

## On Location: Personal Project - Americana

by Photographer Raymond Klass

One of the wonderful things about being an artist is that the only restraints on your work are the ones that you impose upon yourself. I used to tell people that I was a "Nature Photographer", and indeed, that's exactly what I shot – nature. I thought that was what a nature photographer did – just shot nature. I've long since discovered while the great outdoors is still my favorite subject, there's plenty of room for exploring other subjects through my lens.

Traveling the country – through big cities and small towns – for whatever reason, I've just been drawn to some of the uniquely American facets of our culture. I've sort of started a personal project, capturing the pieces large and small of Americana, though perhaps a better title for these images would be "Only in America". The things that appeal to me span the gamut from patriotic to absurd, whether it's a hand-painted flag on the side of an old barn or a 40-foot tall ape advertising beachwear.

The nice thing about a personal project is that there's no deadline – no schedule. It's the sort of thing that you can decide when to begin, and when you've made your statement. Some last for a week or two, while others might continue for years. The images here have been taken over the last few years – though the majority of them were taken in the last year.

There's an inherent freedom in defining your own project. It can be a great opportunity to break away from what you might otherwise gravitate towards, and explore a different or interesting new subject. As I said, the majority of my images concentrate on big, beautiful, natural landscapes – something quite the opposite from Americana and American Kitsch. For the next few months – or perhaps longer, between you and I – I'll





be on self-assignment – capturing some of the more unique aspects of American life and culture whenever I get the opportunity.

I would encourage anyone whose photography is entering a creative rut, to put yourself on self-assignment – to define a personal project. It can be anything, from a new style of taking images, to a post-processing technique, to a new and interesting subject. The goal of a self-assignment is to grow as an artist – to evolve.

The beauty of making your experimentation a personal project is that the only measure of success is whether you are pushing your personal limits. In the past year, I've returned to the sport of rock-climbing, which I had first tried years ago in college. In conversation, I'm often asked about whether I've ever fallen during a climb. I think there's a wonderful analogy here between being a photographer and a rock climber. And the answer of course, is Yes.

When you're high up on a rock face with nothing but a thin rope separating you from the ground below, taking a chance on a harder route than your comfortable with might seem like a stupid mistake. But consider the alternative – I could continue climbing what I know I can do – what one might call the easy route. The only way to get better – to progress as a climber, is to take that chance – to overcome that fear, and that probably means falling a couple times until you've mastered that new technique. World-class climbers – one of which I'm not – often have routes they call "projects". These are routes they know in their heart that they can climb, though physically or mentally they're not there yet. They work on these routes for





weeks, months, or even years, before they're able to do them – if they're able at all.

I think this is the perfect analogy for a creative outlet like photography. All too often photographers get to a location and go straight for the “easy route” – they take the type of picture they've taken before and play it safe. They don't trust that if they take that leap, the rope will be there to catch them. We need to redefine how we see that fall – how we see that photograph that doesn't quite work. There's no shame in taking a bad photograph – rather there should be a sense of pride. It's far easier to take the safe picture than to reach into unfamiliar territory and explore new techniques.

A personal project is a way for us all to reach up and beyond where we were yesterday as photographers and explore new and unfamiliar techniques. It's a positive move toward pushing our personal boundaries and developing our creative muscles. We all would do well to study the patience that world-class climbers have – to try hundreds if not thousands of times to master a particular technique, not knowing if it's even possible. The next time your effort with a new technique isn't successful, don't be disappointed, be proud that you took the risk – for this is perhaps the most difficult part.

