

## Christopher Burkett's Inner Light

Orthodox American shows Muscovites true reality

Maria Bezchastnaya



It is unlikely that anyone can be surprised today with color photography. Everyone has phones, and with numerous filters, everyone can feel like an Instagram star. I photographed pebbles on the sand against the background of the sea, put a sepia tone on it - and voila, the highly artistic picture is ready. And if you buy a “DSLR” and learn a couple of tricks in Photoshop, you can proudly call yourself a photographer and start taking orders.

Of course, photography isn't only snapshots, but also serious images illustrating the problems of our time, or stunning pictures of wildlife like those that receive National Geographic Awards each year.

But what about photography, like art, being the highest means of expressing oneself and the surrounding reality? Can it happen that when looking at a photo it captures a spirit of extraordinary beauty and depth which two-dimensional images can convey? And you are suddenly amazed that you did not notice such a riot of colors and harmony around yourself before? Infrequently, but it can happen.

On June 13, an exhibition of new works by American landscape photographer **Christopher Burkett**, “Brilliant Color,” opened in the Gallery of Classical Photography . These are works that make you stop and look at the world with different eyes, a little kinder and a little bit better. "Free Press" was lucky to be at the opening of the exhibition and talk with the master himself, who told how and why he creates his masterpieces.

## “The main element of photography is light”

Burkett is called one of the last representatives of the "golden age" of American photography. As critics have said, in the works of the artist, "technical printing skills are closely intertwined with a special vision and accurate transmission of natural colors and shades of nature." But it is difficult to convey in words the beauty of Burkett's pictures - the nature in them is not only iridescent with all imaginable colors, but seems to glow from within. Each such photo on the gallery wall looks like a small window into some other world, more real than the one that surrounds us.

However, the artist himself does not agree when his pictures are called super realities. He says that this is our surrounding reality, he simply managed to show the beauty of God's creation, which is often hidden from our eyes, through his hard work. Yes, Burkett is a deeply religious person, and, which is not typical for an American, he belongs to the Orthodox Church. In the 70s he even joined the Orthodox community as a novice, but after seven years he left it to devote himself to photography. However, Burkett photographs precisely in order to show God's light, which is in all things.

“Everything is quite simple,” the artist answers to my traditional question about why he decided to take up photography. - Sometimes, when I left the church after the liturgy, I saw light which illuminates this world. I saw this glow in nature, and it was so alive, so real. But this is not just physical light, it is something filled with God's grace. I wanted to find a way to share this light and spiritual experience with other people, and I thought that photography would be the best way to do this, because light is the medium of photography. ”

At first, Burkett also thought about painting. “But if I drew something, people would simply say:” What a vivid imagination he has. ” I wanted to convey exactly what I see. In photography, there is much more reality, at least there was before digital photography,” says the master. “Of course, the image is also subject to interpretation and creative control, but in analog photography there is a very strong connection with the physical scene.”

Nevertheless, many of the artist's works are similar to paintings. In his waterlily photographs one can guess, of course, **Claude Monet**, in the swirling leaves of green hellebore and red blueberry fields **Vincent van Gogh** is seen , and the forests of Oregon bring to mind **Shishkin**. And this is not by chance.





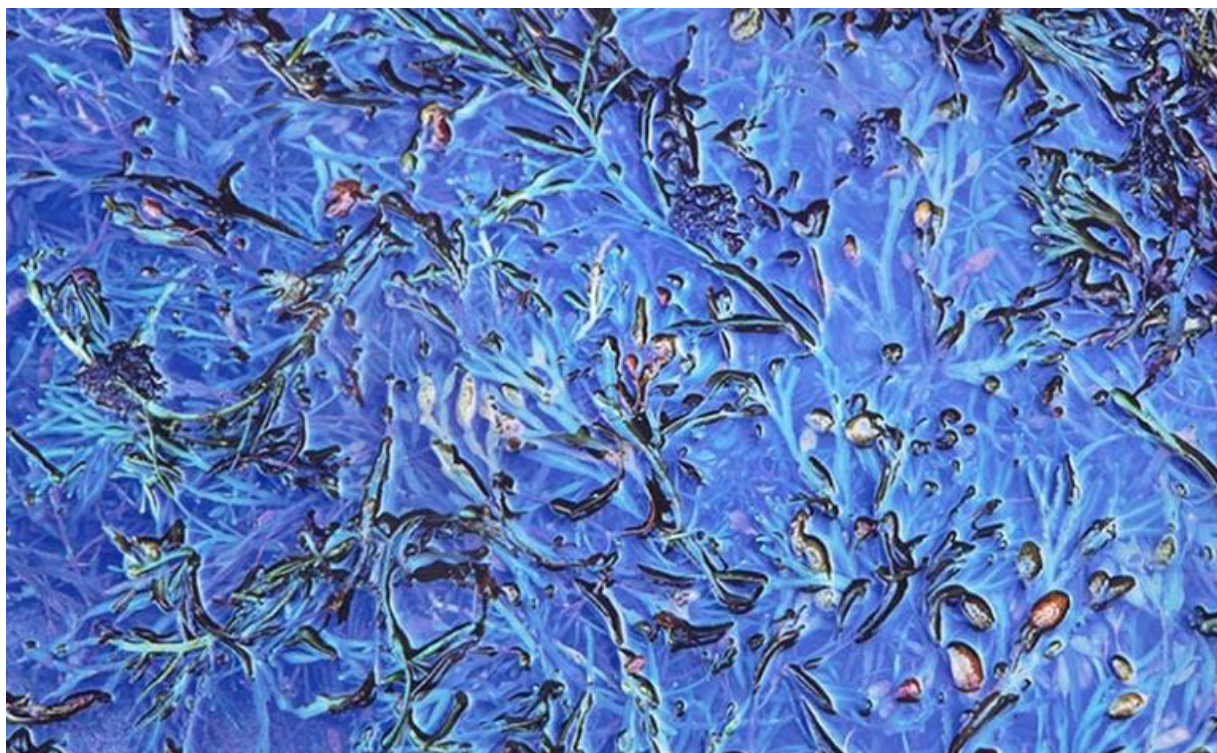
"When I work on a photo composition, I don't use any special rules or theories, but simply try to find the best way to express what I see. And from this point of view, I am much more inspired by painters than by photographers," explains Burkett. - Many times people looked at my photos and said that they look like paintings. Part of the reason for that is because I delicately adjust various light and dark elements within the print to bring them together to make a harmonious whole. This is similar to what many artists do when they are working on their canvases. "

### **"Most of my life I spend in a darkroom"**

Perhaps partly the reason for such an unusual clarity and depth of photographs of Christopher Burkett is that he was very near-sighted from birth. It turned out that only when the boy went to school he was given glasses. As he told "SP", the world gained clarity suddenly, and when he first entered the classroom and instead of blurry spots he saw 30 children's faces looking at him, he experienced a special feeling that he still remembers.

From a technical point of view, the fact is that all photographs used to be taken on film and developed manually without the use of any digital means. Moreover, Burkett in his work uses a bulky 8 × 10 inch camera. During field shooting he is assisted by his wife Ruth, who always accompanies the artist. For a non-professional, such a device looks like an old camera, from which "a bird flies" in historical films. As the photographer himself says, this technique has its drawbacks, but the advantages - an unusually high resolution and image depth - outweigh them.

The technology of developing and printing photos is also extremely complex. Burkett does not use digital media nor any filters, instead adjusting the image through changes in exposure and black and white contrast masks, which are obtained from the original slide. Combining the negative with the original slide, Burkett makes the print using this "sandwich". As the artist explains, in nature there is no simple "green color". A green leaf has hundreds of shades, and you need to take this into account when adjusting the overall color balance, so that each tiny piece glows with its own subtle colors.



Just printing one picture usually takes up to eight hours. In order to better understand the technique of creating, printing photographs and color reproduction, Burkett worked as an operator of a printing press and professional scanners, performed color separation of images for offset printing. The artist used all his knowledge in his work.

"I take pictures about a month and a half a year, and spend the rest of the time in the laboratory, making prints. To get a good photo, you need, of course, to have a good original shot," continues Burkett, seeing my surprise. - But in order to reveal it, to show all the subtleties, shades and light, you need to do a lot of work, which takes a lot of time. It's as if you're getting a small, valuable light gift, and you're trying to show this light to other people. This is the meaning of art, its highest goal. If you do everything right, then a person can feel what he has never felt before, and what the artist wants to share with him.

For example, when a person looks at Rembrandt's canvases, even if he doesn't know anything about technology, about the history of art, about this artist and about the time in which he lived, he will feel something very deep and comprehensive. But to achieve such a level of expressiveness is possible only if the technique is sufficiently honed and improved to convey all the shades of this subtle sense. That's why I spend most of my life in a dark room. "

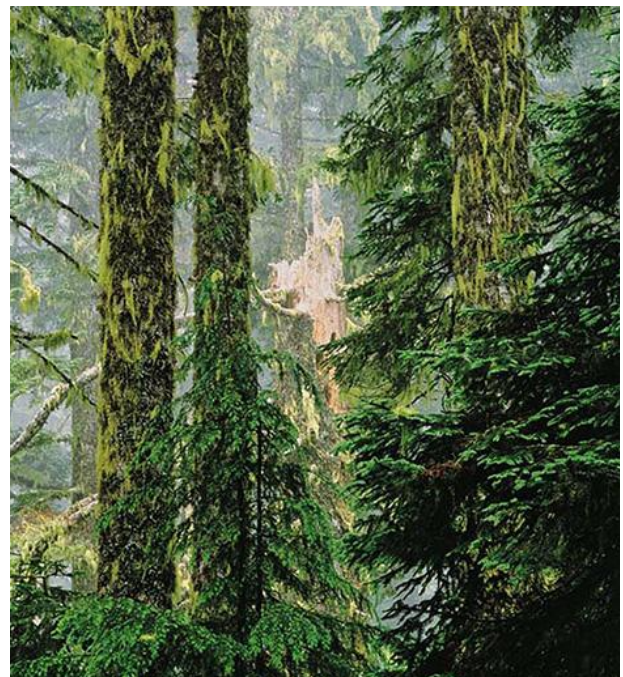
### **"50 pictures for 10 thousand miles"**

At the same time, the negatives of many of his works exist in a single copy, and the search for a suitable photo may take a week.

"Some of my best photos turned out quite unexpectedly," says the "SP" master. - I did not plan them in advance. Many of my photos were taken in the fall, because at this time of the year the most colors and textures are.

I go to places where, in my opinion, there is a photographic potential. Sometimes something happens, sometimes not. But when I go to photograph, I try to do it without a pre-established conviction about what the picture should be - these flowers or this field. I go with an open mind.

Often a good photo is created by special qualities of lighting, which are ideal for this particular scene and situation. But it happens that this light comes and disappears almost instantly, so it can be very difficult to capture it, because the 8 × 10 inch camera is quite cumbersome.



Many pictures that are presented at this exhibition, exist only on one piece of film. I'm trying to find the right composition, with special light qualities. But I don't shoot from different angles or use different lenses or bracket exposures for the same scene. As a rule, I find something special and take only one photo of that scene. I may take a second shot, but only as a safety net, in case the film turns out to have some defect. "

Probably, many of us are accustomed to the fact that after a vacation with a digital camera or just a smartphone, we return with a thousand pictures, which we hardly ever see later. Burkett is sure that quantity does not mean quality.

"I am very selective," - the artist tells me a little embarrassed. "If Ruth and I spend a month and a half on the road, traveling for 10,000 miles taking pictures, I usually take only about 50 pictures in all this time. Of course, digital photography has a lot of strengths, but just a larger number of photos will not give you a better shot. You still have to study all those three thousand frames in search of the best one but there is no substitute for clarity and precision of vision when you are taking the photos.

There is a big difference between being somewhere and experiencing the scene yourself and then transferring it to a two-dimensional image separated from the environment. Since I develop and print in my darkroom, when I'm standing in nature looking for a photograph I know how this scene will look like on film and then what I can do with this film when I print it. I visualize the entire process, when I shoot a landscape in nature. These are fantastic scenes. I want other people to see them, and I try to convey this beauty. When you work with the whole process, you can push the existing boundaries to achieve the finest results."

### **"When will Cibachrome end"**

But no matter how much Christopher Burkett loves his work, the work of a lifetime, it is quite possible in a few years he will have to "hang the camera on a nail". And not because he was tired of photography. In his work, Burkett uses unique photographic paper called Cibachrome (the new name is Ilfochrome). According to the photographer, it is precisely this material which allows transmitting not only an amazing inner light, but also the depth of the pictures, which seem to have almost a 3-D effect.

However, in 2011, the production of this unique paper was discontinued. Burkett, of course, bought himself a ten-year supply, but it will not last forever. In addition, paper, like reagents, deteriorates over time, so how much more an artist will be able to please with new pictures is unknown. After all, he categorically does not want to switch to digital or other means.

"I have been working with film for many years. "I have large stocks of Cibachrome, but when I run out, this will be the end of my photographic printing," Burkett honestly says. - In my pictures there is light and depth, which I can not convey with the help of other printing methods. Cibachrome has many advantages over other materials. I've spent my life working with it, and I don't want to blur my heritage, after so many years by switching to something else.

But when I run out of Cibachrome, I'll still have a lot of ready-made pictures for matting and selling. I won't suddenly turn into a grandfather in a rocking chair drinking beer in his backyard. "

"But won't you miss photography?" I could not resist.

"You know, it's funny, but I've never shot it for mundane subjects. From time to time I take pictures of my wife Ruth, just for the memory. But I don't even have a family photo album, and I've never taken a selfie in my life. "Not because I have some kind of special philosophy that

forbids it, I just don't have such a desire," Burkett replied. For me, photography is a way to convey something special, to say something meaningful. Digital photography certainly has many advantages. I sometimes have to re-photograph my works for a website or exhibitions. Of course, I could take digital photographs, and probably would even be quite good at it. But digital photos are easily manipulated ...

Even if I could convey what I want, people would just say: "Well, yes, you've used Photoshop." In recent years, we have seen so many digital photo manipulations that people have a natural skepticism if they see too blue sky, too green grass. But I am trying to convey something real and subtle, something ethereal through physical means. Analog photos, it seems to me, are have a stronger connection to reality and can do this better. "

In this case, the master has great respect for the work of other photographers and emphasizes that he sees many great digital photos.

"But analog photography is what I do. And this is not such an easy process, I have exhausting days when, after working all day in a darkroom, I can't get the results I hoped for. But there are also very happy moments that I would not trade for anything. Therefore, to be honest, I just do not want to go into digital work," he admits.

### **"People are not used to seeing something real."**

The master does not want to change his role. Landscape photography is something to which he always felt a vocation. "I can not say that this is a rational choice on my part," says the artist. - I just felt that it was mine, and I had to do it. I try to convey the grace and light that I see in nature, and probably this is the reason that I spend most of my life in a darkroom. "

Burkett does not confuse the title of one of the classics, the few representatives of landscape analog photography in our troubled world.

"Now a lot of photos are devoted to social problems, ecology, politics. In principle, it has always been so. Over the past 50 years, I have seen that it is these themes that dominate photography, says the artist. - When Cibachrome ends, it will be the end of an era, at least for me.

But I try not to worry about it, I just do what I do. And I do not think that now there is less interest in landscape photography. People are used to digital photography, which sometimes looks artificial, and they are surprised by the natural colors, transparency and light in my Cibachrome prints. People are not used to seeing something real.

They always appreciate not just beauty, but also light. It seems to me that there is so much photography in the world about darkness, and indeed there is much darkness, but sharing a little more light doesn't hurt the world, and I try to convey it as best I can. "



Christopher Burkett was born in Oregon in 1951. Considered one of the best masters of color printing in history.

Photographic prints by Christopher Burkett can be seen in the Gallery of Classical Photography at: Savvinskaya nab., 23, p. 1.

The exhibition includes about 130 photographic prints, united by the name “The brilliant color of Christopher Burkett: new works”, which are impressive in size, up to 40x50”. This is the most complete exhibition of the work of the photographer that has ever been shown. The exhibition will run until September 15.