



Seeing the Light

Through the Lens
of
Cathy Summers

by
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When you first look at a Cathy Summers photograph, there is an enhanced dimension that holds your gaze. A tree ablaze with brilliant fall color reflected in a pool of water, a diamond droplet of water suspended against the dark gray of a river rock, a rim of light framing the crown of a velvet hunt cap or an iconic building with its marble dome blushed pink in the predawn light — colors and details that your eye did not register at first glance. The familiar is seen

quite literally in a new light, and your experience of a decisive moment changes and is captured forever. The art of her photography allows you to connect with an image. And that is her goal. “Even if it is just one person, one time, then I have succeeded,” she says.

Summers’ work is well known

among the diverse and sophisticated community of outdoorsmen and sports enthusiasts who live around Charlottesville, Virginia, where she was raised and her professional life as a photographer took root. She grew up on a farm not far from the university where her grandfather, William Faulkner, was writer in residence. Her



mother was a dedicated foxhunter, horse breeder, animal lover and avid gardener; her father was an enthusiastic bird hunter; her brothers fishermen.

Anyone at a hunt with the Farmington Hunt Club anytime in the last 30 years might have seen Summers running beside or ahead of the horses and riders and taking shots along the way, or standing among the pack of leaping and baying foxhounds to get a tight shot of a hound. Or seen her crossing a swift running stream, toting heavy cameras with long lenses held against her athletic frame, or moving with speed and confidence along familiar rivers, paths and fields. She works hard to be in just the right spot, in the right light, at the right time to catch in a split second the leap of a fox scampering ahead of hounds in full cry, or to capture a candid image of a rider splashing through a stream in hot pursuit.

Summers' artistic sensibilities were nurtured from early childhood. She learned about color and art through painting with her grandmother. She said, "My grandmother's palette was very muted – probably influenced by her experience living in China. I realized very early





on I wanted to get my own space. The desire to be creative and to participate was there. But I knew I wasn't going to paint and I wasn't going to write it." Her curiosity in photography was cultivated at home; she still owns the family copy of *The Decisive*

Moment by master photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, published in 1952. Among his images of the major writers of the time included his portrait of her grandfather. She was also inspired by images of legendary photographer Ansel Adams and

artist Georgia O'Keeffe. Her great-uncle, Burks Summers, shared travelogues of his many fishing and hunting trips illustrated with black-and-white photos.

Summers' first photos were taken with an old 35-millimeter Rangefinder. "A Leica knockoff," she recalls. "At that time, color processing was way too expensive so we did black-and-white." With an allowance for one roll of film a month, Summers started her journey in photography. She experimented with light. "I loved the magical light of a storm. I would try to capture the various shades of gray in the sky." In the early days, she did her printing in a darkroom used by local professionals, including a few National Geographic photographers. "I met Bill (Allard) and Sam (Abell) when they were developing their film there," she remembered.

Traveling west for outdoor training programs such as the National Outdoor Leadership School and Outward Bound introduced her to the dramatic mountain scenery of the west, and led her to explore differences in light and landscape. After two years at the University of Colorado in

Boulder, Summers returned to Charlottesville to attend the University of Virginia. She also returned to train for the doubles canoe competition in the 1981 Whitewater World Championships to be held that year in Wales. Summers did not get to compete, but she went to Wales with her paddling friends, documenting their adventures with the camera, and worked alongside photojournalists covering the competition.

Summers' first foray into commercial work came in 1981 selling photos taken in the Farmington Hunt field at the club's end-of-year celebration. After moving to Washington, D.C., to work full-time for a Department of Defense contractor in computer science, Summers continued to pursue photography in her spare time, studying monuments, landscapes and memorials, and continuing her self-

education as the advent of digital photography replaced film and the use of computers expanded exponentially the range and possibilities for color photography. With her expertise in equations, experimenting with the complexities of Adobe Photoshop was second nature.

Now retired, Summers is free to photograph subjects that interest her. While maintaining a clientele of private and corporate portrait clients and doing sports coverage for various magazines, she pursues her art using the digital darkroom. She continues to diligently search for the perfect light and to capture lasting images. Most recently she has documented the antics of a family of foxes living in her backyard. She still travels home to Albemarle County to photograph her friends and family in the hunt field, and maintain her affinity for the outdoors in the same

landscape where she first learned to look at life a little differently, through the lens of her camera.

Catherine F. Summers' photos have been published in *The Chronicle of the Horse*, *The Virginia Sportsman*, *Covertside* and *Equus*. To see more of Summers' photography, please visit her website, www.cathysummers.com.

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