



Craig Varjabedian making a photograph, New Mexico 1998. Photo: Cindy Lane.

Craig Varjabedian has the eye of the poet

Craig Varjabedian's camera captures the wondrous beauty of the West



by Nareg Seferian

SANTA FE, New Mexico - He was in his mid-teens, taking pictures for the high school newspaper. One day, they had to go into town for a shoot when two colleagues got into an argument. Craig Varjabedian didn't want any part of it, so he decided to walk the 20 or so miles home.

It was snowing that day, outside of Detroit, but Craig noticed something on his way: a gallery, and a man with a thick white beard hanging some pictures on the wall inside. The man noticed this curious young onlooker, and gestured for him to come inside.

Young Craig was mesmerized with what he saw. Mountains, rivers, trees... all of these moments captured by the lens. The old man got him into a conversation, and they were soon chatting away about cameras and photography.

That old man turned out to be Ansel Adams.

Craig Varjabedian was born in Windsor, Ontario. The family moved across the river to Detroit in his early teens. Although he didn't grow up in an Armenian community, Varjabedian is very aware of his Armenian heritage. He speaks fondly of his grandfather, who would lovingly



Above: Craig Varjabedian. Above right: Tree in bloom. Craig Varjabedian noticed this tree in bloom while driving one day. It sits just underneath a cliff where the Los Alamos National Laboratory's half-mile linear-accelerator and neutron-scanning center is located. He had to take special permission to photograph the tree, and the blossoms fell just two days afterwards.

call him Krikor, and reveres him for having overcome the hardships on his path from Garin (Erzerum) to a new, at times difficult life in Canada.

Varjabedian bought his first camera with money saved by mowing lawns and was fortunate to gain some experience through his high-school newspaper.

Later he studied art, graphic design, and photography at the University of Michigan. Though Varjabedian was interested in photography early on, that chance



A very young Craig Varjabedian with a Diana camera. Photo: Suren Varjabedian.



photography



Pete the donkey did not make for an easy photograph. “He would not hold still,” Craig Varjabedian recalls. “He’d back up a few steps and then go forward a few steps... I’d try to anticipate when he would settle down and get ready for him, and then he’d move his rump toward the camera.” Despite an obstinate subject, the final picture made for an appropriate commemoration of the bicentennial of the Martinez Hacienda in Taos.

New Mexico, I felt, for the first time, like I had come home. I have an adopted, extended family here.” He has been living in Santa Fe with his wife and daughter for over 20 years now.

While the Southwest itself is an inspiration, Varjabedian credits Ansel Adams, of course, as a major influence of his work, and also Paul Caponigro, a local Santa Fe photographer, under whom he worked as a studio assistant. They had met back in Rochester and then, by chance, once again in New Mexico.

All of these chance events, these coincidences big and small, have had a major impact on Varjabedian’s worldview. “I feel blessed to be able to do what I like to do and make a living while I’m at it,” he says.

Varjabedian’s book, *Four and Twenty Photographs: Stories from Behind the Lens*, published last year, features some of his best work and includes texts, co-written by Robin Jones, describing the ideas, settings, and inspirations behind his photographs. Another collection is planned for release next year.

But what is Varjabedian most proud of? “My daughter,” he immediately responds. “You can intellectually understand how great it is to create a human being, but until you have a child of your own, you can’t fully comprehend it. They are miracles, unfolding every day.”

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meeting with Ansel Adams, one of the biggest names and most celebrated photographers of the 20th century, served as a seminal experience.

“The idea of being able to go out there and taking all these beautiful pictures just stole my heart,” Varjabedian recalls. “Thirty-five years later, I am still on that same path, on this romantic quest. And the world, the universe, has been pretty

agreeable,” he adds with a smile.

Varjabedian describes his work as stemming from a “traditional, American West Coast photography background.” The formal, technical aspects of organizing his compositions follow this model, and he even still uses regular film and develops the pictures “the old-fashioned way.” But Varjabedian’s subjects may not necessarily always fit in with this. For example,

black-and-white photography is very much part of his style, “although some images cry to be in color,” he admits.

Varjabedian studied further at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York and, upon the advice of a friend, sought to finish his graduate work by carrying out a thesis project in Santa Fe. “Ever since I arrived, I became enchanted with this place.” he says. “In



It took months of visits, taking notes and diagrams, and consulting astronomical charts before the right conditions for this photograph were determined. Craig Varjabedian describes the moment he first noticed the sight one wintry April day: “Spellbound, I watched the moon rise over the chapel. I followed its path with my eyes, its light flickering through the pockets of clear sky. And then, for an instant, time froze.” Some months later, Varjabedian caught that instant on camera.