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KARL P. KOENIG, 1938-2012



Karl Koenig Holds a Photogravure
© New Grounds Gallery

In this Issue

- Karl P. Koenig, 1938-2012
- Anthotypes - Explore the Dark-room in your Garden
- A Letter from Eric Joseph, V.P @ Freestyle Photographic Supplies
- Ray Nelson's Intro Workshop Series
- 2012 Interactive Workshop Schedule
- February 2012 Newsletter Specials
- 4th Annual Handcrafted Photography Contest Call for Entries

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KARL P. KOENIG, 1938-2012

The job of a photographer is to narrow the focus, to sharpen the image by excluding the world from his viewfinder until only his subject remains, guiding the viewer's eye to what the photographer wants him to see.



Karl at Gallatin, Montana, 2002
©Anthony Mournian

As Sherlock Holmes says in *"The Adventure of the Sign of the Four,"* *"When you have excluded all possibilities, then what remains — however improbable — must be the truth,"* the photographer begins his photograph as he picks up his camera and looks into the eye piece. In that moment his world of truth narrows to what he can see within the four corners of the ground glass, allowing him to hone in on a single face among a multitude in a panorama, or on the vein of a leaf under the eye of an electron microscope.

Excluding all else until only his subject remained

was only one of Karl Koenig's talents. He was an accomplished painter with a well polished sense of color, and he had an artist's eye in picking out detail from the visual cacophony of the world around us.

We met in Cuba on a [Norman McGrath](#) workshop to photograph the architecture of a crumbling Havana. The uproar of [Elian Gonzales'](#) tragic and lonely escape from Castro's island had died down from the year before and Cuba welcomed visitors from every corner of the world.

I came from California; Karl from New Mexico. Others in our group were from as far away as the U.K. and Germany.



Opera House, Havana, Cuba
©Karl Koenig

Our common goal was to preserve the dying architecture of this once vibrant vacation playland ninety miles off the coast of Florida.



Placing the Plate for Photogravure
©New Grounds Gallery

Passing through Immigration at Jose Marti International Airport, I felt the Cuban Customs official's pre-9/11 sense of suspicion and wariness of yet another invader from the North. I was shuttled off to a hotel twenty-something miles outside Havana, to await the start of the workshop in the days to follow.



Arena, North Dakota
©Karl Koenig

Karl arrived later that day. We shared an Ernest Hemingway favorite, a minty Mojito, and settled into an afternoon of getting acquainted with small talk

about our photographic journeys.

I learned Karl had been born in upstate New York, contracted rheumatic fever as a child, and been confined to bed for months as his doctors fought to save his life. His universe was his bedroom; his world a pile of books and a box of drawing supplies. Not by choice, his focus was narrowed to what he could see around him, and hear of sounds coming up the stairwell from the floor below him.

In those many months of recuperation, more than learning the names of colors, Karl learned how to use them. He taught himself how to draw, then to paint. He was

adept at watercolor, but preferred the richness of oil paints. He connected the dots among the wide ranging facts he found in books, and

began to put together a view of the world he carried with him throughout his life.

By the time I met him he had been a scholar at the Trinity College in Connecticut, then at the University of Washington in Seattle. Later he taught at Stanford University, then became a professor of psychology and psychiatry and the head of a clinic at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

Born in 1938, by 1989 he had had enough of the world of academia and decided to change focus. He retired from his post at the university and over the next two years took classes in photography and printmaking.

While he enjoyed the artistic possibilities of printmaking using enlarged negatives, he found the two step process of making the negatives tedious. He considered it



Wall Street
©Karl Koenig

a waste of time, energy and materials, and wondered if it would be possible to create his own positive image using an enlarged

interpositive.

Using the concept of a kindergarten's crayon resist, and

combining it with the use of the chemistry in a Gumoil Bichromate image, Karl realized his dream. He was able, with a good deal of elbow grease and not a small amount of good luck, to create what he called a Gumoil print.

Gumoil is a polychromatic photographic print-making process based on black and white film which Karl created in 1990.

Gumoil prints are reminiscent of the early days of photography, exhibiting

looks similar to gum bichromate, oil painting and the bromoil process. Karl refined his Gumoil process



Arbeit Mach Frei, Auschwitz
©Karl Koenig

until he was able to turn black and white images on film, paper or plastic into uniquely beautiful monochrome and polychrome gumoil prints.

Perhaps his most important work, or surely the one most widely known, is his series of photographs taken on multiple trips to Europe to document buildings and grounds of the ten remaining camps of Nazi Germany. Many of those images were included in a 2011 University of New Mexico volume, *Fragments: Architecture of the Holocaust, an Artist's Journey Through the Camps*. With a Foreword by Ruth Franklin, who has studied the relationship between the artistic beauty coming forth from the ashes of the Holocaust and the horror of the Camps, the images and text rivet the reader's attention.

In 2004 Karl's Gumoils of the Camps were on exhibit at the Holocaust Museum in Houston. According to Karl's wife, Frances, "Visitors stood silently for long periods of time in front of each image, lost to their poetry and their pain. Instead of turning



Dissection Table - Theresienstadt

away, each observer was captured to feel and to think about the image and its meaning to them."

Gumoils are created from a black and white positive transparency film or translucent sheet usually originating from a smaller black and white negative. This bigger positive is then contact printed under intense ultra violet radiation such as sunlight, on 100% cotton paper which has first been hand-coated with a solution of light sensitive, unpigmented gum Arabic.



A Passing Farmer Averts His Gaze from Birkenau
©Karl Koenig

Click here. . ., to watch a short movie of "Handcoating Paper."

In 2005 Karl traveled to Melbourne, Australia to give three Gumoil workshops at Ellie Young's Gold Street Gallery. He also made a presentation of his work at the Institute of Photographic Technology at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. The presentation was an invitational conference

called The Diversity of Photographic Imaging. In 2006 Karl published a book of photogravure images on the Holocaust/gumoil work for a publication called Double Exposure. An image from Karl's museum exhibition, "There is no Why Here," appeared in the second edition of

Joseph Ciaglia's book, "Introduction to Digital Photography" a college text. The exhibit traveled to multiple museums. When it returned to Texas, Karl sold the entire collection of images to the Holocaust Museum Houston following a three-month run in Houston in 2004.

To watch a 20 minute movie of the making of "There is No Why Here" exhibit, click here.

...

Karl's insatiable curiosity and thirst to learn another Alternative Process led him to Photogravure. While he maintained a fully equipped studio near his home, he began working with New Grounds Print Workshop and Gallery in Albuquerque. New Grounds, like the Photographers' Formulary, is dedicated to providing artists with a professional, informative, safer and well-equipped environment for the creation of fine prints while promoting the artists and exhibiting their work.

Photogravure was used by Edward S. Curtis in his monumental series, The American Indian. In

Curtis' time the plates used in printing were of copper sheeting. Copper's gone now, replaced by "plates" made of high tensile plastic. The chemistry, originally highly toxic, has also morphed into something more user and environmentally friendly.

Karl gave a shorthand explanation of how he produced his print of "Artichokes," using what he termed, "the obsessive gravure

process." In every way it is a blend of old and new technology to achieve stunning results. He observed, "I have been interested in the architecture of fruit, vegetables, and creatures for some time. Such things as fish in

Barcelona markets, flowers and fruit from

our yard, and visits to various farmers markets yield some interesting images.

In the case of the artichokes I did what I frequently do except this time I cut them in halves with a very sharp knife when fresh.... then let them dry cut side up for a couple of weeks. I placed them in various numbers and poses on my scanner bed with a piece of black plastic on legs (to create a non-squashing background) over them

and then scanned at high res. Then I opened the scanned image in Photoshop and cleaned all



SS Water Supply for Fire Brigade Disguised as a Swimming Pool at Auschwitz
©Karl Koenig



Artichokes
©Karl Koenig

further adjustments on b/w and printed as a transparency of a size for the final gravure. Then I exposed on a solar plate using the u.v. table. I developed the burned plate, trimmed it, filed the edges, inked it



Cowgirl, Las Vegas, New Mexico
©Karl Koenig

up and wiped it off. then I ran it through a manual, high pressure in-taglio press on damp Hot Press Fabriano 140 lb water color paper.”

Does it sound like a lot of work? It is, and you can see an example of how Karl did it in this short movie. [Click here to watch the movie.](#) . . .

In 2010 New Grounds hosted an exhibit of their resident artists’ works. The gallery, “Sold more prints opening night than at any other opening in its history,” said Karl, “In all, more than forty gravures and gumoils were sold.”

The show was a great success, and a strong indicator of the resurgence of the Photogravure Alternative Process, as well as the growing popularity of Karl’s own process, Gumoil. Envious colleagues in the gallery were kidding Karl that he had caused a local shortage of red dot stickers at the stationery outlets. One simply muttered, “Obscene.” as he looked at Karl, the show and all the “Sold” dots.

Karl passed away January 18, 2012 at the age of 73.

Biography: Karl Koenig was a writer, lecturer and photographer living in Albuquerque, NM. He was the author of the [Gumoil Photographic Printing](#) book. Karl had written articles on Gumoil printing, Van Dyke printing and alternative photographic processes for several different magazines.

With his groundbreaking work with Gumoil he became recognized as an international expert, teaching workshops and seminars in England, and across the United States. His exhibitions included



Burnham Beech
©Karl Koenig

the University of New Mexico Art Museum, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, Capitol Art Collection, Santa Fe State Capitol Building, Instituto de Artes Graficas de Oaxaca (Foto Centro

Manuel Bravo) as well as Ellie Young’s Gold Street Gallery in Melbourne, Australia, and more recently at the Albuquerque Photographers’ Gallery and New Grounds Gallery, also in Albuquerque.

Karl's website can be seen at <http://www.gumoil.com>



Two prints of a Grain Elevator at Sterling, North Dakota, showing the varying effects possible with variations of color
©Karl Koenig