

Autumn 2012

## The Power of Three



If I looked long enough at the fallen maple leaves on the bamboo and stone outside the main shrine at Kamigamo, I could convince myself that they had arranged themselves purposefully into groups of three. Persuading myself of order in the randomness of nature was not hard to do in these peaceful and venerable surroundings. It also appeared to echo the traditional three line Haiku poem made famous by Matsuo Basho, an inveterate traveler and celebrated poet of whom I was already a fan. Perhaps I was playing a little too safe in my interpretations, but during the five weeks I stayed in Kyoto on my first visit to Japan in the early 1990's, the 'power of three' became a daily ritual, theme, and undoubtedly an obsession, which I would follow resolutely in pursuit of my stories. Had I not been on commission, even the photography might have been abandoned altogether in a maelstrom of musings and mutterings.

In many ways this process of working had already become second nature to me, having studied photojournalism intensely at Newport College in South Wales where three picture stories became the mantra. This proved good grounding for entering the world of newspaper and magazine photography where timelines are brief and space for images a premium. We like to think and hope that a single image will be powerful enough to hold our attention and indeed you need go no further than many of the prestigious photographic competitions such as World Press Photo to understand their singular strength. But sometimes one image is simply not enough to tell the story and several images are too many.

The rule of three is a well-established format in writing - Three Blind Mice, The Three stooges; In comedy – An English, Irishman and Scotsman walk into a bar; In culture – Chinese Triads, The Three Musketeers, A Three Act Play. And of course as photographers we are all familiar and probably a little weary of The Rule of Thirds despite its solid premise. Triptychs are nothing new in photography or indeed in many other art forms.

Continuing my delving into Japanese art, I had the pleasure of recently discovering the work of Ogata Gekko, a 19<sup>th</sup> century painter and woodblock printer who created extraordinary panels of Triptychs depicting life, culture and war in Japan history. The Triptych form can probably be traced back to the Middle Ages and early Christian art used in churches and cathedrals. Other artists such as Bosch, Rubens and Bacon have all at one time or another dabbled in the triptych format.



Ed Kashi, an American photojournalist and filmmaker recently put together a wonderful book of images in triptych form compiled from 25 years of his documentary stories from around the world. Many of the triptychs are fold outs adding to the expansive nature of both the images themselves and the stories they tell. This book reinvigorated my interest in the triptych so much so that I now actively seek out themes and stories in existing images as well as new work that I think will benefit from this treatment.



On a recent assignment in Kenya working for the environmental organization, Earthwatch, the volunteers had some time off helping scientists and locals to develop new methods of water conservation in the Rift Valley. We were all invited to a gathering of the tribal Samburu in what appeared to be a nondescript scrubby part of a dry plateau well away from the circular Menyattas, the ethnic mud huts where many of them still lived. We discovered later that it was one of the many sites they used to perform Eunoto, the coming of age ceremony of the warrior, where the young men jump as high as they can to show off their agility and prowess.

This 'Dance' is often watered down for travelers on safari and performed in a straight line rather than the traditional circle that we witnessed. It was one of many places and events, which have lent themselves to the power of the triptych in both personal and commercial projects.

I found the same process working effectively while compiling a series of images of women from ethnic communities I have shot over many years which now form part of a touring exhibition. And just this summer, I began working on a commission to photograph people in the outdoors for the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority but wanted to incorporate separate landscape images as a backdrop to the wider human story. Inspired by the aforementioned Ogata Gekko, and wanting to keep the project simple, I have deployed my newly acquired iPhone into active duty and started to scour the meadows, limestone platforms, pack horse bridges and drystone walls for clues and associations and am thoroughly enjoying the freedom in mind and body it allows for.



