



## Chasing Light

Every morning, John Bice bows to and thanks a tree.

It is a huge oak, probably as old as the Civil War. It dominates everything in his yard near Rhoadesville, spreading over his house, the woodworking shop, and the lawn.

If this tree could speak, it would tell how it has watched John, over the past 35 years, pursue a wide variety of endeavors...everything from being a furniture maker to a crisis management counselor, from a general contractor to a flipper of real estate.

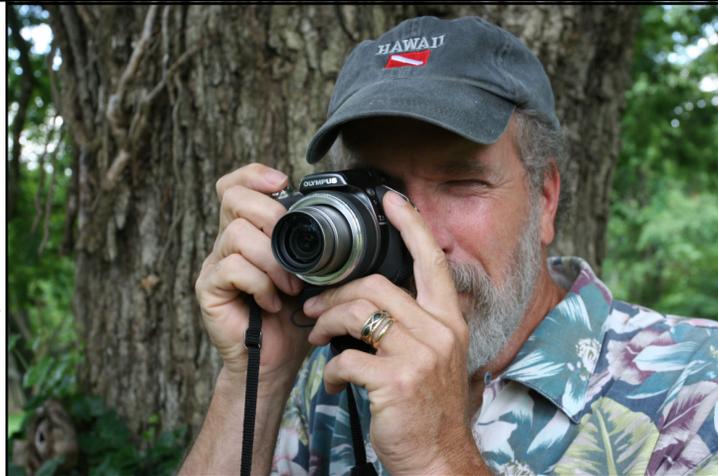
Nowadays, it watches him chase light.

Some things never change. Some always do. And so John bows to one and pursues the other. "It's all about chasing light," he says with a contented smile.

For the past two years, John Bice has been a photographer. He has won awards in Japan and Canada. He has traveled to art shows throughout the mid Atlantic to exhibit and sell his work. He has found images as far away as Turkey and as close as his own kitchen. He has prowled fish markets and cemeteries, city streets and snow covered fields, back alleys and country roads. He has lain in wait for hours in a Florida swamp; he has reacted in an eye blink to a passing person in Montreal. The result has been a remarkable collection of images. And he has done it with a camera that lists for \$259.99.

No huge lenses bristling from complicated mini computer camera bodies and reflective strobe light umbrellas here; John Bice shoots with an Olympus model 550. It has only 7.1 mega pixels... a glorified point and shoot.

It just goes to prove that it is the photographer's eye that makes good pictures, not how much equipment he has. "I am such a neophyte. I kind of don't think of myself as a pho-



Top: Taken one snowy morning in Madison County, this is John Bice's best seller. Above: John Bice, with the oak tree in the background, demonstrates his \$260 camera. Photo by Phil Audibert

tographer," he shrugs. "I think of myself as an image maker. I love capturing images, and I take frames of what I see in the world; which is the beauty of photography is that you share your view with other people."

What is even more remarkable is that he is entirely self taught. John Bice has not taken one photography or art class in his life. When people hear this at the art shows where he exhibits, they furtively blurt things like, "Don't take any classes; it'll screw you up. Whatever you're doing, it's coming out of you and it's right. Taking classes you're going to start second guessing yourself."

Well, maybe a little bit about composition, line and color rubbed off on John from his wife of 24 years, the adoring



John Bice takes great pains to set up his photographs precisely.

and adored Maggie. She's a former art teacher and current graphics artist in residence for the entire Fredericksburg area library system. She knows a thing or two about art. But still, John, with a blissfully clueless expression on his face says, "I don't know squat about photography, I just love images. So I've taught myself enough to capture the images that I want to capture."

Not that he doesn't believe in education and learning; John is all about learning. "You certainly CAN learn a lot," he qualifies, "but we obviously do best when we just go from our heart, whether it's writing or painting or taking pictures or working with wood or clay. It's gotta come from inside."

That's probably where the decision to abandon psychology and take up wood working came from when this London-born military brat landed in Fredericksburg from grad school in Florida. "I think I'll do that," he remembers saying to himself. "To hell with my degree." So, he and a college buddy established an 18<sup>th</sup> century reproduction furniture store called The Colonial Craftsman.

One day, John learned of an estate sale in Orange County...land and a simple cinderblock dwelling near Rhoadesville. "I drove down the driveway and stopped under this tree, which was huge then...and I pulled up and I just did a 360 and got back in my car and drove into town and bought it. I didn't even walk in the house. It was love at first sight and I've been here ever since."

It's funny how one thing leads to another. The house needed work. So, John started fixing it up room by room and he found that he not only enjoyed wood working but building and remodeling. He put that in his back pocket, gave up the life of a "starving artist," and found a job in his degree field as a substance abuse counselor, first in the Fredericksburg area and then with the Rappahannock Rapidan Community Services Board. "I was a counselor at the Orange clinic for a number of years and then unfortunately got promoted," he smirks.

That promotion stemmed from when he talked someone out of pulling the trigger. John is reluctant to take credit for resolving the local hostage-taking crises in the early 1980's, but local law enforcement officials at the time praised him widely for how he handled the situation. "It was pretty hairy. It was like stepping into a movie. Everything got very calm," he remembers as all eyes turned to him for a solution. He talked to the distraught man on the telephone, "for a long time," then through a screen door, then inside the house, before disarming him and peacefully escorting him to the hospital.

"I don't need to be blowing my own horn about any of that stuff; it's just something that happened," he dismisses. But as a result of that incident they kicked John Bice upstairs. He sighs. "I hated administration. I loved working with the people as a counselor. We all get

promoted until we're ineffective."

Pushing paper was not his style, so he quit. "I tend to not do things that I don't like... You gotta love what you do." He remembered the experience of remodeling his home and said to himself, "I loved that, so I'll do that."

And so, Sugarwood was born, the general contracting company and woodworking concern that, under his guidance, did everything from milling the magnificent cherry cabinets in his kitchen to building, remodeling, buying and flipping homes throughout the area. That lasted until six years ago, when he reduced the general contractor's business down to one man...himself. "So when I stopped that was my biggest hurrah; losing the pressure of Friday payroll was fantastic."

John still does some flipping today but adds, "I have been a big proponent, always have, of multiple income streams...that's worked well for me." And he calls this uncertain real estate market, "a double edged sword ... there are great prices out there, but at the same time, it's exceedingly difficult to sell anything. So, it's real tempting to buy but incredibly hard to sell...a real balancing act."

It was only within the last two years that John Bice decided to concentrate most of his energies on his photography. "It's feeding me, so I'm going to stick with this until the next door opens and I take a right turn and I don't know what that will be...Do what you love, the money will follow, and business is an art form in itself. Getting it going and sustaining it is really hard and that's fun for me."

And so John Bice packs up his 10 X 10 exhibit booth/tent and goes to a half dozen or more juried art shows a year to display and sell his photographs. Although he only has room to hang 30 or so, he is looking into a digital screen that can show all 168 of his images as a slide show. That way, if someone likes what they see, he can find the print and have it matted and framed when they return to his booth 15 minutes later.

At \$95 a pop, a John Bice photograph is accessible. "If it's



Many of John Bice's photographs have a serene and uncomplicated quality to them.

\$100 or less, it can be a spontaneous, 'I really like that and I want that in my space,'" he quotes potential buyers as saying. "So I think affordable art is a really important thing in this world. There's certainly room for the \$3000 pieces because there are people who can do that, but most people can't, and most people appreciate art."

But where John Bice really has fun is when he takes his little \$260 camera on safari. "I've spent hours and hours and hours and hours sitting or standing or laying in one spot trying to get the right picture," he admits. Maggie doesn't come with him anymore, "because I just get lost in photo land. So I'm no fun to be with."

Although they have traveled extensively both here and



John and Maggie Bice have been together for 24 years. They are now proud grandparents.

flipped.” The fact that image is NOT digitally altered “adds tremendous value... So, I’m a firm believer that there’s a place for both. Both are art. Both are certainly fair. It’s just a matter of divulging what you’ve got and then it can be appreciated for what it is.”

On the day of this conversation, John, who was recovering from knee surgery, hobbled out on his deck and looked up to the magnificent oak as two panting and somewhat overweight labs followed good naturedly. “Art is everywhere we look and that’s the thing about the photographer’s eye, which everybody has if they just acknowledge it and use it; that everywhere you look, if the light’s right, because it’s all about chasing light, that everywhere you look, given the right set of circumstances, it transforms into art. So, it’s light and composition and boom, you’re there.”

Sometimes people ask John what kind of photography he does. In an e-mail, he responds, “I chase light. Yes, photography is about subject matter and composition and framing the shot and color and contrast ... but mostly it is about light. By definition it is light...light being reflected by, absorbed by, illuminated with, shadowed from ... it is catching all the interactions of light with your chosen subject. It is in constant dance with the world around us, a perpetually changing palette, different every moment, never to be exactly the same ever again.”

abroad, John quickly adds “You don’t have to go overseas; there’s beautiful stuff here.” A line in his artist’s statement says, “We are so blessed here in Virginia to have such natural beauty and variation of ecosystems that I love shooting here probably more than anywhere in the world.”

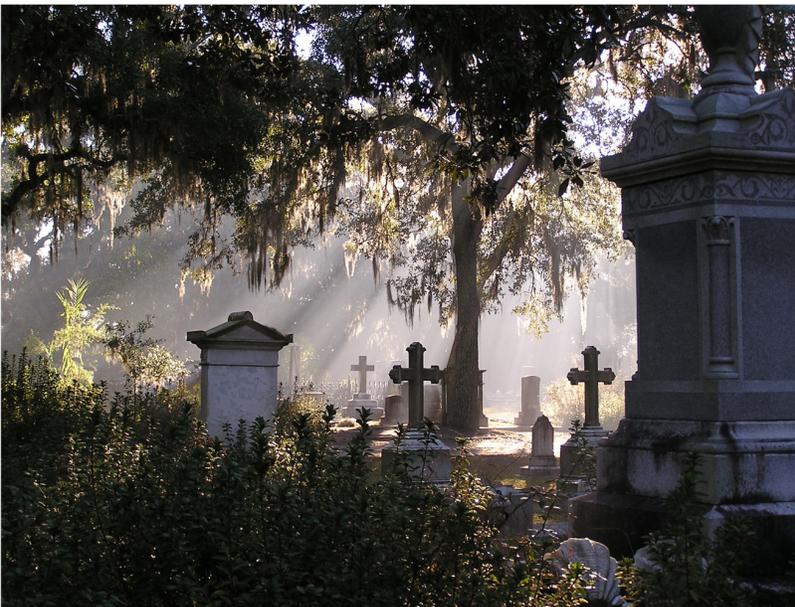
In matters technical, he claims abysmal ignorance. Although he went through the whole 35 millimeter SLR camera with multiple lenses thing in the good ole days of photography, he says today he often shoots on “Auto.” He is a considerably more accomplished when it comes to using the computer and Photoshop. Still, 90% of his images are unaltered digitally, “and I think it’s important that people know...there are pictures where you don’t know if they’re manipulated, and it’s only fair both to the photographer and to the public that you differentiate.”

He pulls out some images he took of the Kirov Ballet at the Kennedy Center. “I water colored it so you can’t recognize the person. I think the watercolor effect lends itself nicely to ballet; it looks like a painting, but you can’t recognize the women and that was important in terms of copyright.”

Then another picture, of a snow white egret standing motionless in a swamp seems digitally altered because the reflection is so white and the bird itself is so gray. John smiles mischievously, insisting it’s the original photograph. “It’s upside down,” he finally lets on. “I hang it



This picture “sells like hotcakes,” even though John tells prospective buyers that he digitally removed 75 people, a boat, and replaced a high rise hotel with the palm trees.



Taken in Savannah, Georgia





Clockwise from top left: Steadying his camera on the balcony rail, John Bice caught a grand entrance of the Kirov ballet coming down invisible ramps at the Kennedy Center. He has made the photograph look like a watercolor so that the ballerina's faces would not be recognizable.

Roses-John Bice not only chased but caught the light red handed on these roses in a stone bowl in Italy.

Vineyard- Chasing light on the diagonal, John Bice shot this picture in an Italian vineyard.



Snapper- John Bice shot this at the riverside fish market in Washington, DC. Of the market, he says, "It's so cosmopolitan, you could be in any city in the world. It's fabulous."

Bluesman- John shot this street musician playing for tips in front of the National Gallery in Washington, DC.

La Femme Noir- This candid shot was taken on a street in St. Augustine, Florida.

