





CARL W. NUNN

The Light Hunter

By Mary Kolesnikova

Carl W. Nunn hunts light. He finds it on the streets of his Harlem home, in the Gotham sky and in the way light drapes itself across the sweeping curves of a naked body. “I always knew that I loved photography,” he says. “Always.” His road to the hunting ground wasn’t an easy one, though. It took him many years and a career or two to realize that his life’s work came down to the simplest thing of all—light.

At the age of 12, Carl struck up an unlikely friendship in his New York hometown with then Syracuse University photography professor Charles Rathbone, helping him develop film in the university’s darkroom. His passion for photography ignited with working alongside Rathbone.

“I was not doing extremely well in school at the time,” Carl says with his trademark, winking laugh. Even though he struck upon photography young, it would take some time before he would pursue his passion. “I would get into it. I would shoot. I had aspirations. Then the 60s came up, and with women, life and the revolution—I got sidetracked.”

When he came to New York City in 1986, he found his muse again at the Center for the Media Arts. This stint resulted in Carl's first professional photography portfolio, but things kept getting in the way. "It was hard to get a job in photography and getting a darkroom in New York was next to impossible. I had buckets of undeveloped film. I ended up landing a job as a grip—don't ask me how. When you start making that kind of money, you think, to hell with photography!"

Ironically, this was the very job that finally brought Carl back to his first love. After a debilitating spinal cord injury on set, he returned to photography and got a hold of a digital camera. Every experience leading him up to that moment simply clicked.

"My background in the motion picture business was to see things differently," he says. "The job of a grip is to modify light. They diffuse



light. They filter light. I didn't know that all of this was actually sticking. If you had told me this was the perfect training for any still photographer, I would've said you were nuts. But it was."

Carl likes to joke that, at 57 years old, he is the oldest emerging artist he knows. And he thinks of himself as an artist, not just a photographer. Says Carl, "I'm no longer separating art from photography. I think that we've separated the life out of art. That makes no sense. To be an accomplished photographer, you have to be an accomplished artist and the key to art is seeing the light."

While Carl is passionate about his ideas on art and photography, he's the very opposite of pretentious. His work has a gritty, documentary feel that many wouldn't immediately associate with an artistic ivory tower. In fact, he is very quick to renounce the ultimate vestige of "true"





fine art photography: film.

"I'm still getting in arguments with people about digital photography," he says with a chuckle. "The revolution is over. A lot of professional photographers have problems with digital because it's democratic. The same problem they had when Kodak invented the Brownie—all of a sudden, a 12-year-old can be a photographer. I think that's the only way to go: access to the medium. I believe it's the bottom that drives the top."

Other than the quick, accessible spontaneity of digital, Carl finds a constant muse

in his surroundings. To find his most important model, all he needs to do is step out of his central Harlem studio. "I'm in love," Carl shares. "I have an absolute love affair with New York City. New York used to have an elegant desolation to it. I like that you can still find it, it's not as easy as it used to be but it's there."

In fact, he likes to find the raw, pulsing heart of any place he visits. He mentions wanting to travel more, going to Europe to lose himself in the beauty of old architecture. Carl comments, "I'll go to Paris and find where the ugly places are! That's

what [I look] for: 'Where's the ugly place? Where's the alley?' 'He's on the wrong side of town!' That's where I'm happiest shooting. It's almost like archaeology, an Indiana Jones approach to photography."

In his endless quest for light, Carl experiments with different setups for his studio shots, relying on sexy, vibrant models. "I use a lot of reflectors and bounce boards," Carl shares. "I like to deal with reflected light and I'm now starting to use my small off-camera flash a lot. I like to have that look of lamp or window light. Even if it has help, I still like to maintain that quality of light."

"Black Hunter," one of Carl's longest running series, deals with his endless search for light in the darkness, his favorite subject. Says Carl, "I love that dark kind of light. I love that kind of desolation." An impressive collection of images, "Black Hunter" resides primarily online at *JPG Magazine's* website (www.jpomag.com). It's a tableau of the people and places of Harlem, the dramatic skies and sharp slices of sunshine, the buildings and stolen moments that evoke Carl's environment.

Carl elaborates, " 'Black Hunter' is about how you see life and light. I look at those things from the dark side. I start from there. Sometimes, to my own chagrin, darkness is comforting. It's always available in the brightest of places. [I search] to find that dark spot in the bright place. I am also investigating the darkness. I look for the darker elements so that the lighter elements pop."

Since *JPG Magazine* online is a lively community of photographers, Carl gets to test their reactions to his "Black Hunter" shots right away. He's constantly updating his collection in prolific bursts. "Some people are totally repelled by it. They say, 'It's too dark, why is that so dark?' When people say that, I know I'm doing the right thing."

A lot of his artistic creativity comes from post-production work but Carl is quick to point out that he doesn't create anything that isn't already in the shot. "I use a lot of manipulation but those elements have to exist. If there is light on someone's face and I darken out the background, I have to see that when I take the picture."

When he edits on his MacBook Pro 17-inch laptop, he uses Photoshop CS3 as well as some editing with Apple Aperture. He shoots most of his pictures in RAW and



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carries Extreme SanDisk cards with him everywhere he goes, backing up his images on DVD and to an auxiliary hard drive.

Developing a style and focusing on his career has been a long time coming for Carl, but he is relishing every minute with his Canon EOS 5D, outfitted with an EF 24–105mm f/4L IS USM lens. “For the first time, I’m putting everything else aside and thinking about the direction of the work,” he says.

As an African-American photographer, Carl is making his mark in the competitive New York City art scene, which is difficult for anyone, but even more so for minority artists. “Does race matter? Of course race matters,” he says. “Being an African-American artist in the United States is not a bowl of cherries. Someone looks at your portfolio and doesn’t believe you took the photograph. ‘How could you have seen this?’ Then you see the other images hanging on the wall and they’re not the kind of images I would create. I’m an African-American who survived in this country in the last 50 years. That’s an accomplishment. If you’re making art, that’s an accomplishment. It’s a difficult endeavor for anyone. For people of color, it becomes extremely difficult.”

Finally building his dream career after

many years, Carl couldn’t be happier with the growth he is currently experiencing. “How do you develop as an artist, how do you find that thing?” he asks with a laugh. “Like Jackson Pollock finding out he could drip paint. It’s the same thing with me. One day, I expose an image and expose light in a certain way and find a way to surgically use it.”

“Photography is simply finding light, it is no more complicated than that.”

Carl is happy to have found a receptive online audience at *JPG Magazine* and *RedBubble* (www.redbubble.com), a website for artists, photographers and writers. More important than that, he’s found community and connected with several photographer friends who comment and follow his work. “I love the Internet. It allows you to become famous. I’m working on that,” he jokes. “I’m no longer excited to fight for brick-and-mortar wall space unless I can control it. I would love to hang art in a major museum but there’s a barrier

when you do. There’s a price point.”

Carl’s work, rich with his unique storytelling viewpoint and his complex take on light, is finally getting the recognition it deserves, both online and off. He hopes that his philosophy is clear in his photographs and that it resonates with old Carl W. Nunn fans and new ones alike. “If it’s too dark, you have to find the beauty in it, you have to look at it longer,” he says of his “Black Hunter” images, though he might as well be talking about a larger ethos in his life. “We are prone to saying light means good and dark is not so good. I go there because there is clarity in the dark that lets you see the light.”

Find more of Carl’s work at www.jpomag.com/people/carl_nunn or www.redbubble.com/people/carlnunn, as well as on his website, www.imagesbynunn.com.

*Mary Kolesnikova is a San Francisco-based freelance writer with a lifelong interest in photography. While her career behind the camera never went past the darkroom she built in her garage in high school, she loves watching photographers at work. When she’s not working for a children’s virtual world website, she writes assorted articles and fiction for children and young adults. Her teen book, *Coven*, is forthcoming. Check out her website at www.marykolesnikova.com.*