

An Interview with Tijuana Bullfight Photographer Mark Mecalis

by Dale Pierce

1. You have become somewhat well-known as a photographer at the bullrings in Mexicali and Tijuana. What attracted you to bullfighting photography?

1: My attraction to Bullfighting specifically was a reaction to witnessing my first in 2001 in Tijuana. The original path I set upon was a writer's quest. After reading Hemmingway, Kehoe, Conrad, Collins/Lapierre et al., I sensed the fiber of manhood and heroism that had only previously come to me through my love of Roman history. Was the arena not dead? I had to see for myself. I took Hemmingway's advice for writers, to seek out an environment of life and death to learn about people and the world in a true light. I mistakenly thought he meant the actual dying part. It turns out the way people react to the life and death environment is where everything becomes crystal clear. Before I had seen my first Bullfight I had a reverence for the rituals and people who kept it alive. The men involved with the Corrida seemed mythic to me, I needed to see if it could be real. It would not be man vs. man on the sand, but something magical I would discover in Mexico. Not only did the ancient arena still have one breath of life in its soul, men could still choose to be heroes or cowards as they stand in a circle of sand before Man and God.

2. Did you study photography itself beforehand or learn as you went along?

2: I did not study photography in a formal setting. I have had an art and drafting background in school followed by years in art galleries in Del Mar and La Jolla as a high end custom framer. These things have led to having an eye for composition and the ability to know what is and is not art. The camera and equipment skills I have learned along the way. Shooting in digital and spending 95% of my efforts initially learning digital image processing has led to a dramatically increased learning curve. I started in digital so I have no baggage to shed from a chemical camera past. Digital is the world I know.

3. You also run a graphics business on the American side of the border?

3: My graphics business consists of a digital photo lab and custom framing studio. I do freelance photography and any custom framing work I can bring in. I have the luxury of being able to bring to life on site a complete package from concept to presentation.

4. What toreros do you consider the most photogenic?

4: The most photogenic toreros come in at least two categories. 1: Damn handsome in the traje – really looking every bit the hero. And 2: The men who have great form with the Bulls, beautiful in balance with the animal and cloth, which may or may not have the physical perfection as in type one. As a photographer my lens lusts for both with equal vigor. Many times the toreros are a mix of the two, usually the handsome trades upwards, but an ugly torero with little talent is less seen. Some of the handsome in the traje fitting the ideal expectation (who have talent as well, but it is not the point of comment here) are; Rafael Ortega, Alejandro Amaya, Alfredo

Gutierrez, Israel Tellez, Ignacio Garibay, Jose Maria Luevano, Guillermo Martinez and rejoneador Rodrigo Santos. On my list of favorite forms on the sand to photograph I have to restate some of the names from the handsome list. In the form group: Eulalio Lopez "El Zotoluco", Eloy Cavazos, Miguel Espinosa, El Juli, Pablo Hermoso de Mendoza, Ignacio Garibay, Rafael Ortega, Manolo Aruza, Alejandro Amaya, Jose Luis Angelino, Fernando Ochoa and Israel Tellez. I'm sure there are names and faces that have slipped through the edges of my memory at the moment but it serves as a representational list.

5. Do you shoot from the stands or the callejon and if the latter, have you had the "pleasure" yet, of a bull jumping into the passageway right by you?

5: I have always shot from the ground level, at first it was through a window in one of the arena gates, or later as the guest of Matador Cesar Castaneda that I acquired enough prints and experience in Callejon rules to earn a professional photographers pass to the Callejon.

I have indeed known the pleasure of being joined by a Bull in the Callejon. It was last year (2004) on September 25th the day of my fortieth birthday. I was shooting at the L.A. Cettos winery festival down in the stone bullring. It had a half circle Callejon with only one burladero at the extreme end. It of course was occupied and left nothing for the dozen or so people remaining. The stone wall was chest high, a foot thick with no estribo. A possible leap for a two handed man, but with a camera and attached telephoto lens in one hand impossible to clear. The Bull (445k) comes out as most all others - with gusto, springing up to meet the Capote in the first circle of the arena. Driving its horns at a couple of initial passes then breaks off for another circle of the arena. The Matador is setting himself on the opposite side for the return of the Bull and then three feet to my left it leaps halfway over the wall. I can hear the hide sliding on the cement and stone surface and in mental slow motion, much to my horror the Bull continues sliding forward as its rear end glides away from me. I realize it is going to be facing me when it lands in the Callejon. Then full speed life happens. The bull is on the sand in the Callejon three feet in front of me and starts at me like lightning. There is no where to run. I glance over my shoulder and see everybody packing into the dead end of the Callejon like people trapped at a locked door in a fire. So I jump as high as I can for the wall cradling my camera in one hand and the holding the wall with the other. I only get half way over with one boot covered foot of mine sticking out behind for balance, making a sweet target for an angry Bull. Like a base ball bat tied to a speeding car bumper the horn hits my foot. A second blow to the arch of my foot and third to the left side of my calf were nasty additions to the first on the top of my foot to my shin. Running down the Callejon to the dead end it runs over a young woman photographer sending her to the hospital. I still shot the whole day, drove home from Ensenada and endured a two hour border crossing before I could get out of my boots and see what really happened. I almost had to cut the boot from my leg due to the swelling. I was unable to put any weight on my foot for a full week. The swelling and internal blood pools did not dissipate for an additional three weeks. I still get twinges of pain and stiffness in my right ankle and foot.

6. Have you studied other photographers from the past and their styles, via the old bullfighting books?

6: As far as studying others work, I would hope I am not alone in my approach. I do not study anyone's work but my own. I have an artistic intention much like a sculptor sees something in the stone. I only work to bring it out. The process takes it own measure of time to perfect. But I know what I am trying to impart through my work and spend all my effort to achieve that goal without regard for others work. There is also the factor of the feeling of personal discovery in capturing a theme or moment perfectly. I always feel a sense of loss when I find a similar moment has been done by others. I understand it and respect it. But it only serves to stoke my inner fires of creativity in which to find deeper and more richly themed shots that are uniquely mine.

7. The Fiesta Brava news service on the net has used some of your photos, right?

7: The Fiesta Brava news service has recently published a few of my photos of Atanasio Velazquez in Mexicali Mexico.

8. Have your works been seen yet in other big media sources?

8: I have been published in 6 Toros 6 Magazine and am featured on www.burladerodos.com.

9 Many bullfighting photographers have seemed to prefer black and white, but you like shooting in color?

9: Color verses black and white is an argument for some. I only see and think in color. The lighting is impossible for a lot of photographers to adjust to in high speed action subjects. Black and white affords them something to work with. The mind remembers color more vividly than it is in reality. Chemical cameras have some difficulty recreating true colors from the lighting in which we are forced to shoot, let alone boosting them. With a good digital camera and the "Black Arts" of digital processing I can bring back the colors to vivid levels which please the eye and correspond to the minds vision of events. With special shooting modes and software I can achieve previously impossible results and detail with a larger volume of usable material.

10. Do you sell photos to the general public?

10: I have all my Bullfighting work available for sale on my website www.mecalisgraphics.com.

11. Where can people contact you? Don't you have a graphics page?

11: My website is just beginning to take shape. I wish to add many more short stories and inside notes from each Bullfight I shoot. One can find my work for sale and custom framing as well. Only a few frame and matting samples are shown, my studio stocks hundreds of varieties. My e-mail address is mecalisgraphics@hotmail.com.

12. Have you ever thought of doing a bullfighting page as well?

12: My inside knowledge of who is who and what they used to do has been greatly

limited by my newness to the world of the Bulls. I walk in rare inside places and through the graces of my friends am learning more of who is doing what for whom and their histories. I am not the right person to maintain a forum on Bullfighting. I just don't have enough experience under my belt yet. As far as what I see happening here and now, the inside scandals at the Plazas, personal moods, scary moments up close, the look in the eyes and all the emotions I am the right guy. I can't get enough time with all my responsibilities to write as much as I wish.

13. Have the empresarios been fairly cooperative with you in your efforts to photograph bullfighting?

13: I have had a path to the Callejon that seems to me as a gift by destiny. I wished for something deeply and everything has worked in my favor towards that goal. Mexico has been most warm and generous; the people involved in Tijuana and Mexicali are wonderful.

14. What do you think makes a good bullfighting photograph? Are there particular angles, passes or certain things you set up and wait for?

14: The elements that comprise a good bullfighting photo are a point of argument with some photographers. You can almost hear them grumbling "What the hell is he going to say". I will with respect give them their due by dividing the categories. One category is the classic shot. Perfect angle, animal, cloth and man. The museum piece example of the moment, the one image that defines the pass. I call them the "White Buffalo" shots. One could spend years collecting a mere dozen or so. And some do only that, waiting, and waiting. Usually getting bitter in the process. Those types of photographers tend to disdain all others work and people in general because they feel that they alone are more knowledgeable than all around them. They also spend much of their time with their camera pointed at their feet. Then there is what I call the "Heroic" shots which can include but are not limited to the Classics. The risking of life with class combined with the Traje, animal and cloth is a powerful theme. In my opinion worthy of great photographic study. Regardless of who is who and where they are performing. What happens on the sand is the truth; that is the most important thing for me.

15. Not the most photogenic this time, but as the "best:" so to speak as a torero, what matador do you consider the best?

15: My opinion of the best I have seen would be the rejoneador Pablo Hermoso de Mendoza and the late David Silveti.

16. How would you describe the Mexicali bullfighting scene?

16: The Mexicali Bullfighting scene is fairly new to me. This is my first "season" shooting there. I tend to think of the obstacles to a good days shoot (angle of the shoot vs. the sun, heat, light fading early etc.) when I think of Mexicali. Except that I love the Bull pens for the sorteo, with their windows to the toros and brick walls.

17. Any other interesting stories to tell?

17: The stories I would like to remember in my future would be divided into three categories;

(1): The moments of honor; like the recognition by Juan Silveti of my photography work, a personal moment of pride I will carry with me always. Being invited by Eulalio Lopez "El Zotoluco" to shoot his dressing and that he and his manager liked my work. Most importantly my friends in the Castaneda family which adopted me as one of their own.

(2): The incredible moments of valor when things go wrong. Watching my friends, the arena Monosabios leap the barrera and bare handedly distract the Bulls or pull the fallen men to safety without regard for their own lives. These young men heed the inner voice of heroic men for much deeper reasons than the 50 pesos a day they receive. Also the Matadors after a goring or severe tossing shaking off the men around them and biting the Bull with a fire, risking all and triumphing.

(3): The moments of humor which unfortunately can include some injuries. Like falling on my butt while shooting in the center of the arena during the paseo. It was without injury but did earn me the first ovation of the day. The time I jumped up from my camera bag to run for a shot ahead in the Callejon and almost impaled myself on a sword handler's blade. He was cleaning the blood off with a sponge and was holding the blade horizontally at chest height and I stopped an inch from my heart. We both laughed – but I had a drink that evening to celebrate. The tossings of the Matadors and Picador spills are all memorable.

18. Closing comments?

18: I only hope to grow and improve in my endeavors. I would be pleased to find out one day that there were others out in the world that enjoy my work and appreciate its openness and direction.

End interview. 10/2005

Mark's website of Bullfight photos in Tijuana, Mexicali and Ensenada Mexico at:

<http://www.mecalisgraphics.com/>

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