

# Kenro Izu: *Photographs along the Silk Road*

The Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington D.C. is currently presenting twenty-five large-format platinum prints by Kenro Izu, the contemporary photographer renowned for his images of sacred sites around the world. The Sackler exhibition focuses upon Buddhist monasteries, pilgrim shrines, and ancient cities along the Silk Road. The photographs record the architecture and landscapes that Izu encountered upon his travels, yet transcend the merely documentary through a remarkable clarity of conceptual focus and exquisite technique. Whether focusing upon the caves at Kizil or the peak of Mount Kailash, Izu seeks to emphasize the spiritual resonance he finds at sites that have been worshiped over millennia.

Asian Art >  
General

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By Debra Diamond

Kenro Izu has been drawn to ancient stone monuments since his trip to Egypt in 1979 to see and photograph the pyramids. He perceives in such monuments a charged atmosphere. In order to record that palpable aura within his photographs, Izu has developed a photographic practice that emphasizes deliberation and allows an extraordinary range of grey tones. In contrast to most modern photographers who take scores of shots on a single outing, Izu chooses each view and shoots each image only after very careful consideration. Because of the size of the large format negatives (these measure 35,6 x 50,8 cm; the same size as the final prints), he takes only eighty plates on trips that on the average last a month. And since Izu typically makes two exposures of each view, he has only forty opportunities to capture the spiritual essence of the sites he encounters. Izu finds that the process is not a limitation, but rather a means for the expression of an intensely focused aesthetic project.

Izu's experience photographing Lamayuru Monastery illustrates his working method and artistic goals. One morning in 1999, Izu and his guide reached a mountain road above Lamayuru Monastery in Tibet (image below). After unloading his equipment and setting up a large-format camera, a process that takes a full half hour, Izu began his wait for light conditions that would bring out the monastery's spiritual essence. Ten minutes before sunset, a golden light fell upon its stone buildings and the surrounding valley was cast into a deep shadow. It was only at this moment that Izu photographed the monastery. In his composition, light and shadow create wedge-shaped masses of greys and blacks that emphasize the rugged and inhospitable immensity of the mountainous landscape. At its centre, the gentle sprawl of the monastery radiates with an almost ethereal luminescence.

Izu finds his inspiration not only within the spiritual aura of sites, but also in the work of photographers like Samuel Bourne and Francis Frith. In the nineteenth century, these pioneers of early photography travelled from Europe to Asia to document its topography and monuments with large-format view cameras, which can produce images of startling detail and clarity. In his preference for the platinum print, Izu reveals another affinity with nineteenth-century photographers. Platinum prints are photographs made with a process that uses ferrous salts instead of silver salts. For the process, a negative – which must be the same size as the desired image – is exposed to light and contact-printed onto paper coated with a light-sensitive solution of platinum chloride and ferrous salts. The ferric oxalate in the solution reacts with ultraviolet light to take the platinum particles out of the solution and bring them into the fibres of the paper. This creates a pho-

tograph with a subtle depth and a matte surface that unifies tones and surface in a manner quite unlike that of the silver print, in which the image remains within an emulsion layer atop the paper's surface. Platinum prints are particularly valued for their almost unlimited range of grey tones.

On his most recent trip to Tibet, Izu had a profound experience that has committed him even further to the exploration of nature's spiritual power. In order to photograph Mount Kailash, the eternally snow-clad peak sacred to Buddhists, Hindus, and Jains, Izu travelled for six days in a jeep along a rough road. Upon reaching the pilgrimage route that circles the mountain's base and transferring his equipment onto a yak, Izu began his search for the ideal vantage point from which to photograph the peak. On the frigid morning of the third day, Izu woke before dawn and set up his camera. Snow had fallen the night before and a fierce wind had arisen. When dawn came, a shaft of sunlight fell upon the mountain and illuminated the snow gusting about its peak, while the *mani* (jewel) stones piled up by devotees to commemorate

their pilgrimages around the sacred mountain remained shrouded in darkness. By exploiting a tonal range that extends from jet black to brilliant white, Izu creates a remarkable effect of luminosity and captures the dazzling radiance of Kailash. Izu considers the image of Kailash to convey the essence of his project, the evocation of a sacred resonance.

Kenro Izu was born in Osaka, Japan in 1940. Izu started photographing as a tool for documenting specimens of a medical nature in high school, as it was his dream to become a doctor. In 1968 he entered Nihon University, College of Art, Tokyo, where he formally studied photography. After a brief visit to New York City in 1970, Izu decided to reside permanently there. In 1983, he began to use the platinum technique of print making with a custom-made 36 x 51 cm camera. Kenro Izu says: 'Over my 22-year enchantment with stone monuments, I have made photographs in Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Mexico, Chile (Easter Island), England, Scotland, France, Burma, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Cambodia. To capture the spirituality I feel in stone remains the density of atmosphere that embraces them, I can think of no other medium than platinum prints made by contact printing with large format negatives.'

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Lamayuru  
Monastery, Ladakh,  
1999, Platinum Print



Courtesy of the artist