



April 2007

Photographic Memory: Cal Mackenzie makes pictures that bring life into focus

G. Calvin Mackenzie
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>



Part of the [Photography Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mackenzie, G. Calvin (2007) "Photographic Memory: Cal Mackenzie makes pictures that bring life into focus," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 96 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol96/iss1/7>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Photographic Memory

Cal Mackenzie makes pictures that bring life into focus

Editor's note: The Colby community knows G. Calvin Mackenzie as the Goldfarb Family Distinguished Professor of American Government and as an expert on the American presidency. But when Mackenzie isn't teaching, writing, or commenting on national affairs, he is traveling—camera at the ready. Colby asked him to provide a few of the thousands of photographs he has taken. He was good enough to do so and to write the essay that frames them.

The master photographer Alfred Stieglitz once said that he didn't understand anything until he'd photographed it. I wasn't familiar with the statement, but I think I was acting on a similar sentiment when I purchased my first serious camera, a Nikon Nikkormat, from the Army PX in Bien Hoa, Vietnam, in 1970. It cost most of a month's salary, but I hoped it would help me understand—some day—an experience that too often seemed utterly inscrutable. I carried it wherever I could and photographed everything.

One of those pictures is in the collection published here. I've probably returned to it more often than any picture I've ever made.

My unit of the First Cavalry Division had earned an in-country R&R at China Beach, and we were returning from Danang to Saigon. At the edge of the tarmac, an Air Force flight sergeant pointed to two C-130 transports on the runway and instructed us to get into either one of them. I chose the one to the right—for no reason that I can remember. We strapped in and the rear door was closed. Almost instantly, there was a deafening explosion, the kind you think is the last thing you'll ever hear. When I opened my eyes, I realized that the other plane, not ours, had been hit and flames were pouring out of it. We forced the freight door down and headed for the bunkers. After the all-clear, as we walked back across the runway, I took this picture. I asked a medic standing nearby what had happened to the men in the burned-out plane. "Post Toasties" was all he said.

Photography has never been my day job, but I've made a lot of pictures since Vietnam. Making a picture is a little bit of art and a little bit of science, but mostly a magnification of memory. It's a way to embrace and enlarge an experience. Often the meaning of the experience doesn't take hold until later, when I see the picture.

One March morning in 2003, I happened upon a protest against the Iraq War on 5th Avenue in New York. I made some pictures of the protesters and the cops who were arresting them. When I later looked at the photo of the young man pictured here, it struck me as iconic. How much he resembled the people I saw at antiwar demonstrations in the 1960s. The people change, but one American habit never does: the wars we make and the protests they generate.

It seems simple enough when the best photographers describe the key elements: light, shape, and composition. Get them together in the

right proportions and you've got a good picture. But the pursuit of that good picture is a sea of endless frustration, broken only by scattered islands of great satisfaction. One very cold May morning a few years ago I spent several numbing hours trying to get good pictures of the Mormon barns at the foot of the Tetons in Wyoming. Every landscape photographer I'd ever studied had wonderful pictures of those derelict barns. I made scores of images that morning from every angle. But the light and the forms and the composition never seemed to merge. Nothing came out of my camera that I much liked.

For every day of frustration like that one, however, there are those moments of splendid serendipity when all the elements come together and a photograph truly expresses an experience. A lonely man with a vacant stare by a vacant lot in SoHo, the two giggling girls in front of a McDonald's sign in Beijing, the fishermen leaning into the day as the sun rises in Zanzibar. The feel of a place in a moment of time.

Last year my wife, Sally, and I traveled in Northern Ireland, seeking some understanding of how the religious passions of that beautiful place had yielded so much hatred. I photographed churches, murals, slogans, and monuments to fallen martyrs. I shot inside the walls of Derry, where so many buildings had been shattered by bombs, and along Rossville Street in Catholic Bogside, where British bullets had rained down in the Bloody Sunday massacre of 1972. But it was a simple print of some graffiti in front of a church—a grab shot, photographers call it—that seemed, when I looked at the pictures later, to capture best the irony of it all: the god in whose name so many were killed who was not there.

Sometimes you just get lucky. On the one day of my life I would spend in County Antrim, the sky and the sea framing the Giant's Causeway were spectacular. The sunset in the Arizona desert when a massive saguaro cactus, like a soldier ordered to duty, was right where I needed it to be. The August afternoon at Popham when the wind shifted to the Northwest and brushed puffy paintings across the sky. The evening I took Sally to the Bund in Shanghai for the first time and the heavy cloud cover lit the playful Pudong skyline like opening night.

Those were great days, though perhaps they wouldn't seem that way now if I'd been without a camera.



Iraq War demonstration, New York City, 2003



Bombed transport plane, Danang, Vietnam, 1971



Sonoran Desert, Arizona, 2003



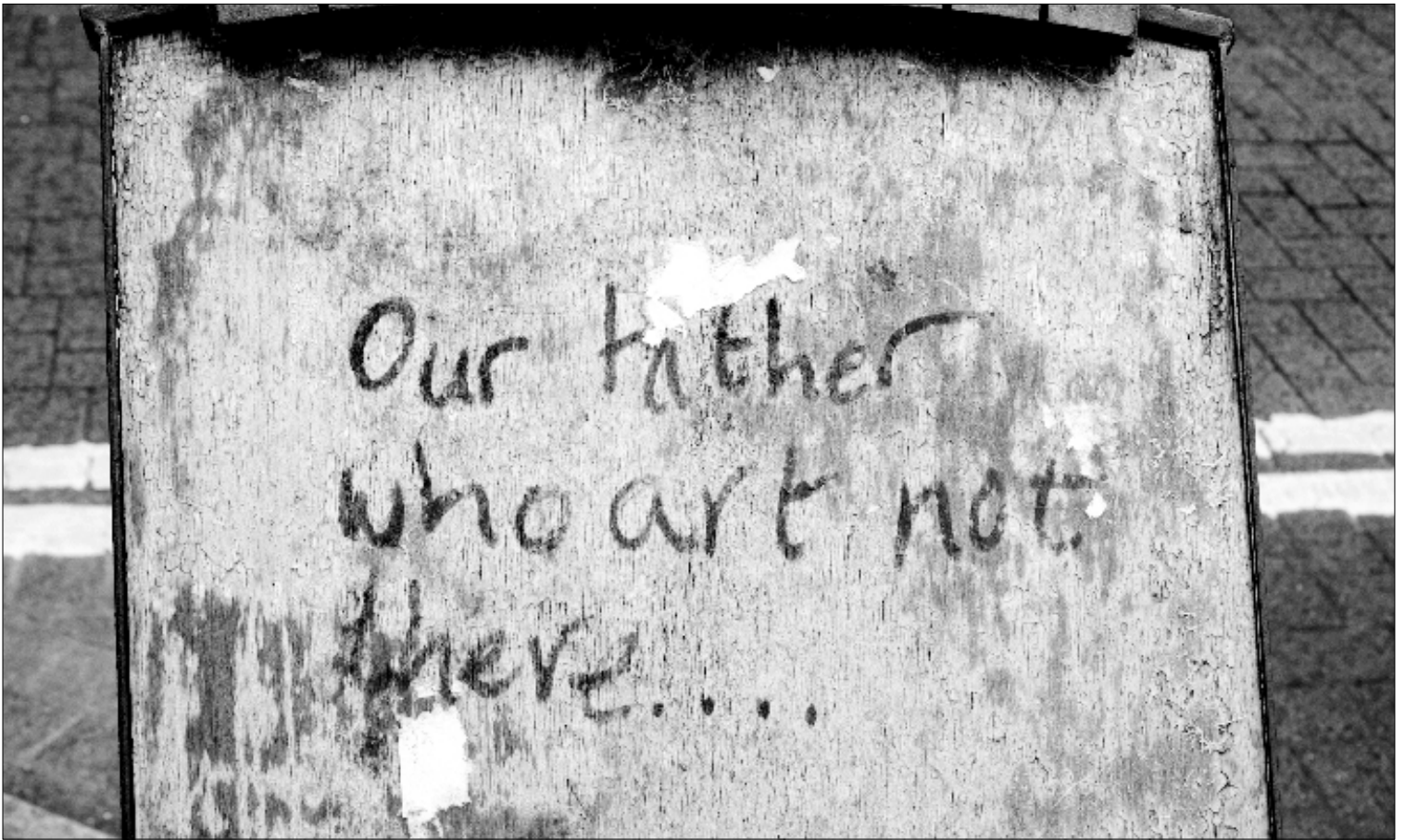
Giant's Causeway, County Antrim, Northern Ireland, 2006



Phippsburg, Maine, 2004



Shanghai, China, 2005



Graffiti at church, Derry, Northern Ireland, 2006



New York City, 2006



Beijing, China, 2005



Zanzibar, Tanzania, 2004