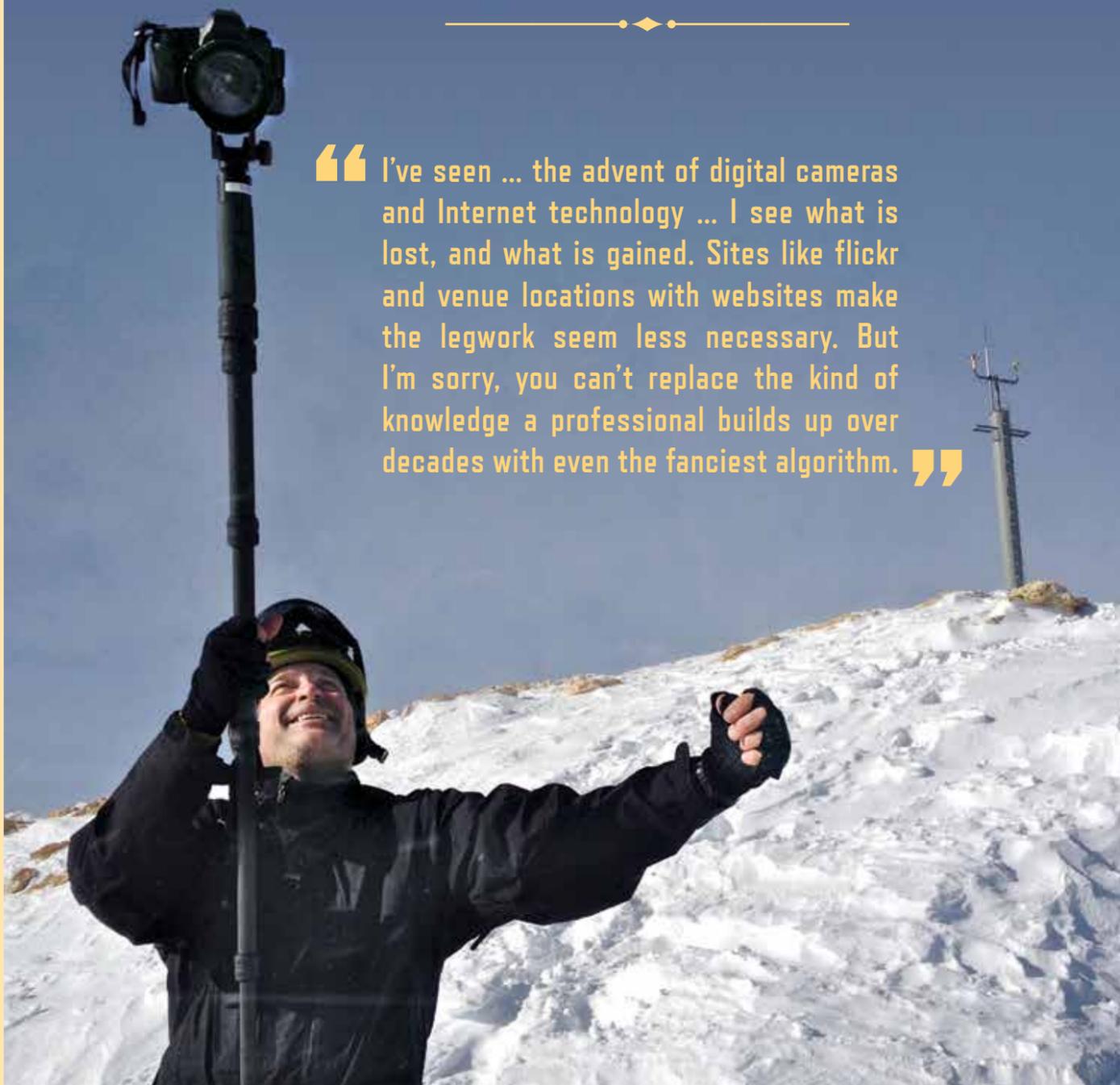


## Osceola Refetoff:

The Authentic Character of Things as They Are

“ I’ve seen ... the advent of digital cameras and Internet technology ... I see what is lost, and what is gained. Sites like flickr and venue locations with websites make the legwork seem less necessary. But I’m sorry, you can’t replace the kind of knowledge a professional builds up over decades with even the fanciest algorithm. ”



Mammoth scouting. Photo courtesy of Osceola Refetoff/LMGA



Desert scouting. Photo by Osceola Refetoff/LMGA

by Shana Nys Dambrot

There’s no doubt my career as a location scout and my work as a fine art photographer are linked,” says Osceola Refetoff, “but maybe not how people think. Scouting requires a different, more frenetic energy. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten a fine art image while on a scouting job—despite having access to so many great places, many of which I’ve revisited on my own time. I’d say it’s been more about the co-development of useful habits and personal interests. In scouting, what sets my work apart I think is that once things went digital, I was able to give the images an extra bit of love in the processing, so that the production team has something more beautiful to look at, without compromising the accuracy of the content. What took hold then was this idea of using photographs to portray, as my artist statement now reads, ‘not only what something looks like but how it feels to be there.’”

A major part of his technique involves editing down the shots to the minimum required to describe the space, and further organizing them to tell its—the location’s—story in a logical, evocative order not unlike leading the viewer on a tour. “My film school education (by the way, my first scouting job was for the earliest seasons of *Law & Order* while I was still at NYU) and my subsequent cinema production experience taught me to think about where the director may want to position the camera, and to tailor my scouting to reflect and support that,” an empathetic

visualization of how spaces become pictures. “I started my work as both a scout and an artist when everything was still being done on film,” notes Refetoff. “I’ve seen and even embraced the advent of digital cameras and Internet technology. There are pros and cons, I see what is lost, and what is gained. Sites like flickr and venue locations with websites make the legwork seem less necessary. But I’m sorry, you can’t replace the kind of knowledge a professional builds up over decades with even the fanciest algorithm or a keyword search. The commercial industry has sadly changed, with shorter schedules, and a reliance on known resources instead of discovering the new. Digital cameras have made it easier to create adequate exposures, so talent as a photographer has become less valued in general in the industry. I miss the face-to-face collaboration with directors. These days, it’s often unclear which scout is responsible for the different location files that are presented on a job.”

But on the other hand, one of Refetoff’s most popular current projects is the Web-based *High & Dry: Dispatches From the Land of Little Rain*, a collaboration with writer/historian Christopher Langley (an educator and author who also happens to be the Inyo County Film Commissioner, and whom Refetoff met while scouting a Firestone commercial). The ongoing series is an expansive set of portfolios surveying the human presence in the deserts of the American West—which is created and



disseminated mostly through online means, including its syndication on KCET's Emmy-winning program *Artbound*. This is where Osceola reminds you that "all these sites have mailing lists. And there's always Facebook."

[desertdispatches.com](http://desertdispatches.com) | [facebook.com/highanddry](https://facebook.com/highanddry)

Another big moment fusing his location and studio work was his acquisition of a Los Angeles film location/photography studio on historic Chung King Road in Chinatown. It's crisply renovated in high-modern, white-box style, but, Refetoff explains: "Scouts think it's going to be Chinese, like some kind of curio shop! So it hasn't been used as a film location (loft, architect's office, boutique) as much as I thought it would be (I'm looking at you, guys)—but it has been frequently utilized as a well-appointed, amenable gallery-style space hosting pop-up exhibitions and sometimes installations of my own work."

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And when it comes to his personal work, as an artist, Refetoff's interest is in documenting the intersection of nature and industry—humanity's impact on the world, and the narratives of the people living at those crossroads. His images exist within traditional means—landscape, portraits, travel, editorial—and are variously produced using film, digital, infrared, color and pinhole exposures according to what best expresses the character of his subjects. "That's a key difference between the scouting and the fine art of course—the possibility of unlimited imagination and interpretation; being able to use black and white or infrared or pinhole; and to focus on details that might not always be practical for the client or salient to what a scout needs to communicate directly. Scout work is the opposite of exhibitionary; it's not for me to show, it's in support of someone else's vision." Thus, despite his documentarian impulses, and the fact that his images deliberately depict quite ordinary, even mundane, subjects, he employs an interpretive and nuanced vision, yielding surreal and even dreamlike results.

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What differentiates photography from other art forms is its indelible, inescapably direct relationship to the external world. The camera may be telling people's stories, but it speaks its own language; Refetoff is perhaps the interpreter—as he elsewhere facilitates communication between locations and production designers. From his *Desert Windows* examining the formal gestures people use to frame their relationship to the landscape; to related series like *Dust to Dust*, *Magic and Realism* and *Flirting With Disaster* examining how stalwart residents build their lives and move across these landscapes, Refetoff shifts between stylistic modes to build layered, multidimensional histories of architecture, landscape and population. What links all the aspects of his eclectic practice is not the imposition of any singular vision, but rather a commitment to figuring out "what the picture requires," using all the potential of the cameras he carries to render "the authentic character of things as they are, not how we expect them to be."

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This page, top to bottom: Chungking Studio/Photo show opening; RR tracks/Photo taken with pinhole camera; Scouting downtown L.A.; Opposite page: Love, Faith, Hope/Cinco, CA. All photos by Osceola Refetoff/LMGA

