



PHOTOGRAPHER MICHAEL BOREK

Juxtapositions

THE VOICE BEHIND THE CAMERA | BY JANET SHARP



Michael Borek self-portrait

This page: "Scranton Lace #7395"

Opposite, top: "Scranton Lace #7594"; and
"Scranton Lace #4814"
All are photographs.

In 2010, Czech-American photographer Michael Borek completed a massive photography project that won him several awards, including a 2012 Photography Award from the Maryland State Arts Council. The project involved photographs of a once-thriving, but now deserted, lace factory in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In 2011 and 2012, he showed his work in several venues, including the

Torpedo Factory's Multiple Exposures Gallery, where he is one of fourteen member photographers; the Arlington Arts Center in Arlington; Photoworks gallery in Glen Echo, Maryland; and several other juried shows.

While working on his Scranton Lace project, Michael visited the factory three times, spending eight days there over eight months, taking 1,400 photographs—a process that he calls "sketching with the camera." He

processed about a hundred photos and printed fifty or sixty of them. Rather than documenting the entire factory, Michael selected scenes that juxtaposed the former grandeur of the building with the decay and vandalism underway there. The title of his exhibit, *Effective Immediately*, came about because the factory owner called his employees to a meeting one day in 2002 and announced that the factory was closing, "effective immediately."

At its peak, Scranton Lace had 1,400 employees and was the largest lace factory in the United States. The huge building included looms from Nottingham, England, and such employee amenities as a bowling alley and a cafeteria. Michael's images tell a story, avoiding nostalgia, but revealing a little of what the building has become and what it once was. He shows the great entrance stairway, where early morning shadows on the steps create a lovely picture, until the viewer sees broken glass on the steps. It's a disturbing scene that documents vandalism in the abandoned structure. Another photograph shows racks of punched cards, now kept in a storage area; a few years ago, they directed the loom



that made the lace. A bowling alley scene, with two pins standing and one down, testifies to the former employees' hasty exit.

Michael heard about the lace factory from friends who had seen his *Words Left Over* series. Noting that Michael was drawn to interesting old things, the friends suggested that he visit Scranton to photograph the factory. They contacted the owner, who gave Michael access to the building and free rein to photograph whatever he wished. According to Michael, the owner plans to reuse some of the space eventually.

Michael's *Words Left Over* series depicts parts of old signs, cropped to form different words. For example, Michael cropped "Adios" out of a sign for RadioShack. Treasurer became "sure," Footlocker became "Foot," and Georgetown became "GET." These "word-images," as Michael terms them, bear the marks of age, including rust, flaking paint and other damage. A dealer who saw these images sold some recently to a new Virginia hotel, where they will be used as hallway decorations.

Michael has several other ongoing photography proj-



jects. *Deer* includes photos of stuffed deer on walls, deer statues on buildings and even some live deer. *Bridges of Montgomery County* consists of extraordinary views of local bridges. According to Michael, his bridge scenes have an otherworldly feeling because he took them through a low-tech plastic lens on a high-end camera. *Wide Awake, Half Awake* includes scenes shot at dawn or dusk. In one unusual early-morning photograph, Michael caught a butcher with a dead pig slung over his shoulders hurrying down a hallway to a restaurant.

Michael has pursued photography all his life. He was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic), and obtained the equivalent of an M.B.A. there. After working for a few months as an economist, he opted for a lesser job, studied English and passed a language test to qualify as a freelance translator/interpreter. In 1992, he accepted a temporary job in Florida, expecting the assignment to last a few months. When the job ended four years later, he moved to Washington, D.C., and soon found work as a freelance translator/interpreter.

Today Michael juggles his photography work with his translating and interpreting career. He has been to Prague several times as an interpreter for the U.S. Department of State, serving on state visits with Secretary Madeleine Albright, President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. He interpreted several times for Vaclav Havel, the late President of the Czech Republic. He sometimes accompanies Czech groups as an interpreter on visits to other cit-



ies in this country. Of course, he always takes his camera along.

Between work and vacation travels, Michael has visited every state in the union except Hawaii. He is an American citizen now but returns to Prague yearly to visit his mother, other relatives and friends and finds it inspiring to return to his former culture. Next spring, he will have a show at the American Center, a Prague venue operated by the American Embassy. The show will be a retrospective of

Top: "Scranton Lace #4801"; and
"Urbania #8102"



Above: "Deer #8875"; and "Scranton Lace #7553"
 All are photographs.



thirty pictures, representing a cross-section of his work.

Michael works primarily in his home studio, upstairs in the Bethesda house he shares with his wife Rebecca and two cats. He uses Photoshop to edit his photos, performing such tasks as color correction and adjusting contrast but never adding or removing anything. Because he is home so much, another photography project on the horizon is a set of everyday scenes that catch his eye while he works. Such scenes might include a shot of his cats playing, a helicopter flying by or a storm forming in the sky. He also spends two days a month in Studio 312 at the Torpedo Factory Art Center, home of Multiple Exposures Gallery.

Michael has taken photography classes from a private instructor as well as at Northern Virginia Community College and the Smithsonian, but he is mostly self-taught. He has a bookcase full of photography books, but another bookcase is filled with books on other subjects. He rejects being pigeonholed in a particular role: "I like to think of myself as not just a photographer, but as a person who has something to say." The Surrealists, especially Belgian artist René Magritte, have influenced him, as has Czech photographer Josef Sudek, the "Poet of Prague." Michael says that learning about Sudek's work and life made him realize that "It's not where you are, but what—or what else—you see there." é

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