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Photography

Walking in the Light: Ken Duncan's Iconic Australian Images & Their Stories
Ken Duncan, photographer
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Using relatively simple tools, Ken Duncan creates complex images that require exploration. The very nature of his chosen medium, the panoramic photograph, encompasses more in one frame than can normally be seen with our eyes. The viewer must approach Walking in the Light as he would view a sweeping vista, turning his head to take in the expanse.

"Royal Gathering, Maquarie Island" is an example of one photograph that encompasses many different scenes. In the right foreground are hundreds of Royal and King Penguins, but as the shoreline recedes into the distance we see their numbers are into the thousands, fading to nothing but black and white dots on the distant beach. In the left foreground seals play in the crashing sea. In the background on the right, tree-covered hills glow in deep greens and golds, while on the left side indigo storm clouds move in across the ocean. This is not Photoshop trickery, but a fraction of a second's exposure capturing the perfect moment on one frame of film.

Duncan is a master of his small tool set. Nearly every image is captured on Fujifilm Velvia and most are made with a low-tech Linhof 617 camera with either a 90mm or 75mm Schneider lens. Only one of all the images, "Arkaba Woolshed, Flander Ranges, SA" uses a longer (180mm) lens. Duncan is similarly spare with his words.

Each plate is accompanied by a short description of his experience making the photograph. At times it feels a bit like gilding the lily, as Duncan's images speak for themselves. But in his unrefined prose there are frank and moving statements about the controlling Australian government. In the message accompanying "Southern Dreaming," an image that was licensed as a souvenir of the 2000 Olympics, Duncan writes "I was allowed to access this normally closed beach through an old tunnel … Sadly this historic tunnel is no more, destroyed by authorities to prevent any further access to the beach. Surely in a place like this there must be better ways of managing the public than simply locking them out." Duncan sees the

photographer as a preservationist as much as an archivist and often laments the fleeting nature of these hallowed places. He writes, “Places are transient things. If we don’t photograph them today, they may be gone tomorrow.”

Walking in the Light is a welcome addition to any coffee table that can display its large-scale, 19×8.5” format. For photographers and other artists it’s a most valuable book that demonstrates how a master practices his craft; to those who have a passion for wild Australia, the beautiful volume is a gift of love.

Thomas Kachadurian