

Around the World

Photographer William Frej's globe-trotting pilgrimage



Day of the Dead, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2013 Archival pigment inks on archival French platine paper, 30 x 45 inches Edition 1/6

By Alex De Vore | August 2

Photographer William Frej reminded me persistently of his existence via email, but in a really friendly way. I'd reached out first, after all, but I'd been distracted by flooding—apparently, he had not, and made sure I remembered that I had once wanted to meet him before my house had been filled with water. And anyway, he'd have to be tenacious given the breadth of his catalogue. We're talking tens of thousands of images taken over five-plus decades from across the planet. As Frej puts it, "I always traveled with my camera at my side."

Frej studied photography in the 1960s under Boyd Nicholl and Paul H Kuiper at the University of Arizona. The latter studied under famed photographer Ansel Adams; Frej even has an original Adams in his library—Yosemite's Half Dome. Frej as a shooter, meanwhile, has that combination of stellar eye and utter patience, allowing him to line up a beautiful shot and wait for just the right moment of light. "Sometimes you get lucky," he says as we peruse his work at Peyton Wright together. But we both know the truth: It's talent.



Frej moved to Santa Fe with his wife eight years ago after retiring, but both spent time here in the '70s. In addition to photography, he'd studied architecture at U of A and city planning at the University of California, Berkeley. Those fields that helped him spearhead an organization called the Santa Fe Neighborhood Housing Services, which helped Santa Feans buy homes—you know it better today as Homewise.

Frej and his wife would also spend time living in Chicago and San Francisco, but Santa Fe always called to them. "Santa Fe, I think, is the closest city in the United States to a culturally rich Indigenous environment," he says. "It's a great place and ... my wife and I have lived in Indonesia, Poland, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan—we enjoy Indigenous culture and movements."

This enjoyment becomes abundantly clear in Frej's new show, *Sacred Sites and Ceremonies*, which opened at Peyton Wright last week, his third at the gallery. The work encompasses time spent in India, Afghanistan, Nepal, Guatemala and beyond; through large-scale color prints, Frej captures the people and landscapes of these cultures in stunning detail, each telling a story of its own. We're talking close-ups of holy men meditating, gatherings of priests, Mexican celebrations and distant vistas of the Gangotri Glacier at the source of the Ganges River.



Daya of the Dead, Oaxaca, Mexico, 2013 Archival pigment inks on archival French platine paper, 30 x 45 inches Edition 1/6

"This is what makes this shot work," Frej says, motioning to the background of a photograph from Oaxaca, Mexico's Día de los Muertos revelers. On the right, a woman in full face paint smiles coyly at the main subject, a man painted up similarly; a face to the left frames the image, adding depth while remaining barely noticeable.



Sadhu, 2017 13.62" x 20.75" Archival pigment inks on Epson exhibition fiber paper Edition 1/6

Another shot from India features a Sadhu, or holy man, in the foreground, smiling widely. A rickshaw driver sits just out of frame. In the background, Frej describes, a man and woman, both without legs, forage for who-knows-what. Cows, sacred in India, round out the scene alongside a sacred tree. "This is India," he says softly, perhaps noticing new layers in his own work. This shot is indicative of this particular body of Frej's, where so much is going on, it begs the viewer for extended time. Others include a religious sunset procession in Guatemala and ceremonial mask-wearers in Tibet. In 2010, Frej even captured the site of the Buddha of Bamiyam some nine years after the Taliban destroyed it.



Buddha of Bamiyam After the Taliban, Bamiyam, Afghanistan, 2010 Archival pigment inks on archival French platine paper, 30 x 45 inches Edition 1/6

And there's more on the way, too. Frej won't get into the details of who and how, but he says an American university aims to publish his next book, a compendium of shots of remote Mayan ruins taken while following in the footsteps of 19th-century archaeologist-turned-explorer and photographer Teoberto Maler. "The Mayans," he says, trailing off briefly, "it's still so mysterious—but the architecture of the Mayan world is so distinct and varied that being able to document these masterpieces in a fine art sense—well, nobody's been looking at Mayan architecture in a fine arts context."

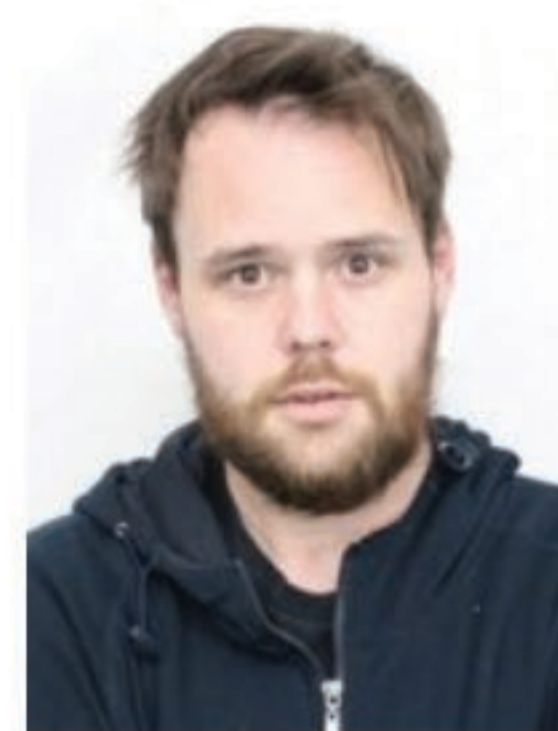
If anyone can do it and do it right, it's Frej.

"I've had an almost 60-year love of photography, and now I have an opportunity to really pursue it," he says. "So, yeah. I'm busy."

William Frej: Sacred Sites and Ceremonies Opening: 5 pm Friday Aug. 3. Free. Peyton Wright Gallery, 237 E Palace Ave., 989-9888

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About Alex De Vore
Alex has written about the Santa Fe culture scene (mostly music) for nearly a decade and won awards for doing so. He's pretty tired of Americana and still hopes new punk bands might happen.

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