



# Straight from the heart

A love affair with New Mexico began 20 years ago for **Craig Varjabedian** and he has been there ever since, documenting the landscape and the people who inhabit it. Elizabeth Roberts goes in search of the motivation behind the man



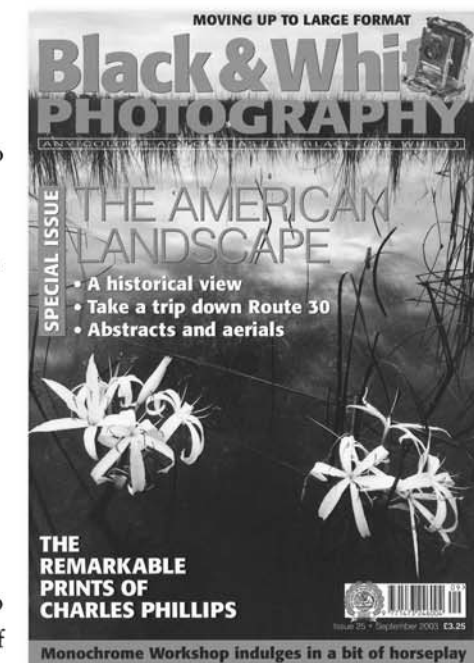
**E**VEN BEFORE TALKING with Craig Varjabedian, I felt I had a pretty good insight into the kind of man he is. His photographs say a lot, not only about his subject matter, but about the thinking behind the lens. I was curious to see whether my detective work was correct.

Varjabedian's love affair with New Mexico began shortly after he graduated from the University of Michigan in 1979 with a BA in photography. On his way home he happened to drive through New Mexico and spent a night sleeping in his car on the Santa Fe plaza. A car not being the most comfortable place to sleep, he was awake at dawn and experienced the sunrise over the Sangre de Cristo mountains behind the city. It was to be a turning point in his life.

Several years later he came across an exhibition of photographs by Paul Caponigro entitled *The Wise Silence*. The images were of New Mexico and confirmed for Craig his growing conviction that he should go there to live. I was curious to know what it was that drew him. 'Most artists that come here are mesmerised by the quality of the light. There is no bad light here, it's incredible,' he says. 'And, of course, the people, we are a real melting pot – and thus the history – Santa Fe is the oldest city in the USA.'

This gave me a clue to something I had noticed in his work – the indivisibility between the landscape and those that inhabit it. Varjabedian does not describe himself as a landscape photographer, although the

**Left** White sands study no.1, Alamogordo, New Mexico 2000



**Right** Children dancers, Holy Innocents Day, Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico 1997



◀ landscape plays a vital part in his photographs. 'Recent images that I've shot have included dogs, cars, people, or the things they leave behind.'

### Influences

It's always fascinating to trace the development of a photographer, to see who influenced them, and how. I plied Craig with questions. 'My first real connection to the world of the lens,' he says, 'was with

**Below** Moonrise over Penitente Morada, dusk, late autumn, New Mexico 1991



Ansel Adams.' A good start, you might say. 'I met him at the age of 15 when he had an exhibition at a gallery in Birmingham, Michigan. I now see it as a foretelling of what would happen in my life.' Later, he did some workshops with Adams. 'I came away from them with an understanding of what commitment to photography really meant – I had seen a glimpse of it.'

If this encounter was about a deep understanding of what it means to be a photographer, his next great influence was of a more practical nature. 'At university I was taught by a guy called Phil Davis. He really taught me the craft,' he explains. 'He believed that the ideas of the artist should come from within. Years later I really understood why he taught in this way. The aesthetics were put in the background but what he did was give the students a 'toolbox' from which they could take off.'

The third impact on Craig's development came from Paul Caponigro. Having seen the exhibition *The Wise Silence* Craig got to know Paul and later worked in the darkroom with him. 'I learned from him the power of capturing emotion in the picture,' he says.

Craig is a dedicated monochrome worker, strongly believing that the medium abstracts



**Left** Clouds and approaching storm, Carrizozo, New Mexico 1986

the reality it portrays. 'It gives things a meta-reality,' he says. He uses an Ebony view camera because of its immaculate construction. 'It's like a Stradivarius,' he says. He uses Zeiss Protar lenses, mostly over 100 years old. 'Old glass defines space better. New lenses make the image too "real".' He is adamant about keeping his equipment simple, always using Kodak Tri-X because he likes the kind of image it produces, and likewise he sticks to Ilford paper.

### Maturity

Having moved to New Mexico, which is still his home today, Varjabedian set about his first major project entitled *The Morada Photographic Survey*. What started out as a documentation of the *moradas* or chapel houses of the Penitente Brotherhood, turned out to be much more. 'Georgia O'Keefe once said that the Catholic Church is spread like a shroud across Mexico. It is impossible to separate the Church and the State,' he says. 'I'm not interested in organised religion but I have a sense of wanting to connect with

something greater than myself.' Here his explanation tails off, it's not something he wants to define clearly but you feel its roots lie somewhere in the impetus he felt to move to this state, and in this first important project.

His love of New Mexico has not diminished in the years he has spent living there. Occasionally, he tells me, he goes away for a week or so as a way of seeing this

**Below** Sunflowers after rainstorm, Los Luceros, Alcalde, New Mexico 1998



**Right Archie West and  
Buddy, San Marcos,  
New Mexico 2001**



◀ extraordinary landscape afresh. 'If you see something every day you stop seeing it,' he says. It seems unlikely that his feelings for the place will ever become dulled because his awareness is acute. 'In New Mexico the sky is ever present,' he says. 'It plays a huge part in the landscape. I always marvel at the clouds and the sunsets.' Skies are crucial in his work – either by their presence or absence – daring compositions in which the sky dominates with

just a slither of land to counterbalance it. Alternatively, when the skies are bland he cuts them out of the composition entirely. 'Plain skies are just empty to me,' he says. 'I don't have any rules of composition.'

He is currently working on a book of images of New Mexico which is part of what he considers an 'ongoing journey' of work. 'I've been photographing here for 20 years and I feel I should bring it together. The pictures say what I feel about the place. I hope later on, towards the end of my life, that I will make another statement about it. It's the first place I've lived that I yearn for when I'm away from it. I never want to leave it.'

Feeling rather pleased by the confirmation of my analysis of Craig Varjabedian, I quickly scribble down a phrase he uses while talking to me about his work: 'I believe that you should photograph with your heart and edit with your head'. It seems to encapsulate both the man and his work. ○

● To see more of Craig Varjabedian's photography log on to his website at [www.craigvarjabedian.com](http://www.craigvarjabedian.com)

### Workshops in the USA

Craig Varjabedian runs the New Mexico Photography Field School which offers photography workshops inspired by the history, character and beauty of New Mexico. Under incredible skies with beautiful sunsets the photography field workshops immerse participants in photographing a place like no other. Past workshop offerings have included *Finding Georgia O'Keeffe: Photographing the Painter's Landscape*, and *Ranchers, Ramblers and Renegades: Photographing Faces and Places in New Mexico*.

Readers of *Black & White Photography* can save 15% on tuition at the New Mexico Photography Field School. To request a catalogue and review current workshop offerings and news visit [www.photofieldschool.com](http://www.photofieldschool.com), e-mail [info@photofieldschool.com](mailto:info@photofieldschool.com) or write to The New Mexico Photography Field School, 903 West Alameda No 115, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501, USA, or telephone 00 1 (505) 983 2934.