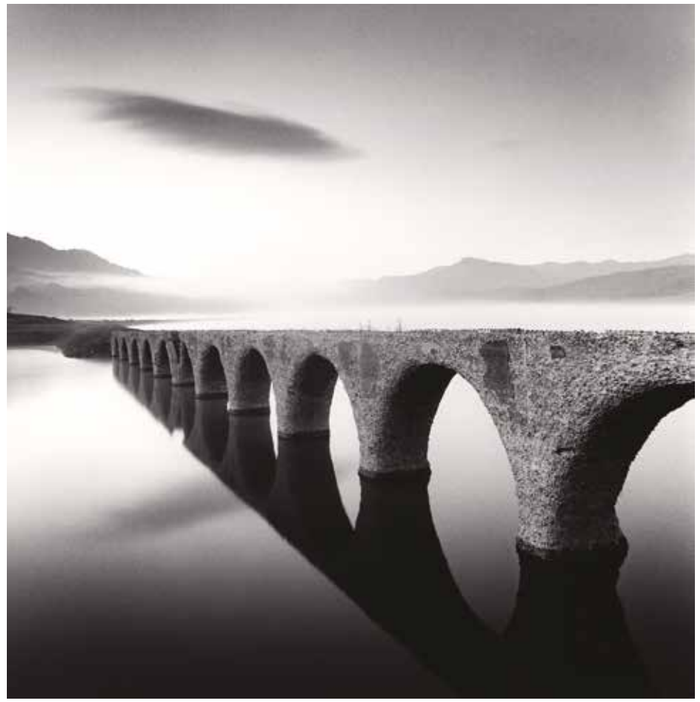


FEATURE

THE WANDERER

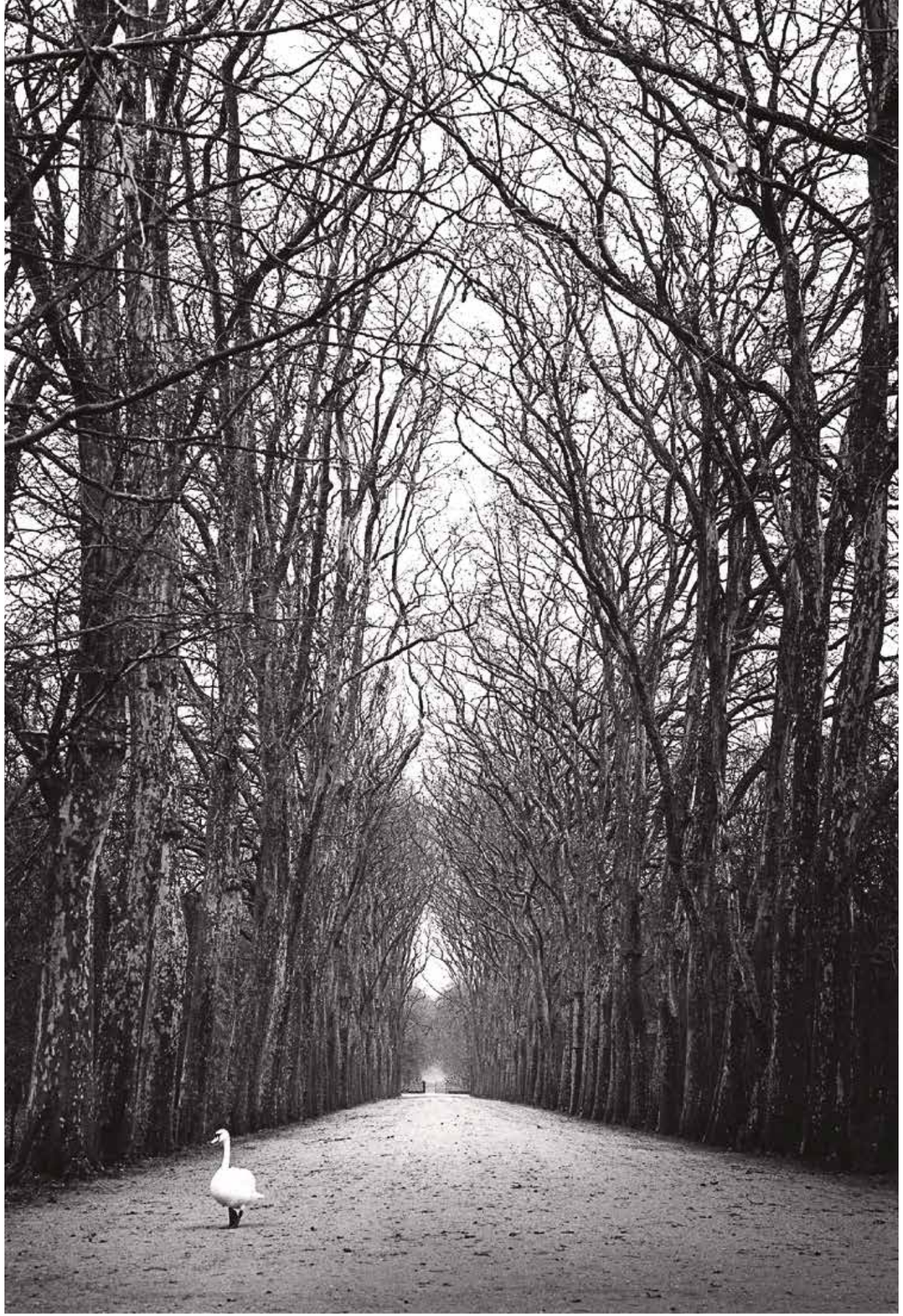
Whether photographing trees, cities or industrial landscapes, **Michael Kenna** takes his own sweet time – much like his exposures. He talks to Graeme Green about spirituality, sheep rustling and spending time with old 'friends'.

I choose to take the slower path, says Michael Kenna. A photographer who's content to do things his own way, Kenna's approach is at odds with the rapid pace of modern travel and technology. But over the past 50 years his slow, contemplative process has established him as one of the world's most renowned landscape photographers.

Born in Widnes in Lancashire, England, Kenna spent seven years studying at a seminary school with the intention of becoming a Catholic priest before art and photography led him down a different path. He has since travelled the world, concentrating especially on France, Italy and Japan. Creating images with his analogue Hasselblad cameras, he often works at night or in the early hours of the morning, using long exposures (up to 12 hours) to produce his distinctive, meditative black & white pictures, from trees and water to industrial buildings and statues.

Since the late 1970s Kenna has lived in the United States. He's currently based in Seattle, Washington. In 2022 he was awarded the decoration of Officier des Arts et des Lettres at Paris Photo. Having recently published a book of tree photos from around the world, 2023 is another busy year, with global exhibitions and more books, including the new *Flesh of Stone* (on statues), another on Venice and a third that continues his exploration of Nazi concentration and deportation camps. ›

Left (top) **Taushubetsu Bridge, Nukabira, Hokkaido, Japan, 2008**
Left (below) **Four Lamps, Fondamenta Zattere, Venice, Italy, 2007**
Opposite **Strolling Swan, Château d'Azay-le-Rideau, France, 1980**



Graeme Green: Trees have been central to so much of your landscape photography – why did it take you so long to put out a book on them?
Michael Kenna: I never considered myself a tree photographer. When Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire, a beautiful estate in France, invited me to hold an exhibition of my tree photographs, I started looking through my archive to see how many tree images I had. It came to over 600, out of a body of work that's around 3,500 images. It's an enormous percentage, which startled me. There were photos from 1973 through to 2022, and they all fit together. The technology I use today is the same as it was 50 years ago.

I grew up in Widnes, an industrial town, but right across the road from my house there was Victoria Park. As kids, we used to go to the park. We made tree 'friends' – we used them as goalposts, as tag places, as places to hide things under tree roots. I always loved trees and I always photographed them.

GG: Why the love affair?
MK: Graphically, they're beautiful, masterful shapes, especially in winter when you see the skeleton. During the summer, I sometimes photograph trees, but I always feel I've become a 'fashion photographer' – I'm photographing the 'clothes'. What I love to see is the structure, the form.

Trees change as I change. I have favourite trees throughout the world that I like to revisit and say 'hello' to. There's one particular tree in Hokkaido, Japan, that I photographed when it was 2ft high and now it's massive. Every other year, I go back and re-photograph it in winter. It's a beautiful experience to see this tree grow, similar to how we see children grow into adults.

GG: What do you look for from trees when you're in a location?
MK: It's hard to articulate. It's a bit like, 'How do you meet somebody and start a conversation?' Why does one particular person interest you and you form a relationship? It's similar with trees. I look for a certain abstract shape, for trees that appeal to me, a resonance, a tree that I can have a relationship and dialogue with.

Left (top) **Domaine de Chaumont-sur-Loire, Study 4, France, 2022**
Left (below) **Blackstone Hill Tree, Hokkaido, Japan, 2020**
Opposite (top) **Philosopher's Tree, Study 3, Biei, Hokkaido, Japan, 2009**
Opposite (below) **Graveside Statue, Study 1, Milan, Italy, 2008**

GG: Hokkaido in Japan is a favourite destination of yours – has it become overrun with photographers? And are you partly to blame?
MK: Yes, I say 'mea culpa' on that. A few trees I've photographed have become very popular in part because I photographed them and published the photographs, and they became well known. There was a tree I called the Kusshаro Lake tree, which was cut down because people were climbing it and sitting in the branches – it was considered a hazard. There was also the Philosopher's Tree in Biei, Hokkaido, a gorgeous tree in the middle of a field, which I would photograph in winter when the field was covered in snow. It became extremely popular – coach-loads of photographers on guided tours of Hokkaido would come to photograph it. The farmer put signs all around the field: 'Please do not enter the field. I have crops.' But people ignored the signs and trampled the crops, so the farmer cut the tree down.

In the past, I was greatly influenced by Eugène Atget, Bill Brandt, Mario Giacomelli and Josef Sudek, and there was a certain adventure to figuring out where their pictures were taken, going to those locations and trying to photograph in a similar manner, as a learning experience. But these days, it's become so easy. People have iPhones and GPS trackers – you see a photo on Instagram and everyone goes.

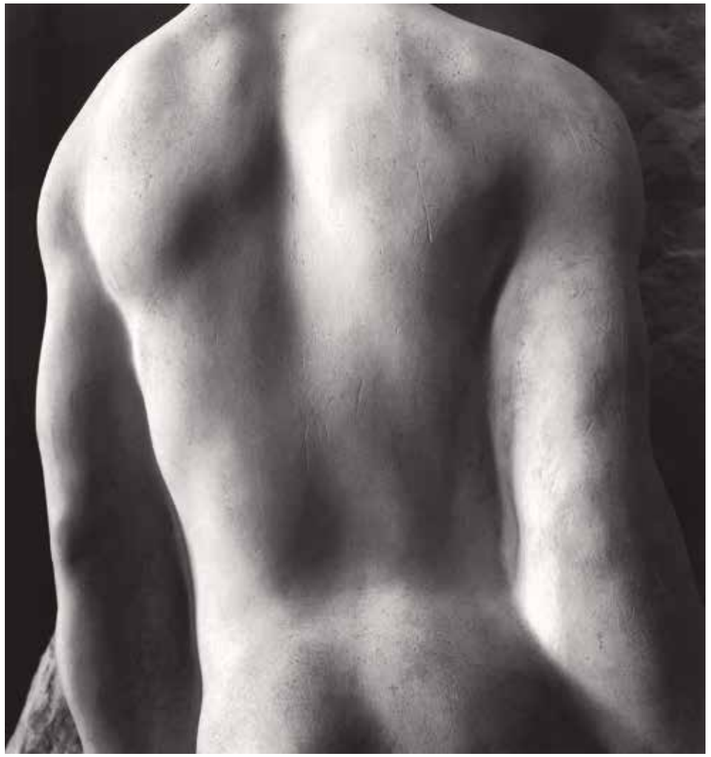
GG: Your new book, *Flesh of Stone*, focuses on statues – do you find statues as interesting as subjects as natural landscapes?
MK: Again, it goes back to this idea of conversation or collaboration. Perhaps when photographing statuary, something that someone else has created, you become an even smaller part in the big equation of who is making this work. I'm completely conscious that I'm just a messenger of what is out there. I don't have to let my big ego get in the way. I'm fine transmitting what I see.

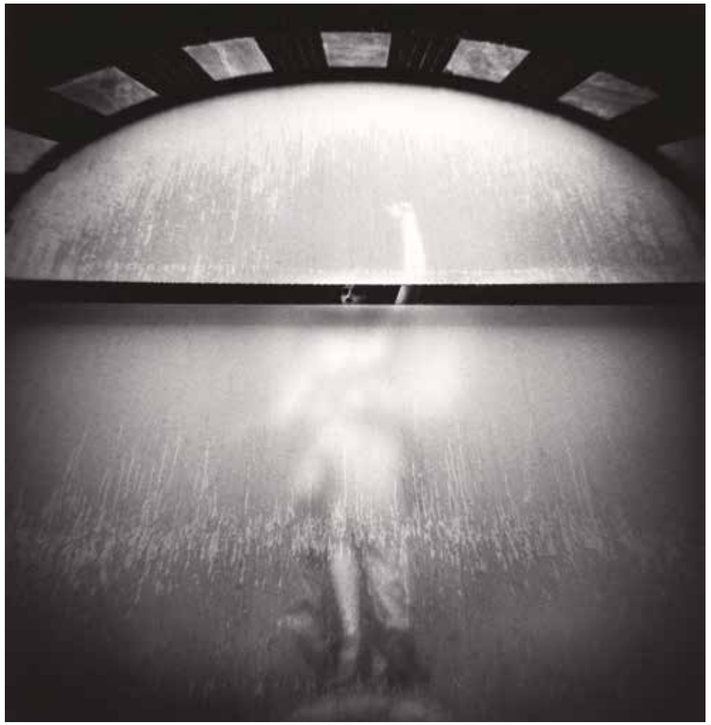
I wander around graveyards, museums and sculpture gardens, occasionally coming across odd pieces of statuary. At this point in my career, I have an archive of some 175,000 negatives. I can go back and build together projects based around works I haven't yet printed from my wanderings around the world.

GG: Later this year you're also putting out a book on Venice – will you be showing a different side to the city?
MK: I've never worried much about trying to be wholly original, different or on the cutting edge. I've always just plied my way in the world, photographing what I wanted to photograph. I photograph in a certain way. It's who I am. I don't pretend to be anything else.

Venice is a truly unique, magnificent, ›

Top **Kusharo Lake Tree, Study 16, Kotan, Hokkaido Japan, 2009** | Above (left) **Threatening Clouds, Tokimaru Beach, Hokkaido, Japan, 2020**
Above (right) **Olivia's Tree, Study 2, Meursault, Bourgogne, France, 2022** | Opposite (top left) **Stone Pine Tunnel, Pineto, Abruzzo, Italy, 2016**
Opposite (top right) **Ponti di Spagna, Bondeno, Ferrara, Italy, 2018** | Opposite (below) **Grandfather Oak, Study 45, Beaverton, Oregon, USA, 2021**





mysterious, glorious, gorgeous location that I've been going to since the 1970s. Hopefully, some of the new images will be a bit different from what other people have photographed. I managed to get to a few new places outside of Venice: Chioggia, Marghera and many of the smaller islands.

Where I am in my career, it's important to me to wrap up these projects I've worked on throughout my life.

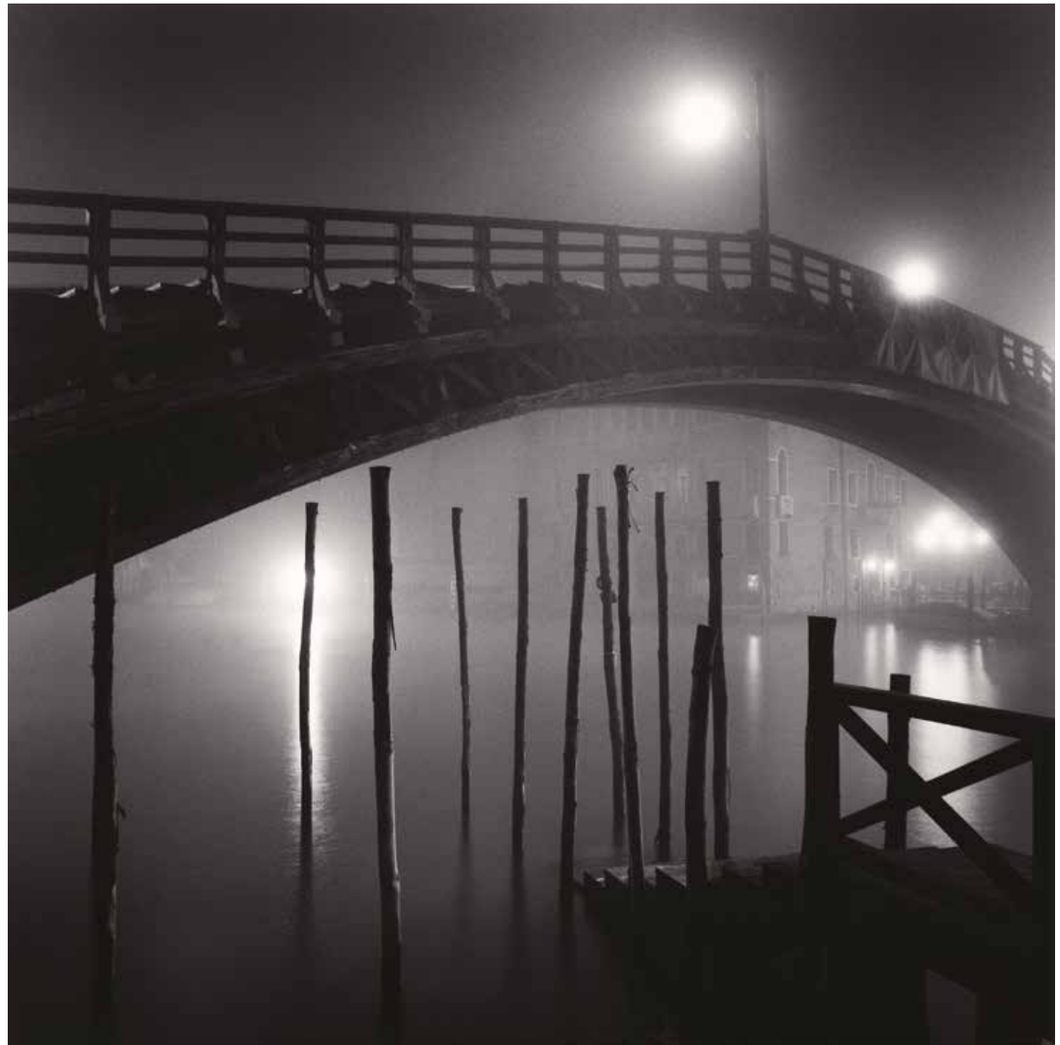
GG: What new projects might you work on?
MK: I'm not so inclined any more to go to new places all the time. I find my interests are more in reconnecting and deepening existing relationships. Rather than try to make new 'friends', I prefer to spend time with my established 'friends'. There are many parts of the world I've never been to and probably will never get to.

I'm circling back to some projects, including one I did on concentration camps in Nazi Europe. Last year, I photographed at the Rivesaltes Memorial in the south of France. During the era of the Vichy government, it became a transit camp for Jews destined for Drancy and then Auschwitz. There will be a book published on that.

GG: You work with very long exposures – how much do you visualise the results and how much is each photo a mystery until you see and develop it?
MK: In the 1980s I found what I was getting was predictable. Ansel Adams talks about knowing ahead of time in his mind's eye what the photograph will look like. I've always battled against that, almost doing the exact opposite. I don't want to know how it's going to come out.

GG: Do you often spend 10 or more hours waiting for an exposure only for the result to be a disaster?
MK: Yes, most times. I'll leave cameras out, and I haven't a clue what's going to happen, what planes will go by, clouds, water, vehicles, whether the wind will shift the tripod... It's all part of the package. I feel like a dinosaur, but I still use silver gelatin photography. It's slow and painstaking. You have to have a lot of patience. It's unpredictable. The results rarely happen the way you think they're going to happen. The process takes forever, and I love every second of it. ›

Left (top) **Musée Rodin, Study 7, Paris, France, 2021**
Left (below) **Hidden Figure, Cimitero Monumentale, Milan, Italy, 2008**
Opposite (top left) **Night Ferry Departure, Calais, Pas-de-Calais, France, 2000**
Opposite (top right) **Pont des Arts, Study 3, Paris, France, 1987**
Opposite (below) **Ponte dell'Accademia, Venice, Italy, 2007**



Chapel Cross Power Station, Study 6, Dumfries, Scotland, 1986

‹ I have an iPhone and I'm fully conscious that it takes better pictures than my Hasselblads at this point. But just because you have a car that can go 200mph, it doesn't mean you have to do that. You can saunter along and look out of the window too. I choose to take the slower path. I like to saunter around. I like to see what's here and there. Knowing where the destination is, you're destined to go in a straight line. I like to go on diversions, finding things, making accidents.

I'm never sure I have a photograph, which means I'm always trying different angles and different apertures to see what happens. With digital, you have the picture immediately. It's just not my way.

Huangshan Mountains, Study 1, Anhui, China, 2008

GG: Have you ever seen anything unexplained at night?
MK: I haven't seen any UFOs yet. I keep looking for them.

GG: Do you ever get into trouble wandering around at night?
MK: When I was photographing a nuclear power plant in Dumfries, Scotland, back in the 1980s, bright headlights came hurtling down this country road. Somebody jumped out and said, 'What are you doing here?' I explained I was photographing the power station. Gradually, he calmed down. He said, 'I thought you were rustling my sheep'. He was a local farmer and all his sheep were in front of the power station.

GG: You nearly went into the priesthood – is there a spiritual element to your pictures?
MK: We're all spiritual creatures. My faith has changed in many ways. I've photographed Buddhism and Hinduism. I've explored life, religion and spirituality.

In Huangshan, also known as the Yellow Mountains, in China, I was on the top of part of the mountain range, wandering around in thick fog and rain for hours. The clouds parted. There was a miraculous scene that you could call 'heaven' or 'utopia'. It was the embodiment of all my basic beliefs: that all we see is not all there is. I was able to take a few photos before I had to change the film.

It was a great lesson. In photography, we have to appreciate what's in front of us. It's not all about the photographer, but a collaboration between the photographer and what's in front of us. To acknowledge what is amazing, astonishing, beautiful and powerful, then make a document and transmit that to somebody else, is the essential mission of the photographer – or this photographer, anyway.

▶ *Trees/Arbres* by Michael Kenna is out now, published by Skira Paris (skira.net), price £32.
▶ *Flesh of Stone* is on sale soon, published by Editions Noir (noir-editions.com), priced €89.

Michael's new book on Venice will be published by Skira in the spring.

Another new book, on Camp de Rivesaltes, will be published by the Memorial de Rivesaltes (memorialcamprivesaltes.eu) to coincide with Michael's exhibition in March.

▶ For more on Michael's work, including prints, books and upcoming exhibitions, see michaelkenna.com.
▶ Follow @michaelkennaphoto and facebook.com/michaelkennaphoto.