

Words on pictures

Shedding light on the photographer's vision

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but sometimes there's more to an intriguing image than meets the eye.

That's the premise behind a new book by Craig Varjabedian '89 (MFA, photography). In *Four & Twenty Photographs: Stories*



Craig Varjabedian '89

from *Behind the Lens* (University of New Mexico Press), the Santa Fe, N.M., fine-art photographer presents 24 images and explains how they came to be.

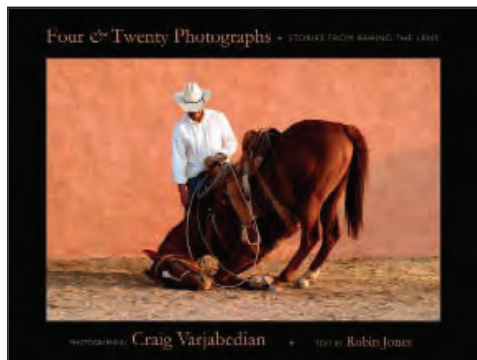
This is not a technical manual; Varjabedian rarely mentions aperture

settings, shutter speed or such. Rather, he talks about the emotional background of his portraits and landscapes, the human content, history, physical circumstances, insights and other factors that culminate in "something wonderful." Nor is Varjabedian the only narrator; many others contribute commentary, and writer Robin Jones co-authored the book.

His notion that people are interested in these back stories dates from early in his career.

"When I was a graduate student at RIT, I saw Paul Caponigro's exhibit 'The Wise Silence' at the George Eastman House," Varjabedian recalls. "At a presentation, he talked about the stories behind the photos and people were mesmerized."

When Varjabedian gives presentations on his own work now, people invariably ask for that kind of background. The journals he began keeping when he was an under-



"Cottonwood Trees No. 5" by Craig Varjabedian '89

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grad at the University of Michigan help him recall the details.

Varjabedian developed an early interest in photography and vowed to become a fine-art photographer at age 15 after meeting Ansel Adams. Although he grew up in Canada and Michigan, "When I was a student in Rochester, I found that the weather was not very kind to me."

He moved to Santa Fe in 1985 and completed his graduate thesis, *Places of Power*, a study of locales in the West that have drawn people throughout history. (Professor Richard Zakia '56 was his thesis adviser.)

The landscape suited him, he says. "I felt like I had come home."

Life as a full-time artist was not always easy, but Varjabedian remained committed to his decision "to do the kind of photography I was interested in." With the help of his wife, Kathy, "I found my place in the world."

Varjabedian was hired to teach photography classes for retreats at the fabled Ghost

Ranch. In 1986 he founded the New Mexico Photography Field School. In 1991, he worked as a darkroom assistant helping Paul Caponigro produce his book, *Masterworks from Forty Years*.

He has won grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the McCune Charitable Foundation, the New Mexico Endowment for the Humanities and the Peter and Madeleine Martin Foundations. His works have been featured in national magazines and Varjabedian co-produced an Emmy-winning PBS documentary related to his work with KNME-TV, Albuquerque. His photos have been widely exhibited across the United States and acquired by prestigious museums. He has published two books and two limited edition portfolios of his photos. His current project is photographing Ghost Ranch for a book to be published in fall 2008.

"I am grateful for the incredible support I have received for my work over the years," he says. "I am fortunate to be able to photograph, teach and write in order to answer a powerful voice that compels me to make images."

Kathy Lindsley

See www.craigvarjabedian.com for more information about Varjabedian's work.