



ART FROM THE AIR

By Claude Jodoin

Dale Fisher

Dale Fisher produces some of the finest photographic art I have ever seen in person. For his large prints in custom frames, which can be seen in his galleries, he uses nothing but the best techniques, equipment and materials for production. Everything is done under one roof with a Wizard mat cutter, Larson-Juhl frame moldings, a 4x8-foot mounting

press, Epson X800-series printers, Dell computers, Photoshop and a Nikon medium-format scanner—for all of the “analog legacy data” he has, otherwise known as film. Dale has published several books and always has one or two more in the works at any given time. Given all this, he just doesn’t seem to know the meaning of “slowing down.”







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Wearing his ever-present blue helicopter-pilot jumpsuit (I think he even sleeps in the darn thing), Dale's self-referential title, "the Flying Farmer," speaks to his storied history. His threads have been pretty consistent since Dale began training in the Navy as a reconnaissance photographer at only 17. Even though he refers to that time as one during which he was "being just a dumb kid," his career quickly evolved. After a short stint as a newspaper photographer, Dale began creating incredible images from helicopters. He claims he started doing images from the air because he was too lazy to haul truckloads of equipment to rig platforms on the ground.

"What I do is not aerial photography, per se, like I used to do from a hole in the belly of a plane in the Navy," he says. "I just use a helicopter instead of a big ladder. I never hover, but I am much more maneuverable

to be at the right place at the right time, and I have learned to compose and anticipate very quickly. Natural light is just as elusive in the air as it is on the ground, but you learn to see differently from up there."

While still in the Navy, Dale began investing in cameras and Ektachrome lab equipment. At 21, he opened his own business. Although his art is created on his own time and at his own expense, his bread-and-butter work comes from the construction industry, along with publishing several books of his images featuring work of many large Michigan businesses, hospitals, universities and local government projects.

Dale's just-do-it attitude proves that you can teach an old dog new tricks. He made a complete jump-over-the-cliff transition to digital capture and output in 2002, with a little help from me as a digital consul-

tant. Since the day after he shut down his state-of-the-art C-41/RA-4 wet lab in 2002 (with 8x10 enlargers and Krenonite processors), hundreds of his artistic landscape images on 6x7cm film, using custom gyro-stabilized cameras, have been Nikon-scanned and printed on an Epson 9600/9800 wide-format inkjet. With over 50 years of photographs in his archive, he has thousands to go before they are completely converted into pixels. The results are beautiful museum-grade works, which he sells for reasonable prices to corporations, labor unions, restaurants, hospitals, hotels and many individuals. All of his new work is done on a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II and L-series IS zoom lenses.

With regard to the benefits of shooting digital, Dale offers, "Even with my own darkroom in the camper, it used to take two days to photograph, process, proof and



print final 16x20s from start to finish. That was for the local clients; anything done by mail took over a week. These days, with laptops and the Internet, no matter where we are in the country, we can upload and email the images to our lab and have prints made in about an hour. So digital processing and printing has certainly impacted what we do. As an old dog, I certainly have learned quite a few new tricks, many of them from you, Claude.”

Dale has come a long way from single-focal-length lenses on Pentax 6x7s bolted to heavy gyro-stabilizer motors. In a helicopter, vibration kills image sharpness, but it’s no problem for modern Canon zooms with IS. “Many of my images are made early or late in the day, sometimes before sunrise and even right after sunset,” Dale says. “So having amazingly clean high-ISO performance in digital cameras is another

benefit to working digitally.

“When you are doing images of buildings on the ground, you can get an overall early evening exposure, then expose again when it gets dark and all the lights are on,” he continues. “In the air you can’t do that, you only get one shot. Sometimes it’s a matter of a few minutes. I’m probably one of the few people around who knows exactly what the image will look like as soon as I snap the shutter without looking at the image or histogram on the LCD. I developed those skills in the film world and they still serve my job well.

Of the incredible image of the New York’s World Trade Center towers he made (see page 78), Dale says, “Brian McMahan, my main pilot, and I flew the chopper to NYC in 1992, and I had planned on making the World Trade Center picture at night, moving south on the Hudson river, looking east

between the Twin Towers. I had to have that position perfectly, and the timing had to be absolutely right. I made one exposure and that was it. I knew I had the shot. This is where my years of experience really paid off. It was made into a poster for the 1997 Art Expo New York Show. As the definitive picture of New York before 9/11, that poster was used as a fundraiser for fire and police departments after the attack. Along with my photo of the Statue of Liberty with flag, that shot, in poster form, raised over \$1,000,000 for the relief funds. We even sent the Red Cross \$70,000, just from sales around Ann Arbor restaurants.

Dale tells me that if he had image-stabilized lenses and his Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II earlier in his career, he’d be a multi-millionaire today—something that would be nice, given his humble way of giving back. He is especially proud of his non-profit Michigan Center for the Photographic Arts, where once a year, hundreds of youngsters from several counties contribute their unique vision to an art show featuring 8x10 images from disposable cameras and donated lab services. When not booking weddings or business meetings on his 100-acre property, Dale makes charitable use of his galleries and farm to teach kids how to see and appreciate photography as an art form.

“If I were to cite my mentors, they would be Mahlon Buell, my high school science/photography teacher, who was both technical and artistic,” he says. “He, along with Clifton Dey, a master portrait photographer, and my boss at the *Ann Arbor News*, Eck Stanger, taught me fundamental composition and good lighting. I use the same classic theories of composition, including the rule of thirds, as any ground photographer. I got to be real good at picking the right time of day to go up and create images. Usually you only get a precious few minutes of perfect light to get the shot. At \$1000 per hour for helicopter time, it used to cost me \$13, time-wise, just to change a roll of medium-format film in the air, so modern large-capacity CompactFlash cards mean I never have to reload while I’m in the air, even though I shoot everything RAW. It’s a real godsend for my type of work.

I ask Dale why he has developed such a sense for the sun’s position at a given time of year or day and why he doesn’t pilot his own helicopter anymore. His answer is simple: “Severe economics and danger



is the simple answer. For what it costs to make an exposure on the ground versus from the air, you have to be efficient with time. When I owned my own helicopter, when you factor in the cost of ownership, licensing, fuel, insurance, maintenance, it worked out to about \$800 an hour. After I sold it and decided to work with Brian, the price went up to only \$850 an hour, and I didn't have the maintenance, timing and headaches. For many years, I owned my own helicopter, which I would trailer to a given job site, even out of state, and fly. I would fly and shoot at the same time. Since the controls on a helicopter are so delicate, it's difficult to do. I came close to dying one time, so that incident had a significant effect on my decision to work with another pilot and just concentrate on making images. Now I just direct him to exactly where I want to be and I'm free to



concentrate only on the photograph."

I ask Dale how architectural work differs from the air. "With a helicopter in a metropolitan area, you can approach an architectural subject from a place that's otherwise not reachable by other means," he says. "Sometimes it's the only way to get a clear shot of a building at the perfect angle, but you still have garbage like wires, poles, etc. So, I'm totally amazed at all the things I can do in Photoshop to clean that up. If you consider Photoshop to be about six miles long, then I only know about 1/10 of a mile about it, but it has served my business and my work very well"

To see more of Dale's images, visit dalefisherphoto.com or email him at dfisher@dalefisherphoto.com. 

Claude Jodoin has been involved in digital imaging since 1986 and has not used film since 1999. Email him at claudej1@aol.com.