with an electronic flash shooting from the side.

All those months later, I converted it and

cropped the colour original to a punchy black and white image that looks for all the world like people engaged in a civil uprising in a third world country. In fact, they were just piled in the back of a truck on their way to town.

Des Crawley once commented that it looked like it may well have been the last photograph that the photographer ever made.

## > Have you held/will you be holding any exhibitions of your work?

Some of my work will be included in the Port Now! exhibition to be held in the Glasshouse in April and May 2010. Exhibiting 'solo' is a future goal.

## > Future plans/projects?

All photographers would like to be famous! I hope to build a reputation for fine art photography that is considered collectible. Other plans include: doing environmental portraiture and commercial photography commissions; judging and speaking engagements; and leveraging my writing and design experience to produce books.

## > Anything else you'd like to add about your work?

Photography is my passion, and I owe so much to my wife and three sons for encouraging me to go for it. It consumes a lot of physical and mind space in our home, and any success I achieve owes much to my family.

The promise of photography is that you can improve continuously as you age while ever you retain the critical faculties and a desire to really see the world around you, rather than just looking at it.

Each week I publish a free email Picture Postcard newsletter of images and commentary, and I invite anyone with an interest in sharing my journey to subscribe. No strings attached.

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> Thanks very much, Rob.