



## Introduction

Someone once said that the definition of a photography collector is one who continues to buy pictures even though there is no wall space left. With some of today's artists producing mural sized pictures, that may happen pretty quickly then! I have personally been a collector and dealer in the fine art photography business for over ten years now. The essence of collecting

is about passion. Why do I buy a photograph? Because I love it. But many people also collect photography as an investment and this has become a very serious business. The informed collector is one who goes to see many exhibitions and looks at books to become familiar with the artists and genres. Over time you may discover certain artists or styles you prefer, but

you don't necessarily have to have a theme to your collection. Collecting photographs should be fun and it shouldn't have to bust your budget. This tech sheet offers background information for beginners and some valuable resources to help collectors make informed decisions.

– Kevin Kaplan

## Before the Boom

The Museum of Modern Art in New York City is widely regarded as one of the most important art institutions in the world. In 1940, they asked Edward Steichen to form a department of photography at the museum. He became the first in a series of important curators at the museum who would influence, to this day, the collecting of fine art photography. Photographers fortunate enough to be included in their collection were able to command higher prices for their work and found themselves being sought after by important individuals. Private gal-

leries soon realized that there was a growing market and demand for those who wanted to mimic museum collections. At first it was some of the established painting galleries that included photographers in their stable, but eventually galleries dedicated solely to the exhibition of photography began to evolve. New York, because it is home to many important museums and businesses, was the first city that embraced private photography galleries. Today there are hundreds of galleries around the world that specialize in the sale of fine art photographs.

*"Take heart, budget collectors. Major museums across the country are gambling on some promising photographers whose works you can actually afford. In much of the art world, where works often command seven or eight figures, such bargain hunting isn't possible anymore. But photography has boomed as a collecting field only in the last 15 years. As a result, the window for superstars is still wide open. That means museums, as well as private collectors, can get in on the ground floor."*<sup>1</sup>

## Working with a Gallery

The number one thing I tell most novices about galleries is not to be intimidated by them. A gallery is a resource. What is on the walls of the gallery is most often a small fraction of what they have in inventory. Ask to see additional works, and you will be pleasantly surprised to discover many things you had not seen before. Ask questions. Dealers should have a good understanding of the art in their inventory and the context in which their artists belong. Does it matter if the photograph is in a limited edition or un-editioned? Sometimes this does affect the price if an artist has staggered the price based on how many have sold within the edition. But usually the current value is reflected based



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on who the artist is, if the image has been published, and whether or not it is a vintage print. (The term *vintage* is commonly accepted as a print made within five years of the date of the

negative.) And surprisingly to most Texans, size does not matter. Some of the most expensive photographs in the world are smaller than 8 by 10 inches.

*"Just because you have come into a lot of money doesn't mean you have the knowledge you need to buy art intelligently. If you're a novice, buying without help from a trusted dealer or art consultant is risky. Dealers can help collectors in many ways. They alert clients to new works, they supply a work's provenance, or history of its ownership and past sales, which helps determine its value. The main thing is to acquire works that you'll enjoy living with."*<sup>2</sup>

# The Auctions

Twice a year in New York the art world focuses in on the auctions at Christie's and Sotheby's. These events have set the standard for determining the market for fine art photographs and have continuously raised the bar for the quality of work being offered. The auction catalogs are fantastic resources that provide important historical information about the artists as well as provenance information. This helps to answer the question of why two prints of Ansel Adams' *Moonrise over Hernandez* can be sold for radically different prices

during the same auction. Apart from the photography auctions, many photographs can now also be found in the New York contemporary art sales where popular photographers like Thomas Struth and Philip-Lorca diCorcia are sold alongside Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns. Another place to find some great work and hidden gems are benefit auctions held by various organizations and institutions. The annual TPS print auction is a example of this. You can look on the Internet or in magazines to be alerted when these events take place.

*"The market has never been so hot for photography", says Philippe Segalot, international head of Contemporary Art at Christie's, where last November's sale broke world records for five artists' photography. "Now, collectors aren't buying a few photos just to fill the wall space between their paintings. There are more and more collections being put together around photography and dedicated to photography only."*<sup>3</sup>

## Some names to check out

Here are some names you may be familiar with of a few photographers worth noting. I have divided this selection into three categories: early stars, mid-career bargains, and masters you should snap up fast. Sometimes you do not have to look much further than our own organization to discover rising talent. Rick Hunter and Kimberly Gremillion's works both sell for under \$1,000 and are now being seen in many

exhibitions both locally and nationally. Take note of Kimberly's circus work, which will be the subject of her first monograph next year. Keith Carter and Michael Kenna are among some of the most widely collected artists in the country. Their work is editioned and prices rise very quickly as the more popular images sell out. Look for some great shots of theirs still in the lower tiers. And finally pay attention to

what I call some of the under appreciated masters. Bruce Davidson and Lee Friedlander fit into this category. Both have been the subject of numerous one-person museum shows and monographs and are priced way below some of their peers. This is perhaps the best-kept secret in the collecting world. There are of course many more, but these artists are a good place to start your search.

## Resources

Here are a few books I recommend should be a part of every photography collector's library. They offer a broad introduction to the masterworks of photography from which almost everyone working in the medium today has been influenced. Also I have listed the telephone numbers for subscriptions to the auction catalogs. Over time these are an invaluable record to the trends in photography collecting.

Davis, Keith. *From Dry-Plate to Digital: The Hallmark Photographic Collection*. Foreword by Donald J. Hall. New York: Hallmark Cards Inc, 1995.

Szarkowski, John. *Looking at Photographs: 100 Pictures from the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Doubleday, 1973, 1990.

Christie's catalogs – 800-395-6300.  
Sotheby's catalogs – 800-444-3709.

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup>"Betting on Photo Futures," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 31, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>"The Art of the Dealer," *Business Week*, March 27, 2000.

<sup>3</sup>"Lens Crafters," *W*, May 2000.



© Rick Hunter

*Drive In - Fredericksburg, Texas, 2002*  
From the series – *Waltz Across Texas*

## About the Author: Kevin Kaplan

Kevin Kaplan pursued a master of fine arts in photography at The School of Visual Arts in New York City and then spent three years working at Pace/MacGill Gallery with such legends as Harry Callahan, Robert Frank and Irving Penn. He left the

art world briefly to work in high tech, but shortly after moving to Austin, Kevin opened his own photography gallery. He is the owner and founder of Lake Austin Fine Arts, which specializes in contemporary photography in Austin, Texas. Gallery exhibitions

have included many artists such as Bruce Davidson, Neil Leifer and Joel Sternfeld. Contact Kevin at 512-347-9233 or email [kevin@lakeaustinfinearts.com](mailto:kevin@lakeaustinfinearts.com).

*The Texas Photographic Society is a nonprofit organization of amateur and professional photographers whose purpose "is to support contemporary photography as a means for creative expression and cultural insight." With over 830 active members from 33 states, TPS focuses on the education*

*and artistic development of its members and the community by providing exhibitions, publications, education and outreach programs. Tech Sheets, a benefit of membership, are edited by Jean Caslin and D. Clarke Evans. © Kevin Kaplan and the Texas Photographic Society. For information about the*

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