

Michael Penn

# StreetWitness

By Amanda Quintenz-Fiedler

The photography of Michael Penn is rooted in a deep understanding and awareness of his surroundings. He watches as the sun goes down, the lights come up and cities change—sometimes in the course of an evening, sometimes over weeks and years. He keeps a keen eye open to the way neighborhoods shift and personalities change as he moves through various environments with his camera in hand. What he has accumulated are images that tell the story of a place from an insider's perspective, with all the grit, reality, beauty and emotion that can fit in his self-imposed square frames.

Penn's father loved photography, so it is no wonder that he taught Penn everything he knows as only a true enthusiast and mentor can. Under his father's tutelage, which started when he was in his early teens, Penn has grown into a photographer who loves everything about the medium—and he shot for himself until three years ago, never thinking his work was something that would be taken seriously. That all changed when his work was accidentally seen by a gallery curator at a print house. In no time, his exhibition career took off.

Since his discovery, Penn has exhibited in numerous galleries throughout Phila-

delphia, been interviewed and written up in several publications, and has been able to turn his passion into his career. He is living the fine art photographer's dream, all thanks to his dedication, patience and persistence.

Penn's images return to the roots of traditional street photography, though differing in that he emerges to photograph the grit and solitude of the city mostly at night, with careful attention to details, design and that evocative moment that tells a story within the frame. For Penn, that frame is mostly a square format, reminiscent of the clean, organized Hasselblad framing. Yet Penn has shot nearly all of his work digitally, using primarily a Nikon D300 or D70, and taking extra time to contemplate how the square format will work with every given subject, being careful with the destined square edges to ensure the right look, feel and composition for the final image.

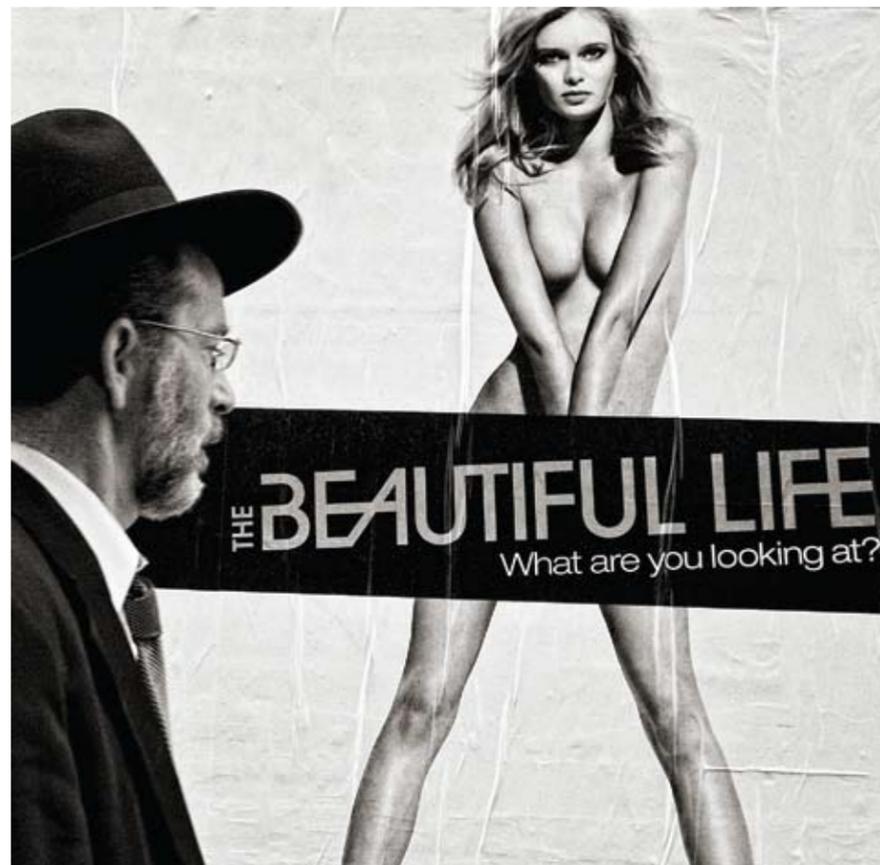
Imposing these constraints on himself forces Penn to take more time, to be more observant, and to work more intimately to create the final image that he is seeking. "I really like the square format and still prefer it," Penn explains. "I don't print large, usually 10x10, and what I noticed is that you almost get a sense of tunnel vision

when looking at a square image this size. It becomes an intimate experience for the viewer, which is how I would like my photography to be seen because most of the time that's what I'm trying to portray."

Working with a standard 35mm format and pre-visualizing the final square image has led Penn to slow down with his imagemaking and be thoroughly aware of his constraints. Looking through the standard viewfinder doesn't automatically present the final image as Penn sees it, as is the case with standard street photography. Instead, Penn's mind has additional freedom to play, internally cropping and formatting images even as he sees them forming in front of him through the lens.

In addition to his square frames, Penn also chooses to transform the majority of his images to black and white, in crisp, sharp detail, and focus and high contrast. "I always liked black and white. To me, a black-and-white photograph is all about the image without being persuaded by color." Removing the color from the images leaves the viewer more aware of the architectural angles, the repeating patterns, and the stripped-down visage of Penn's subjects. The lines jump forward, the design is more evident, and his keen composition





a variety of different criteria that move away from his standard square, black-and-white prints. The most ambitious of these is *The Philadelphia Project*; his goal is to shoot 1000 images in three years, documenting Philadelphia in a faster, more fluid manner. "I wanted a very large project that required a higher level of dedication and speed, a real challenge," he says. "Moving away from the square format for this project greatly increased the speed and options. It's my way of taking my street photography a level or two higher." *The Philadelphia Project* is already well underway, and Penn continues to post new images on his Web site every month.

Moving in the opposite direction of most modern photographers, Penn has also expanded his otherwise digital arsenal to include three 35mm film cameras—a shift made only last summer. "The first thing I noticed when it came to using film is that I worked faster. With no LCD screen, I couldn't check to see the results, so I just shot and moved on." His increased speed allowed a variety of different images to emerge in his work, giving *The Philadelphia Project* a different feel than Penn's earlier photographs; presented together with his previous work, he is able to give an ever

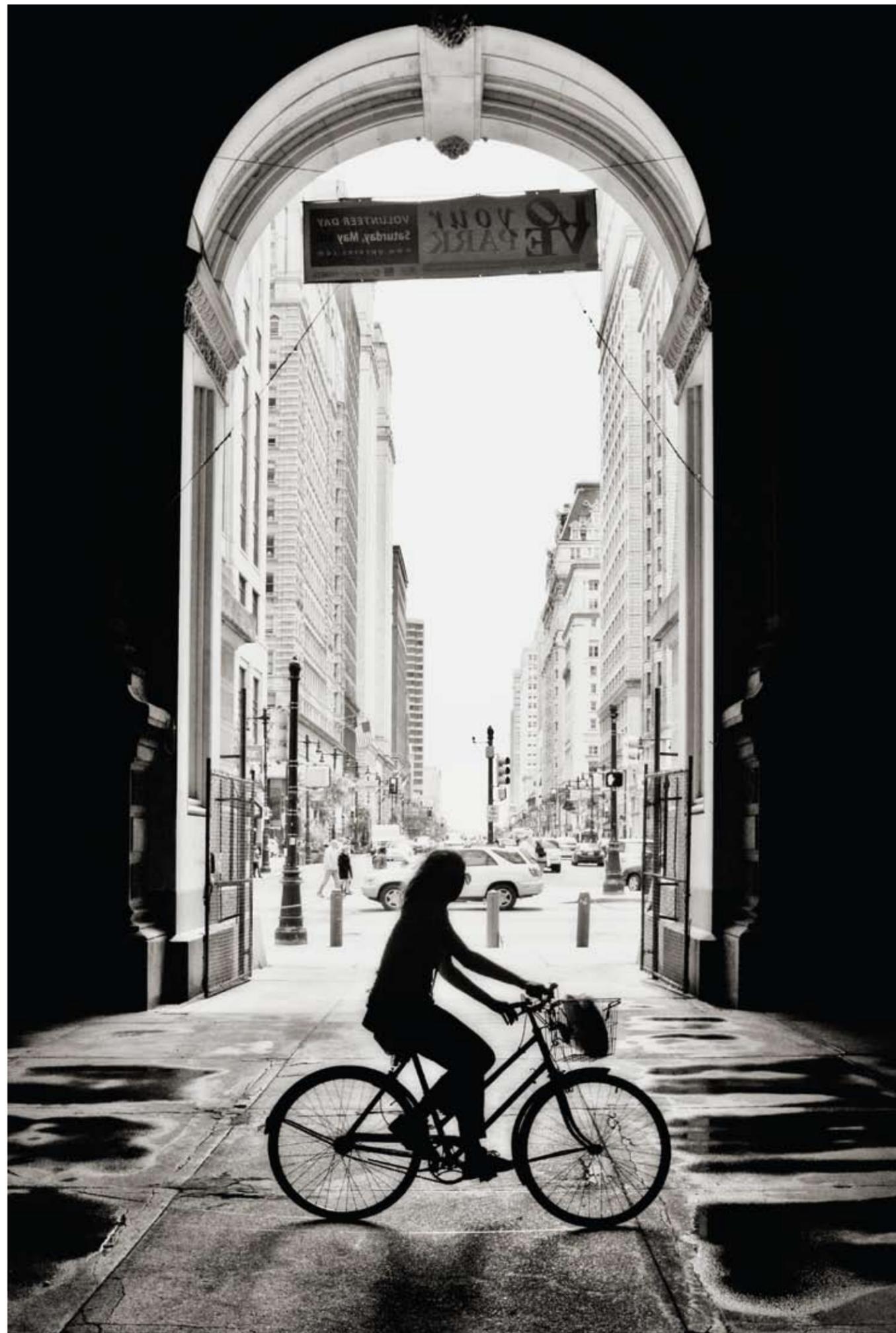
comes to the forefront.

The result of applying the two constraints of size and tone is a more careful look at his subjects, and Penn's time commitment and patience have paid off with evocative and intricate images of the places that he knows, and would like to know the best. Being a descendent of William Penn, the founder of Philadelphia, Michael Penn has nurtured a fascination with the city since he was a child living in New Jersey. It is an attraction that has led him to document the city, even as he watches it change, despite his nostalgia. Yet he continues to hit the streets, documenting both the large and the small—from stormy images of City Hall to the dark and dank hallways beneath the city—and has amassed several bodies of work about Philadelphia. As a result, he has helped to document, in stark detail, what is and what remains in the city at every moment. "I reached that age when you start to notice how fast things change, especially in a large city. I'm trying to capture as much about Philadelphia as I can before too much changes."

As Penn's career continues to take off he has started to search out new projects with



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and publishing since he was first discovered by the gallery curator three years ago. Photography, always an important part of his life, has become his only career. "I spend more hours a day taking photographs, printing, giving interviews, meeting with collectors and doing research than I ever would with a 9-to-5 job. I love it and can't imagine doing anything else the rest of my life." But the dedication isn't a burden for Penn—it's a gift. "If you want to live the life of an artist, you must really be prepared for it, financially and emotionally. It takes full dedication and sacrifice," he admits, but then quickly clarifies his perception. "If it's something you truly want to spend your life doing, you quickly forget about the sacrifice part." 

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more honest and inside view of the city.

There are more crowded streets, more images during the day, and more interaction with his subjects—either when someone is gesturing toward the lens or when Penn's own shadow or reflection pops up in the frame. Where his previous projects have captured the tenacity and mood of the night, this project feathers in the vibrancy and life of the day, making Penn's overall portfolio a review of all angles of the city.

As he continues to document Philadelphia, a project he admits will be life-long, Penn has also started to shoot New York, finding scattered moments that have grown into a distinct portfolio. When discussing the differences between the two,

Penn explains, "Life moves a lot faster in New York than it does in Philadelphia, and you could spend a lifetime just trying to capture a small part of it." This new fascination might lead to a New York project in the near future, and he has mentioned an interest in pursuing projects in cities vastly different from the ones he knows, such as Tokyo, Hong Kong, Berlin and London.

Yet the quiet of Philadelphia will always be a part of Penn's photography, even as he learns that shooting a city like New York can be much different in terms of pace and feel. "There's very little time to think," he says of the streets of New York, "so most of the time it's instinct and reaction."

His instincts have proven to be keen, and he has been exhibiting, winning awards

