

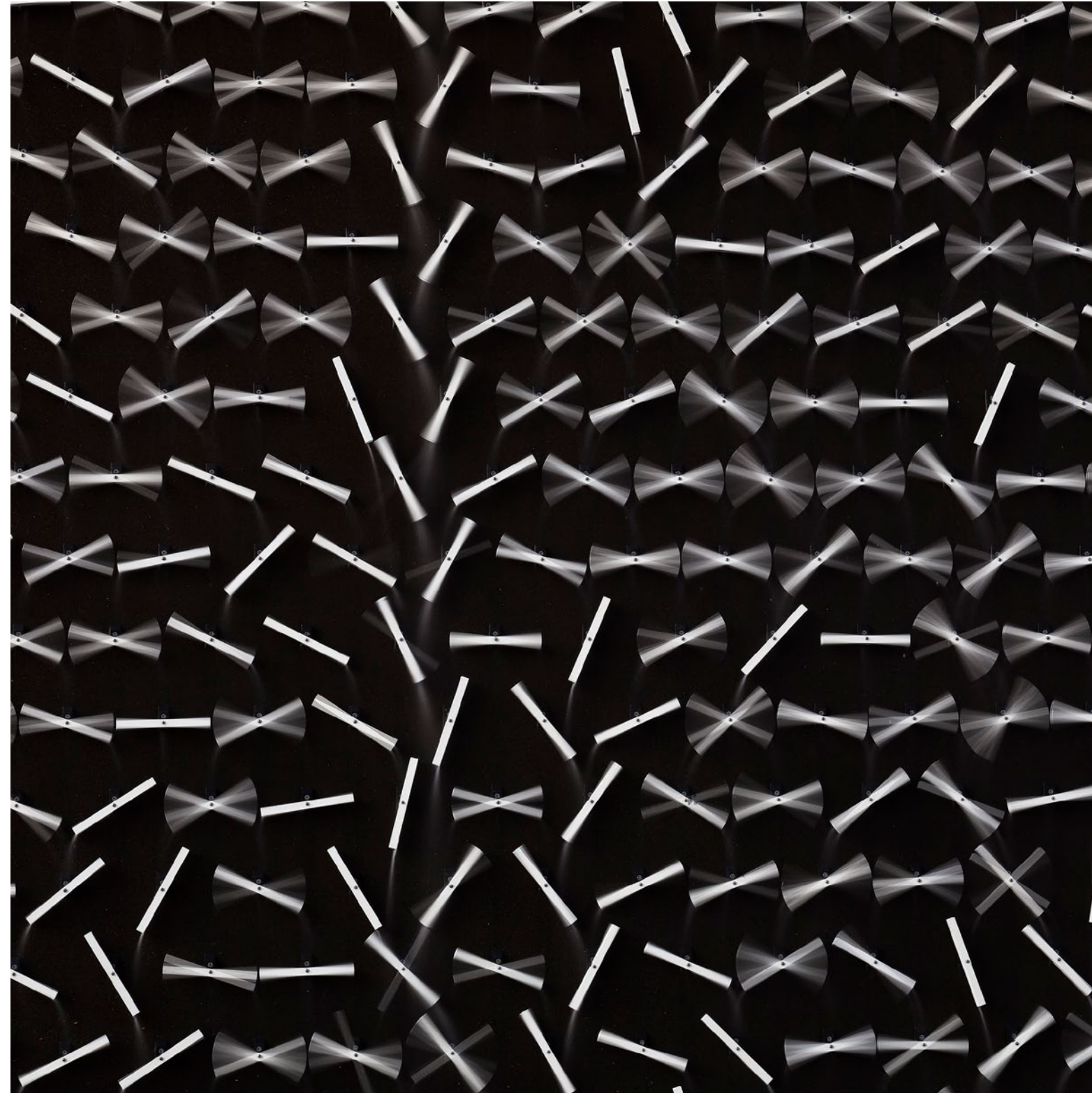
RED OGNITA

Red Ognita is based in Beijing. The majority of the photographers featured in this book are based either in the United States or Europe, so it is interesting to see how the work of Asian photographers compares. He makes a salient point about the importance of the ability to see during the interview.

Website: ognita.com

How would you describe your photographic vision? What kind of look or feel do you try and create in your photos?

I haven't really thought about it. I create what appeals to me. Though I have to admit that I am most attracted to simple compositions – landscape or architecture. When the weather permits, I love to play with the fog and snow. That's why I choose to shoot early in the morning. Not because of the light, but the mood it creates.



I find it interesting that when there almost nothing to see but just a tad of a hint, the mind creates the rest for us. When we are unsure of what we are seeing, the imagination comes to play.

When the viewer becomes so aware of the image that he is enveloped by it, and somehow forgets about the print even for second, then I have achieved the look or the feel I try to create with my photos.

Your work is very creative. Where do you get your ideas and inspiration from?

I believe that we are influenced by everything. The things that we see, the experiences we've had and the environment we live in. It shapes not only our personality but also how we approach everyday life. And these things spills out to the things we create.

I notice that ideas and inspiration can come from almost anywhere. I can be doing some non-creative activity and have an idea for a photographic project. But most of the time, it is stories of greatness that gets my inner self going. It may be about a thorny path a creative person took or about someone's perseverance that celebrates the human spirit.

Name three photographers you like and why.

Jerry Uelsman and Michiko Kon. Both photographers show me what dreams may look like on paper. It frees me from the limits of what the eye can see and from the box of what a photograph should or should not be. Also the integrity that it took to stand with their own work. I can just imagine the critics having a field day, but they stood their ground and now, they're masters.

Hiroshi Sugimoto. Minimalist aesthetic and Zen-like images. Simple but not simpler.

Michael Kenna. I was first drawn to Kenna's images due to his black and white work. The atmosphere in his photos is amazing. I was fortunate enough to meet him a few years back. One thing that I noticed immediately (aside from him being tall) is his humility. He is also very softly spoken. I was able to connect the man to his creations.

When did you start taking photos? What made you decide to explore photography as a means of artistic expression?

I started taking photos only in 2006. I am based here in Beijing and I wanted to document family events every time I went home.

I did not decide on anything initially but having more time to myself, I started to go out and take some photos. Being used to taking photos of my family and events, I found it weird in the beginning; taking photos where the subjects are the landscape and city architecture.

I feel that it happened naturally. I enjoyed what I'm doing and just continued doing so. The next thing I remember is that I am creating images rather than just documenting events.

What effect has living in China had on your photography? What's the best (and the worse) part about taking photos in China?

I think I would not have stumbled in photography had I not been based here in China. Appreciation sometimes happens when you detach yourself from

something. When you are almost always away from your family, time becomes more precious. Hence, the reason behind the purchase of my first camera.

As you would imagine, logistics can be a nightmare. Travel is also relatively more expensive than in my home country. I want to be there but not go there. A constant dilemma. Plus it is not enough to know Mandarin. The dialects in the provinces can be a challenge.

Culture can also be something to look out for; things that you expect to be acceptable might not be. Though, I think, culture can be easily compensated by a smile and constant awareness that you are in a different place.

But China is China. One of the dream destinations of many. Being one of the oldest civilizations and being closed to the outside world for many years, it offers some of the most interesting places and people. You just have to be there to experience it.

Why do you choose to photograph the landscape in black and white?

I am attracted by simplicity, and it seems that the vastness of a landscape lends itself perfectly. When there is almost nothing in the horizon, that is when my mind is relaxed and the time that I can listen to my muse. I guess, you could also say that it is a form of escape from the man-made world of steel and stone.

The black and white processing came naturally. Black and white conversions help eliminate distractions and highlight the things that initially caught my attention.

Although, sometimes, I'd see simple patterns within the city. I realize that it is not actually where we are but what we really see.



You crop most of your photos to the square format. Why do you do this and how does it affect the composition?

The way I present my images was brought about by the way I see things. I tend to focus only on certain parts of a scene. It is challenging for me to see like an Alan Ross or a John Sexton – where elements of a grand vista sings altogether.

My photos are much simpler, and require a different approach in presentation. I could say that the format is almost as important as the image as it is the vehicle that helps the content to get across. It is important to use methods to suit our vision, and not the other way around.

There is a strong design element in your compositions – an awareness of geometry, graphic design and negative space. Do you agree? How would you sum up your approach to composition?

Thank you for noticing. Yes, these are the things that attracts me and the same things that I want to be evident in print. When there is nothing left to take away and the image stands on it's basic element(s), then I am done. I think they call it minimalism and I agree.

You take a lot of landscapes using long exposures. What is the attraction of this – and how does it affect your approach to other aspects of the photo like composition and lighting?

I think it's the overall appeal of a landscape that attracts me. It's always there and there no need to talk to have a conversation.

I like it when there's a sense of simplicity and calm in my images. The technique of

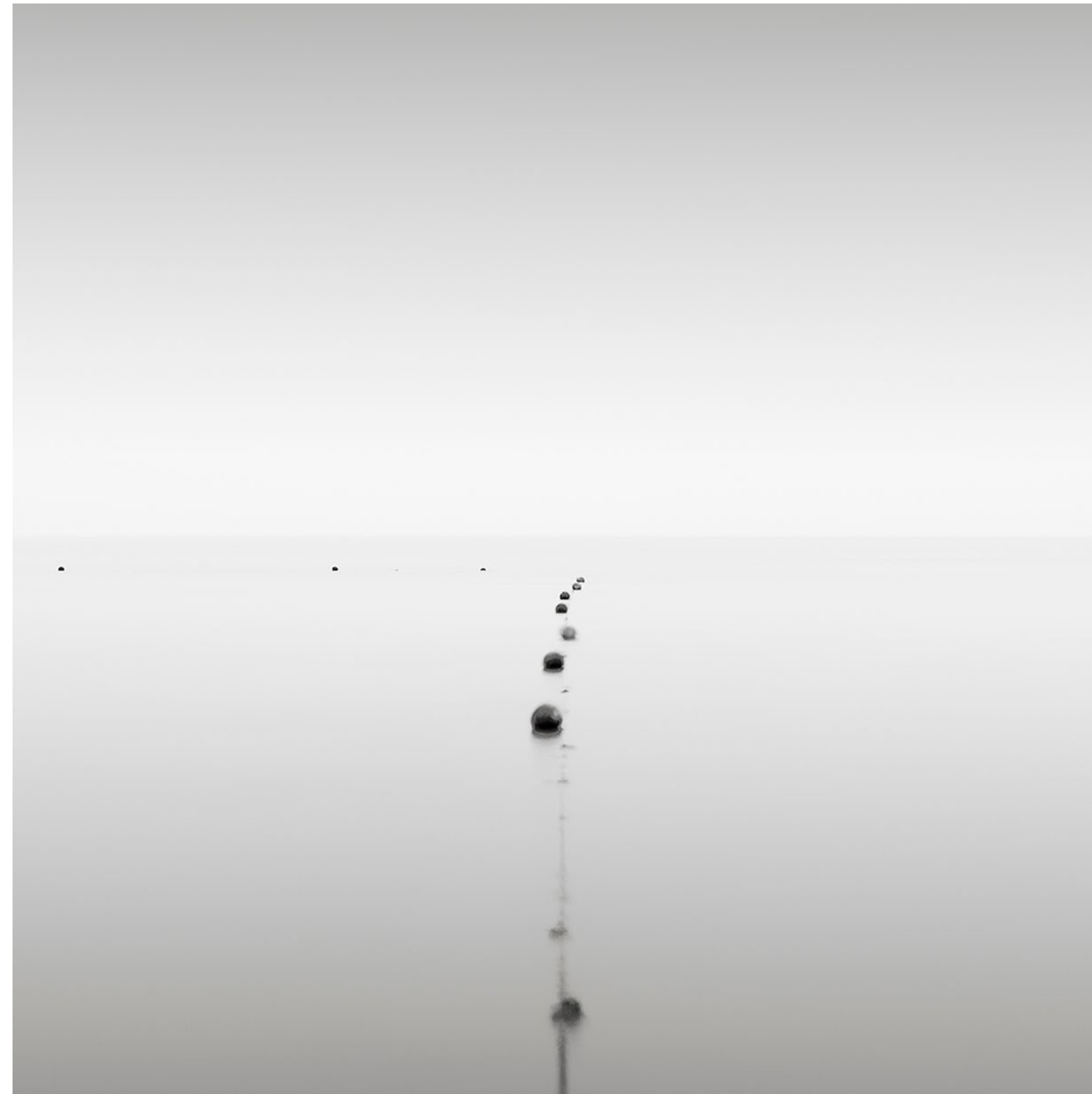


long exposure helps me to achieve what I set out to. It is an interesting technique wherein you would cut available light whereas in other techniques – more light, the better. It is difficult to expose when the sun is up, and that why I tend to shoot either early morning or near dusk. I also have a neutral density filter to cut the amount of light during midday exposures.

What equipment do you use for your long exposures and what advice would you give someone who wants to try this technique out?

In doing long-exposures, it is paramount that the camera stays still when exposing. In this regard, anything that would help you achieve this is important. To make creation easier and flexible, I have invested in a cable release, neutral density filters and a tripod. These are not really expensive relative to their use and the benefits they give you.

Patience is another indispensable tool that you should have. Long exposures are exactly that – long exposures. You will spend time not only looking for a good subject but also in exposing itself. And although there are calculations available as to the length of time vs. ISO and aperture, these are only base calculations. A sudden change in light would affect your image. Be prepared to make mistakes and fail. Welcome them as a learning experience.



You sell fine art prints of your work. Do you make the prints yourself or do you have a printer to do it? Why the relatively small size? (10×10 inches).

My gallery helps me to do that. I sometimes find it difficult to be on the business end of photography. But true enough, I am getting a better grasp on it.

I consider the print as the final stage of the creative process. In my opinion, it should reflect the vision almost to perfection. I work in collaboration with a master printer to create my platinum and palladium prints.

Needless to say, partnership with someone with years of experience in printing breathes life to my work and helps me realize my vision. I print my own pigment prints, but if needed, I have a trusted gallery printer of over three years to help me out.

While I acknowledge the impact big prints gives to the viewer, I also know that my content calls for a more intimate experience. A smaller print requires the viewer to step in closer. I believe that images of simplicity, calm and serenity are better presented in a smaller print. I'd say that the images dictates the print.

In my earlier days, I shied away from any collaboration. I exposed, post processed, printed and framed all my work. I felt that getting some help somehow dilutes my creative process. Today, I realize that a symphony is made by an orchestra.



I thought it would be interesting to learn a little more about some of your photos. Do you mind telling us the stories behind these images?

Mangrove Study 4 (right)

This image was in part created for a dare. I have lived in Beijing for the last 13 years, producing minimalist images. I was told that I cannot do the same aesthetic in the Philippines, since the country is very cluttered. A fellow countryman said so. This image was made during an visual inspection on my first workshop in Manila. It's a very famous place for local photographers but I have not seen any work that somehow looks like mine. A keeper that reflects my style.





Beidahe Panorama II (above)

The image was taken during a photography group outing in Beijing. We came to this place which was very foggy.

I immediately saw what I wanted to do and shared it with my friends. I invited them to plant their tripods where mine was. I actually pointed the buoys out on the horizon, but nobody did it. I took the shot, post-processed it home and shared with them finished work – only then did they see what I had seen.



Mt.Wulingshan (above)

It was a fine day, and Beijing only has a few of them. I called in sick for work. The landscape was already there. By that I mean the elements were all present. All I needed to do was to click the shutter. The creative part came from the choice of angle and cropping. I chose a panoramic crop to highlight the layers of the mountains.





