

OUT of the DUST

How Wyoming's Adam Jahiel to specialize in painterly photographs of western life

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"IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH TO MAKE ME HAPPY,

says photographer Adam Jahiel, whose pictures of contemporary cowboy life are praised by critics for taking subject matter that falls easily into cliché and transforming it unerringly into art. "Just some black-and-white film and wide-open spaces. All I do is watch, from the moment I wake up in the morning till I go to sleep at night." The first part of Jahiel's declaration is wryly disingenuous. Even a thumbnail sketch of his biography argues that he is a man not easily made content. The second part, while obviously overstated, is fundamentally true. The photographs themselves say as much.



Many of Jahiel's images of ranch life in the lonely, dry expanses of the Great Basin in Nevada are instantaneously beautiful. In REMUDA #1, STATELINE CAMP, for example, a horizontal phalanx of horses moving forward in the fog of their own dust creates a magically dynamic horizon, while clouds overhead, half sun-struck, half ominous, perfectly mirror the spiritual nature of the herd they alternately threaten and protect. The formal elegance of the composition stays a crucial pace ahead of its drama, allowing the photograph to retain—even after long inspection—its ability to welcome and reaffirm the viewer's desire to look closely at this piece of the world. Dust hasn't been so eloquent since Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, two of Jahiel's heroes, photographed the Dust Bowl.

Some of Jahiel's images, however, speak a slyer, less ravishing visual language. In AFTER THE RAINS, HUMBOLDT COUNTY, three cowboys seated awkwardly in a small boat steer toward a herd stranded beyond a sky-reflecting stretch of flood water. The surface absurdity of this cowboys-out-of-saddle vignette is supported by a foundation of compositional ingenuity is so pleasing and right you feel faced with inexhaustible possibilities of meaning.

If Jahiel shot only the first type of photograph—the immediately memorable, iconic western images—he'd still be renowned for capturing a realm that stirs the heart of anyone who has ever yearned for big skies and the lonely dignity of ranch life. These pictures—flawless, evocative achievements—are what made his reputation. But it's those other shots, the ones with a quiet, poignantly comic weirdness to them, which fill out the case for his artistry. That said, you can pick up just about any Jahiel photograph and sense you're looking at the work of someone whose vision has found its perfect subject and may never finish investigating it, never become inured to its mystery. That is why watching is; indeed,

all Jahiel really does, from the moment he wakes up in the morning till he goes to sleep at night.

As a contemporary, professional photographer of the West, the 44-year-old Jahiel hit pay dirt—make that pay dust—only after a long, circuitous, and at times highly entertaining journey. Born in Michigan and raised in Illinois, his wandering years included studying oceanography in Florida ("As a boy I lived for a year in Paris, and Jacques Cousteau was my hero"), earning a degree at Brooks Institute of Photography in California, pulling in a second bachelor's degree in Missouri in photojournalism, doing a global apprenticeship with glamour/fashion photographer Douglas Kirkland ("I was young, single, and responsibility-less. I had a blast"), shooting set photography in Hollywood for such endeavors as Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video ("It was all painfully slow and boring"), and diving down two and a half miles to the floor of the North Atlantic to take pictures as part of the second team ever to lay eyes on the real Titanic, back when future king of the world Leonardo DiCaprio was king of the sixth grade ("For ten and a half hours I existed only from my eyeballs forward"). With this wealth of education and experience behind him, and with his assorted interests and shifting enthusiasms agitating inside, Jahiel remained a young man with latent brilliance who wanted the right inspiration and didn't yet know the unlikely place it would come from.

Hollywood high points aside, the first of three important epiphanies in Jahiel's life took place when he agreed to teach a photography course for Semester at Sea, a college program that had him sailing around the Mediterranean with all the fancy cameras, lenses, and filters that happening young photographers need. One day, when he pulled a muscle and couldn't carry his gear, he was forced to go for a couple of days on just a relatively simple Leica and black-and-white film. "I'd never been a Cartier-Bresson, black-and-white sort of guy," he says. "But it felt great. I found that I think in black and white. I'd shot pretty color pictures, but that's what they were—just pretty. At the end of that trip I realized I didn't want to be doing what I'd been doing anymore."

The second of Jahiel's epiphanies took place when he'd left Los Angeles—"Where you have to send inflatable palm trees to art directors to get noticed," he remarks with the uninflected tone and straight face that accompany similarly pithy descriptions that abound in his conversation. Having been through his conversion to black and white, he'd taken a temporary job at the *Sacramento Bee* in Northern California doing newspaper journalism. For one assignment he had to go out to a ranch in the godforsaken Great Basin in nearby Nevada to photograph "the biggest, baddest rodeo bull in the U.S." After the Titanic, European hotspots, and Michael Jackson, this was perhaps a deflationary adventure in the making, but, then, so many epiphanies start out that way.

"I walked into the ranch cookhouse—a whitewashed building with a linoleum floor, picnic table covered with red-checked tablecloths with jugs of Kool-Aid on top—and the lightbulb," says Jahiel, "went on." This was the world he would train his eye on.

The third epiphany came via the photographer's friendship with an abstract expressionist painter named Charming Peake. He'd become friendly with Peake and the two went to a rodeo together, Peake to draw and Jahiel to shoot. "I ended up with the same dumb pictures everybody else does," Jahiel remembers. "Then I saw what Peake had drawn, and everything changed." Everything, that is, about photography that is neither technical finesse nor subject matter—meaning: composition, light, form, and poetry. "I'd had two college educations," Jahiel comments, "and it wasn't until I met Channing Peake that the nickel dropped and I had some original ideas."

The life Jahiel leads now began then. What started out as a project photographing contemporary cowboys in 1989 became his whole artistic existence. It is a life that involves

weeks-long ride-about (essentially walkabouts but on a horse) during which, he explains, "I put my saddle, camp gear, tent, and cameras in my pickup and go out to a few different ranches in Nevada." The Great Basin of Nevada is an area where cowboys lead a particularly austere version of the stark, lonely life cowboys have always led. "It's about as lonely a place as I've ever found. It's nowhere, and then we go nowhere from there. The cowboys always feed me and give me a horse to ride. I'm not an in-your-face kind of guy. I just tag along and play fly-on-the-wall and wait for the elements to arrange themselves. These are anachronisms that are alive and well. There are patterns to this life, and you can anticipate them," Jahiel explains.

He takes his photographs of these people—"anachronisms that are alive and well"—with a Mamiya 6, a medium-format camera, which means it takes a fairly large negative (two and a quarter inches square) that shows maximum detail. He rarely crops his pictures, which leaves them mostly square. It's a "less-is-more format" he likes for good reason. Unlike horizontal formats, which would succeed in presenting the wide expanse of the range, or vertical formats, which would serve to show the big sky, Jahiel's square photographs seem to stress both by mimicking the human eye's centered perspective on the world that meets it.

The photographer eventually found the place he wanted to live when he wasn't with his favorite anachronisms. It's near Sheridan, WY, about 25 miles south of the Montana border, where, he says, "The people were friendly and parking tickets only cost a dollar. Once again I just blundered into the right place at the right time, which is how I think you succeed in life." Jahiel, along with his wife, writer Laura Sands, and their two children, an 8-year-old boy and a 5-year-old girl, live in a vintage 1928 bungalow in a small town outside Sheridan called, unbelievably, Story. "This is heaven," he describes. "A trout stream runs through the back yard, and you don't lock your doors. A lot of artists live around here."

Despite having traveled the globe for weighted down with high-tech gear, these days Jahiel has surprisingly little desire for anything but aiming his medium-format camera to "peel the layers of the onion" that he's discovered in Nevada. "I can't imagine going anywhere else or doing anything else," he says. "This was my biggest thrill till my kids came along—they surpass everything in life and love. As far as my work, it would be impossible to top this."

Jahiel's photographs back up his claims. They are the evidence of a way of seeing that comes from watching what one is profoundly willing to watch ad infinitum. This humble side of art—the patience part—keeps lots of talented people from ever attaining the level of art. They just aren't blessed with the necessary patience or lucky enough to come upon something that inspires that patience.

As for Jahiel, he takes what sounds like a cowboy's pragmatic attitude toward his own good fortune. "I wish," he says, "I could claim that it was some form of intelligence, but it's just luck."

Virginia Campbell, the former editor in chief of *Movieline*, has also written for *ELLE*, *Decor*, *Departures*, and *Traditional Home*.

Jahiel is represented by Stremmel Gallery, Reno, NV; Photo Eye Gallery, Santa Fe, NM; Etherton Gallery, Tucson, AZ; Staley-Wise Gallery, New York, NY; Stephen L. Clark Gallery, Austin, TX; and John Cleary Gallery, Houston, TX.