

Chance favors the prepared mind

Story by Dale Smith
Photos by Oliver Schuchard

Photographer Oliver Schuchard looks back on three decades of his teaching and art at MU.

“As a teacher, I think I was known as a man of many stories,” Oliver Schuchard says with a laugh. He’s leaning back into a leather sofa in the house he built near Jefferson City as he scratches the ears of his dog. Johnson is the latest in a line of dogs that accompanied him during the past four decades to the remote places where he has made nearly 5,000 photographic negatives of landscape subjects.

Schuchard is a decorated teacher who retired recently from the Department of Art, where he taught photography for 30 years and practiced his art. The University of Missouri Press has just published a retrospective of that art, *The Landscape in Black and White*, in which Schuchard recounts his artistic journey with his photographs and text (cloth, 184 pages, 66 images, \$49.95, University of Missouri Press).

One of the most important stories Schuchard told his students was about how Ansel Adams made the famous photograph *Moonrise Hernandez, New Mexico*: It was at the end of a long day of shooting, and Adams was barreling toward home in his Cadillac hearse, along with several other people and a lot of camera gear. The group was on a rural road in northern New Mexico when Adams glimpsed the village of Hernandez with the moon rising above it. At that moment, the light was extraordinary, and he wanted to photograph the scene. So he hit the brakes hard and swerved onto the shoulder. The light was changing fast as the sun began to set. Adams knew he had to work quickly. He sent the whole group scrambling to help him set up the tripod and camera. But his light meter was missing.

How would he set the exposure?

“Adams knew from previous experience that the moon reflects 125 foot-candles of light in a north sky, and he calculated his exposure from that,” Schuchard says. “He took one shot, turned the film holder around to take another one, but the sun had gone off the foreground of the scene. It was gone forever. It’s a wonderful image. His spirit and the spirit of northern New Mexico are captured in that one photograph.”



Photo by Bill Hall, Polaroid Corp.

In this 1971 picture taken at Yosemite National Park in California, Schuchard, far left, takes a lesson on using view cameras from master landscape photographer Ansel Adams, far right.

Little Scotia Pond ►
Mark Twain National Forest
Near Bunker, Mo., 1974

Schuchard’s dark-toned photograph of this scene looks very different than it would have appeared to a passing hiker on that bright April day in the central Ozarks. To make this image, Schuchard captured the way the pond and its surroundings felt to him in all their fecundity rather than the way they looked. Working in midday sun, he visualized the very different scene shown here and calculated an exposure to produce this photograph.



Schuchard used the *Moonrise* story to drive home the central lesson of his teaching: Chance favors the prepared mind. Adams picked up the phrase, coined by Louis Pasteur, and passed it along to Schuchard and others who attended his workshops. "That's the essence of what I was after in my teaching," Schuchard says. "It was the same whether I was teaching undergraduates at the University or whether I was teaching nontraditional students." At one workshop, for instance, Schuchard worked with some quilters who wanted

to take better photographs of their quilts. "I wanted to do my part in preparing their minds so they would be receptive to what was presented to them," he says. "Then it was up to them to find their own way."

Teaching, Schuchard discovered, helped him find his own way as a photographer. Unlike Adams and other famous photographers who thought the academy would drain their creative energy, Schuchard relished the contrast of solitary photographic work versus the social aspects of teaching. He found that

the exercise of teaching students the art and craft of photography honed his own mind for his work. And that, in turn, has helped make him who he is. "Whether photographing the landscape or traversing it without a camera," he writes in his new book, "no matter where I am, being a photographer has allowed me to develop a sense of self through a sense of place." ■■





▲ Mesa, Moonrise, Clouds

Northern Mexico, 1986

This photograph came on the sixth evening of a seven-day canoe trip on the Rio Grande River, Schuchard says.

“We came to a clearing and set up camp in a stand of tall corn that allegedly had descended from corn given to the Apaches during their transition from a nomadic to an agrarian culture. The banks were of hard-packed mud that the Indians, Spanish, outlaws and vigilantes used to cross the river. I eventually shot four rolls of film with my Rolleiflex camera as the moon rose in the sky and the wind moved the clouds and the light changed on the mesa. If I didn’t know how historically significant the place was, I don’t think I would have been moved to make the photograph.”

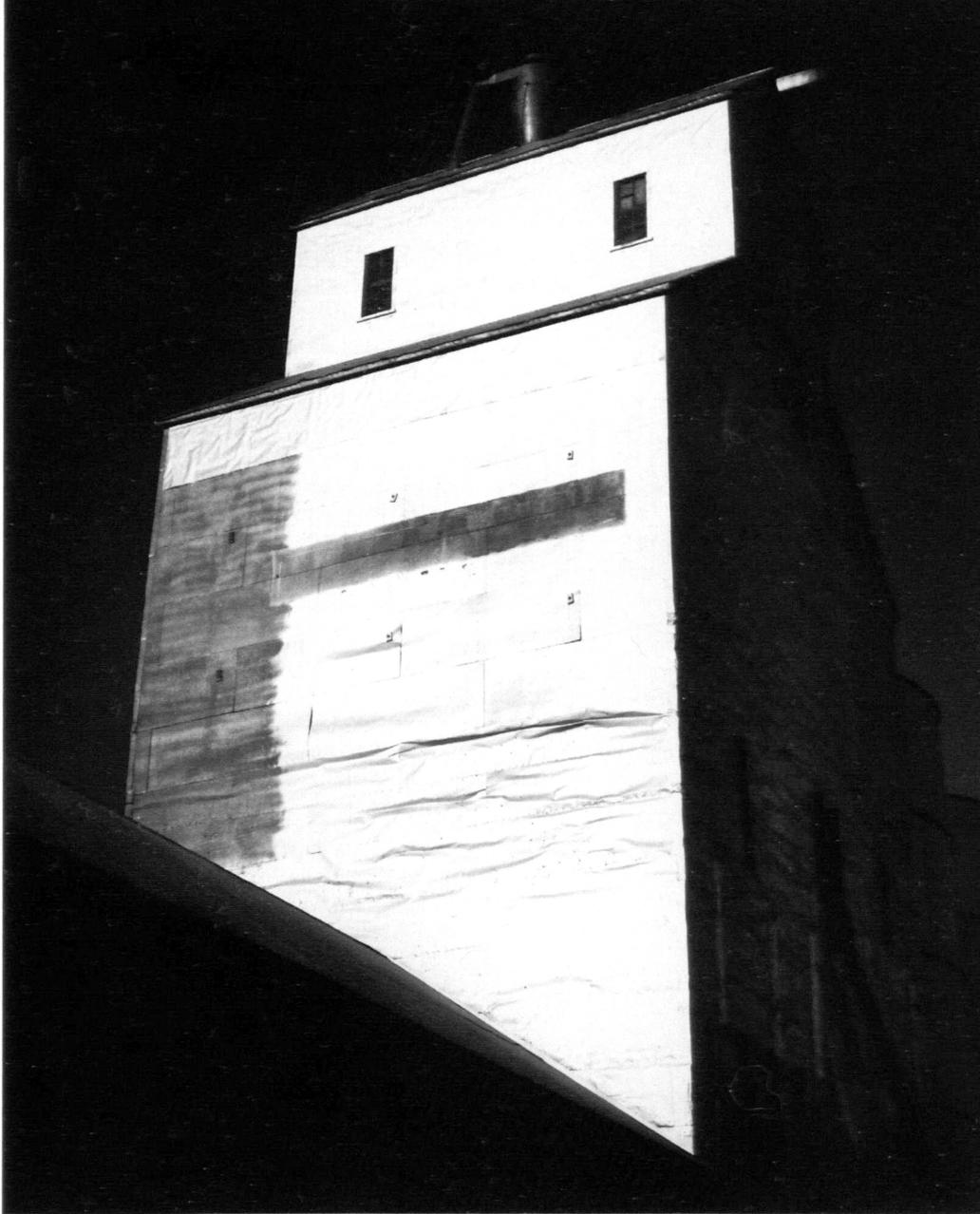
◀ Reflections, Fallen Spruce Trees

Red Rock Lake, Indian Peaks Wilderness

Colorado, 1999

Schuchard has been visiting this lake since he was 16 years old, and he walked past this very spot three or four years in a row before seeing its possibilities as a photograph. What changed, he says, was not the scene but his sensibility.





◀ Grain Elevator
Colby, Kan., 1982

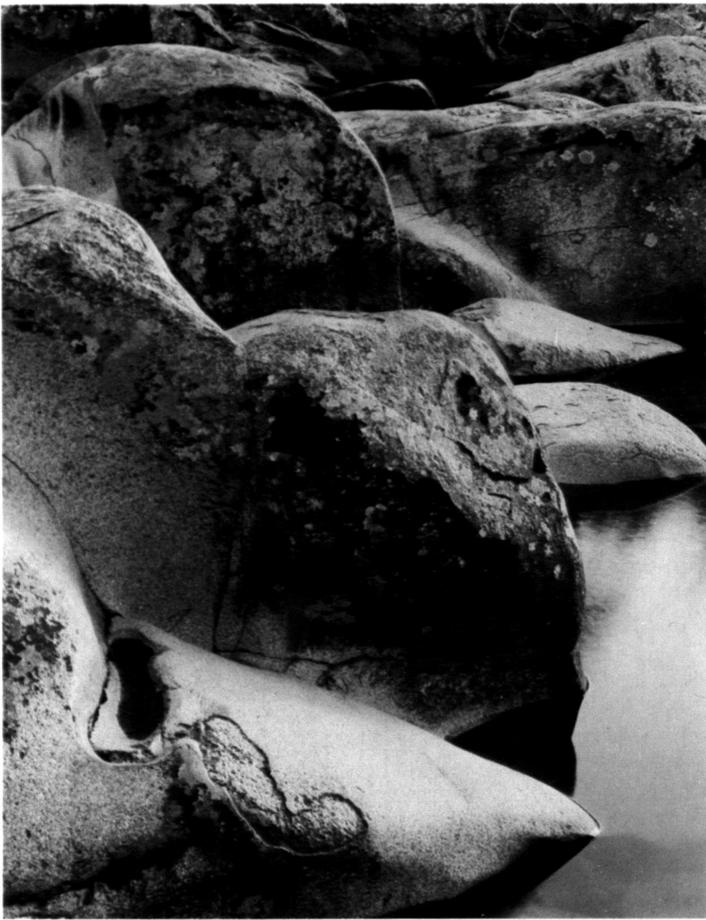
“The grain elevator is a metaphor for the prairie landscape and the agricultural riches emanating from it,” Schuchard writes. “Among other things, it signifies the efficiency of the American farmer, the bounty of the land and the real wealth of America — our natural resources. As a symbol, the structure in *Grain Elevator* also represents abundance and well-being, in much the same way as does Norman Rockwell’s painting *The Four Freedoms*, which portrays the members of a World War II-era family enjoying a holiday meal together.”

◀ Fence Rails and Fallen Leaves
Arrow Rock, Mo., 1984

“*Fence Rails and Fallen Leaves* was made on a clear and cold fall morning,” Schuchard writes in his new book, *The Landscape in Black and White*. “The lighting was from behind the fence and to the left, not a daunting challenge by any means but still one that could easily result in a harsh and contrasty rendition of the scene — one that contradicted my emotional response to the subject and the visual dynamics of that impression. The correct exposure for any subject, and there is only one correct exposure for a scene, is the one that conveys that subject in a manner commensurate with the photographer’s emotional response.”

‘An extraordinary photograph is definitely a chance, and the best chance is that you’re not going to see it.’

— Oliver Schuchard



◀ Granite Forms

Silver Mines Shut-Ins, Mark Twain National Forest
St. Francois County, Mo., 1975

“Spring is the optimum season to photograph at this location; the rocks are polished, the lichens are rich in color and texture, and there is ample water in the pools between the rocks to create reflections and add textural variety,” Schuchard writes. “The most critical challenge to the photographer is a multifaceted one. A decision must be made whether to document the place literally or move toward the abstract.”

Rocks, Leaves, Water ▶

Little Pigeon Creek
Great Smoky Mountains National Park
Tennessee, 1988

“In this deep and narrow valley, if the wind is right, you could probably hear the traffic in Gatlinburg,” Schuchard says. “I look at water as a life force. It brings life to the forest in spring and carries it away in the fall when leaves hit the ground.” Schuchard expressed his interpretation of that scene by making the image in low light at 3:30 p.m. There are two ways to use a camera, Schuchard says: “One is to make a picture. Pictures are what get made 3,000 or so times on the Quad each year during graduation day. The other is to make a photograph, which is an extension of the artist’s sensibility, of themselves, of what they value.”



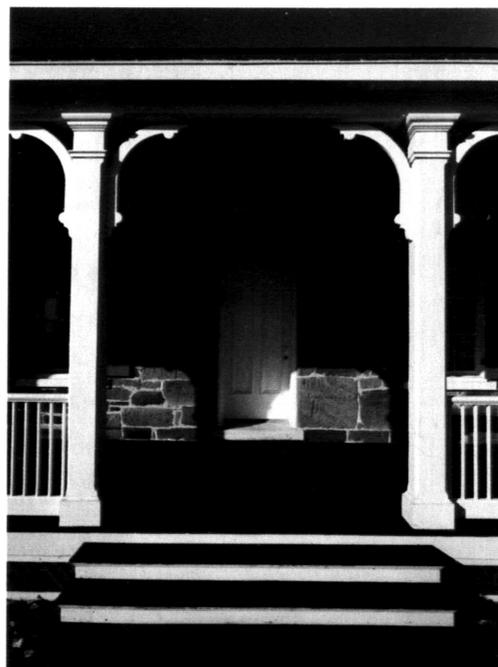
◀ Ferns and Ground Cover Along the Little Pigeon River

Great Smoky Mountains National Park
Tennessee, 1975

“Ferns are among the most symmetrical and delicate of the ground cover species in the southern Appalachians,” Schuchard says. “Their fronds radiate from a center stalk. The branches and individual leaves, all similar and all symmetrical, are a metaphor for the structures inherent in nature.”







▲ Columns and Porch With Graffiti
Fort Larned, Kan., 1988

“I like the idea of building things and have tremendous respect for historic architecture,” Schuchard says. “This architecture served its original purpose of protecting travelers on the Santa Fe Trail. It has also been a cattle corral for local ranchers, and now it’s a historic site. The stones are carved with thousands of names of travelers in Spanish, English and several other languages.”

◀ Wheat Field
West of Summerberry
Saskatchewan, Canada, 1970

“Subtlety is a quality seldom found in the prairie landscape,” Schuchard says. “The prairie is a tough environment, a place of extremes. Before I made this exposure, I visualized the print as a soft rendition of a hard place.”

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