

SPORTING: The Mark Mecalis Interview!



Mark Mecalis is a professional photographer and a burgeoning writer. I discovered his work while researching the bullfights in Tijuana, MX. His beautiful imagery documents one of the last remaining rituals pitting man versus beast.

The Sporting Life) Where did you grow up?

Mark Mecalis) I was born in Portland, Oregon and raised on the coast of Del Mar, California.

TSL) What were your interests as a kid?

MM) Fishing in the streams of Mt. Hood, Oregon, Model Rocketry, Amateur Magic, U-Control model airplanes and surfing Torrey Pines & Blacks Beach.

TSL) What inspired you to start photographing bullfights?

MM) I first went to see the Bullfights on a writer's mission, taking Hemingway's advice to seek the truth in men by getting as close to life and death circumstances as possible. To paraphrase; If you cannot get to war then go to the Bullfights. I assumed he meant the death of the Bulls. When seeing a glimmer of this "truth" from the front row of my first Bullfight I made up my mind to take action. Arriving early to the next, I watched through a hole in an arena gate at ground level. Among the wonders witnessed were photographers wearing Callejon Passes - right down in the action. I decided that moment to do what-ever-it took to get in

there with the Matadors. Keeping a writers perspective I began to learn photography. I was required to prove my worthiness to the officials of the Plaza and through some developed connections eventually was allowed in for one Bull a Bullfight to show I could produce images and not get anyone killed (by distracting the Bulls or anyone out on the sand). While in the trenches of the Callejon (working area on the arena floor) I have found Hemingway's truth: It is the life and death environment that brings out the real nature of Men.

TSL) How has it changed your perspective on modern life?

MM) I am a huge Homer fan (800b.c. - not Simpson) as well as Roman history devotee. It came as an epiphany watching my first Bullfight - I could see a link to the type of Men who fought with steel and flesh in the Matadors of today.

TSL) How has the *Sport* changed since you've been involved or interested?



MM) In the small window of my six years involvement I was able to document the final few years of the famous Plaza el Toreo in downtown Tijuana from an insiders perspective. I have been humbled by the welcoming of my work as a part of the historical record of Bullfighting and by the Matadors of Mexico and elsewhere with whom I am privileged to work. I've shot some events, as time

passes turn out to be very important. Men die, retire and give their finest performances – which are best noted in retrospection and imagery. I've seen the Americans in the seats lighten since 911, also the recent (and hopefully temporary) loss of participation by the official Bullfighting organization in Mexico with the Tijuana Plaza- leaving the owners to privately organize their own season. Things hopefully will improve. What I see of the future of Bullfighting in my area concerns me. If there are curious minded people out there - now is the time to attend.

My view on modern life is through a historical perspective. The world of Bullfighting is its own thing. What brings me in as a photographer is a quest to catch the ether of the heroes I read of in Homer and other ancient stories. As in literature, I seek a common bond in Man that transcends time and connects us.

TSL) Which are your favorite bullrings to photograph?

MM) Of the five Plazas I have worked in, I think of them as follows:

Plaza el Toreo was my woman – if you will. I loved her, faults and all. My close friends lived and worked inside the Plaza grounds. My sons both learned to ride on the arena sand with the Picador horses. I spent my best times welcomed as family inside that historic Plaza and was emotionally crushed when it was torn down.

Plaza Calafia, Mexicali is a very relaxed Plaza for me to shoot in. I can do what ever I need to get my shots there - God bless them. It is a “little” warm out there, but the drive over the Mountains and through the desert is just beautiful – especially Hwy 2 from Tijuana over the mountains at La Rumarosa into the desert below.

Plaza Monumental Tijuana is huge, and for me the most reminiscent of an ancient arena. I love the romantic feel of the coastline and the sunset at the close of the Bullfight. I have had some of my most exciting days and encounters with beautiful local women there.

Plaza el Cortijo, Tijuana is a small horse ring that has occasional exhibition Bullfight festivals. I have captured some great images there.

L.A. Cetto's, Ensenada is a great experience in travel and romantic scenery. The coastal drive down Hwy 1 to Ensenada is spectacular. The Eastern road that turns into a lush and beautiful wine valley is a great surprise. The magnificent private stone Plaza has a half- circle Callejon which drives me nuts as a photographer – I can't always get in front of the shots because the Bulls are worked facing the audience on the opposite side of the arena. It is the place where I was attacked by a Bull that jumped the wall during a Bullfight in 2004. In the pre-Bullfight hours I eat lunch with the participants of the Bullfight under the shade of olive trees there. The Bulls, thumping at the walls of the transportation boxes on open bed trucks sharing the shade with us. The ease of laughter, local food, sips of tequila as well as fine Cetto's wine from the vines surrounding us. Our boots sunk in the soft, deep dirt of the fields and the Armor legging of the Picadors glinting in the sun as they prepare themselves for the day's battle. It is a magic place to be "one of the guys".

TSL) What aspect of the bullfight do you find most interesting?



MM) The drawing of the lots in the morning along with the deep observation of religious rituals. The change in the Matador over the course of events and the rush of thousands of years of history as the blade is wielded and placed. How often do you see the drawing of lots - for what may be a Mans life, the last prayer for life before facing death or to capture the inside true view of a man as he transforms through fearlessness, grace, heroism and potential greatness?**TSL)** Do you feel that the ease of access to media and information has improved our quality of life, or reduced it?

MM) In fact I've found my father, information on how to get to my first Bullfight and the bulk of my equipment purchases on-line - certainly added quality. Truthfully, I feel the bulk of the under-initiated who've learned little from history and literature are not any better served by an instant information society - Especially with the public's increasing lack of ability to discern fact from fiction.

TSL) Whom is your favorite artist, if you have one?



MM) Too many...the traditional Classic painters, sculptors from Ancient Greece, Artists through the Renaissance and to the impressionistic period. There is always talent in Art; the greater exposure to new work only increases my "I love it" list.

TSL) What music are you currently listening to?

MM) RADIOHEAD

TSL) Who are your favorite authors?

MM) Homer, Shakespeare, Melville, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Robert Graves and a host of classic science fiction authors. I try and read mainly works of literature and historically significant pieces, sneaking in a little Crichton and other fun stuff around the edges. My bookshelf is overflowing.

TSL) Who are you currently reading?



MM) Manuals and technical stuff for work. Re-reading *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* by Philip K. Dick, for pleasure. *If Chins Could Kill* - Confessions of a B Movie Actor by Bruce Campbell, because Bruce is cool.

TSL) You are also a writer, what do you write about?

MM) I am currently working on a collection of short stories - Vignettes into some amazing moments in the Bullrings as a photographer and a Man. I want to create literary pieces with real-life authenticity and intensity, laced with the romantic imagery of the Bullfights. My other projects include writing journalistic/photography pieces for print.

TSL) What historical figure do you most admire?

MM) Harry Houdini - A self-invented giant who proved the power of the common man. He did more than anyone to expose the fraud of spiritualists and attempted to combat the weak-minded garbage that has ultimately led to the “I can talk to the dead, your pet or read Bigfoot’s mind between alien probings” stuff that has leapt from the airwaves of Art Bell to the belief system of too many. Don’t get me wrong, I respect the world of story tellers and enjoy it as a hoot in the wee hours of the night, but there is a reason the Fiction section is separate from the Historical. In a strict sense, the very fabric of truth unravels if we don’t hold a line against the blurring or fabrication of facts. In Houdini, I much respect

his sense of clarity, especially coming from the genre of the magician - who to the outsider is known only as the showman. In reality, what is learned of the nature of people from the magician's side of the stage is most revealing.

TSL) Champagne and Caviar or Beer and Chips?

MM) Both – depending on the brand and real bread not chips. I worked in a Liquor store during my senior year of High School. More than few bottles of Dom Perignon, Mumms and every variety of imported beer from the wall of imports found their way to my “tasting room” (the beach). My friend worked in a cheese and bread shop on Hwy 101. Friday nights he would bring Artisan crusty-breads, soft cheeses, Danish Blue, cherry desert cheese, chopped onions, and caviar to match up with the ice cold Champagne or imported beers. I developed my taste for quality from those times. Think of it in the Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer fashion, except with gastronomic intention, girls and the trappings of Del Mar in the 1980's. The girls sure loved those Friday night beach parties – good memories.

TSL) What are your feelings on the current state of bullfighting, particularly in Spain?



MM) I've concentrated my energies on capturing the images I seek among my friends in the Bullrings along the border in Mexico. The relationships are precious and the interaction with the Matadors - priceless. In Mexico there is a small core group of working Matadors. I am fortunate the season begins early in Tijuana, bringing the Matadors that will be performing over the rest of the

country later in the year. In some cases, my work is used to gain performance contracts for them in other cities. I find that the greatest compliment of all. I don't feel the need to look to Spain at this point, someday I may have to.

TSL) How do you justify your interest in “blood-sports” to your friends?

MM) What friends? Just kidding, although sometimes I think Gertrude Stein was correct; you do your work for yourself and strangers. I don't soft sell the truth in my photography or conversations. I'm not intolerant; I understand others have their views. It can be tempting, but you can't project human traits upon animals. It's a total loss of perspective. I try not to get “into-it” with people who are upset about Bullfighting; it can make for some potentially uncomfortable social situations. But there are those moments.

TSL) If you could sit down at a dinner table with anyone-living or dead, who would it be? What would you serve?



MM) That is a fun question. At first you think something enlightened like “wow, all the questions I could ask of Jesus” and then realization sets in that unless he is

performing miracles for your benefit of understanding, it's going to be purely a discussion of faith. I'd lean more towards the historically misunderstood; I find that intellectually stimulating. To have an opportunity to ask direct questions regarding personal philosophy from some serious players in world history would be amazing. It has to presuppose language and guests of opposition were not a factor. They would not necessarily be of my view - just the chance to achieve real insight would be cool. Of course, the 1960's Julie Newmar and Barbara Eden would be on my left and right. The food and drink would be to the tastes of the guests and the cigars old-style Cuban Puros.

TSL) What is your favorite subject to shoot?

MM) Life and death moments, straight-up fleeting reality.

TSL) What is your greatest extravagance?

MM) Cuban cigars and quality coffee beans.

TSL) If you could live in any era, when would it be?

MM) If I pick an ancient time, I lose photography – that is tough. Plus, I'm still waiting for the damn flying car and Moon bases we were promised when I was a boy. I might wish for the future, but am happy in the now raising my two sons.

TSL) If you could live anywhere, where would it be?



MM) Admittedly, I have not traveled far. Most of my income has been invested in my work over the years. I would like to live in an old city with a history and architecture that was made with greater pride than the chip board, foam, chicken-wire and stucco stuff built today. I must say, living on the coast of San Diego is great. La Jolla and Torrey Pines are my beaches and Mexico is 30 minutes from my house.

TSL) Whiskey, Scotch, Vodka, Beer, Wine, Sober? (Favorites?)

MM) Cuban Style Rum, Añejo Tequila (aged in French Oak casks), Spaten München, Stone Brewery IPA (it's all about the hops!) specifically. Beers in general; old school German, some modern microbrews and the occasional a drop of Brandy with a premium cigar. I don't have a great tolerance for quantity, so I indulge in quality. The important thing is to live well.

TSL) What else are you into? Polo, Horse Racing, Motorcycles, F1, Rally, Croquet, Bocci?

MM) I have more hobbies and passions than I can make time for. In sports, I follow the San Diego teams, mostly because I played little league and football here and went to the games in team functions - It was part of my youth. I don't

usually watch other teams. I shot a few days of the Red Bull Air Race when it came to San Diego and thought it was amazing. I am spoiled by knowing Matadors who have been gored, thrown off any help and with maybe a dirty bandana tied over the gushing wound, hurl themselves as if on fire back at the Bull. It makes “other sports” less dramatic for sure.

TSL) What’s your idea of the perfect lunch?



MM) Truth, accompanied by a beautiful woman with glowing golden skin and sparkling eyes, while having a conversation of depth and meaning with the ever present electricity of attraction. The setting would be a secluded coastal bluff restaurant overlooking the azure sea on a warm summer day - the air filled with the sound of pulsing waves. The food would be Mediterranean. Opening: a delicately fried Calamari with aged balsamic Vinegar and a creamy spiced sauce on the side. Fine Sangria, warm crusty bread and soft butter accompanying lobster bisque with pastry crust cracked at service for a shot of Sherry. I prefer my salads with my entrée and a mix of Romaine, European-style lettuce, peas, black olives, a few small tomatoes, Blue cheese dressing and half-a-dozen large croutons with cracked fresh pepper – without onions in this situation. I like prime beef, medium-rare with straight horseradish and trade off with L & P Worcestershire sauce. In addition, a rich-crusty potato frittata and thick asparagus on the side. For desert, it has to be chocolate. Frozen or baked, as long as it’s decadent.

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