

HOLGA

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With an essay by
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BEYOND THE VISIBLE

Frances Malcolm

From an ancient imperial palace in Beijing to the Mediterranean-inspired gardens of Montecito, California, every location across the world manifests a particular genius loci, Latin for “spirit of place.” For the ancient Romans, the genius loci was the protective or guardian spirit of a site. Today, it is generally used to describe a location’s prevailing atmosphere — one informed by natural and man-made features, and framed by the conditions of a specific moment. Michael Kenna has made photographing this phenomena his life’s work. Traversing the globe, he spotlights the distinct characters of destinations both familiar and far-flung, processing them through his individual interpretive faculties. His photographs thus conjure a hermeneutics of space and time that has been shaped by his own experiences and idiosyncrasies.

Kenna typically uses Hasselblad cameras to create his distinctive black-and-white silver-gelatin prints, which can be variously described as tranquil, moody, otherworldly, and enchanting. The compositions are minimalistic and often graphic, free from the extraneous sensory information that tends to confound our day-to-day lives. He usually photographs late at night or early in the morning, when the light is either sparse or diffuse and the landscape devoid of people. A long exposure — anywhere from seconds to several hours — allows him to collect that which the human eye cannot see: light and movement as it plays out over time.

In his travels, Kenna often carries a lightweight analog Holga camera along with his Hasselblad equipment. Though the Holga is considered a less professional tool within the world of photography due to its technical limitations, Kenna has mastered its use, creating square-format images that distill his aesthetic in striking ways. These Holga photographs — the subject of this book — feature a heightened sense of diffusion, a softened focus, and a shortened depth of field, marshaling the subject into either the mid- or foreground. The resulting sense of immediacy is amplified by the telescoping effect of vignetting, which the Holga is famous for producing. Together, these effects generate images that magnify Kenna’s tendency toward minimalism, paring down the noise and throwing the contours of the

genius loci into sharp relief. His is an intuitive art, honed through years of experience and experimentation, but ultimately rendered successful by his strength of vision and trust in the vicissitudes of the photographic medium.

First introduced in the early 1980s, the low-cost, easy-to-use, Hong Kong-made Holga was designed for Chinese consumers who wanted an affordable way to make photographs using medium-format 120 film. Family portraits and vacation snapshots, for example, would ostensibly comprise the primary output of its mostly amateur core market. The original models featured a lightweight plastic body, a 60mm plastic meniscus lens, hot shoe, two aperture settings, a fixed shutter speed, adjustable focus, and aspect ratios of 6×6 cm and 6×4.5 cm, the latter of which was achieved with a removable mask. However, the rise of the Holga — whose name is a phonetic adaptation of the Cantonese word for “very bright” — was hampered by an unforeseen early setback. Shortly after its release, the popularity of 35mm film in China skyrocketed, threatening the viability of the medium-format camera. In a bid to stay operational, Holga’s manufacturers shifted their focus overseas to American, European, and Japanese markets, securing adequate albeit modest sales.

Holga’s saving grace, ironically, was its so-called technical constraints. Due to its inexpensive and simple construction, the Holga, classified as a toy camera, generates low-fidelity pictures marked by light leaks and flares, blurring and doubling, the aforementioned vignetting, and fluctuations in contrast that alternately heighten and mute tonal variation, among other effects. A cult following slowly started to grow among those intrigued by its unique visual voice, and a cottage industry dedicated to off-market modifications took root. Professionals began picking up the Holga, too, and images produced by the camera started garnering high-profile attention. Following the camera’s surge in popularity, new versions with new features, such as built-in flashes, panoramic capabilities, and pinhole formats — many of which were designed by Holga’s original creator, T. M. Lee — periodically found their way onto the market. In 2001, sales of the Holga surpassed the one-million mark.¹

A second serious setback, however, struck in 2015, when it was announced that the Holga factory was permanently ending production of the camera. Gerald H. Karmele, president and chief operating officer of Freestyle Photographic Suppliers, which distributed the camera in the United States, noted that “Holga outlived many other cameras but, as like we have seen throughout the years, is yet another casualty of the digital age.”² This death was fortunately only short-lived: in mid-2017, the Holga was resurrected after Freestyle Photographic revealed it had found a factory in possession of the original molds — previously thought to have been destroyed — and was recommencing manufacturing. This turn of events confirms the importance of analog in an increasingly digital world and, specifically, of the creative freedom offered by low-tech equipment in a culture that otherwise prioritizes all things advanced, cutting edge, and instantaneous.

For Kenna, the Holga is intriguing precisely because it allows him to focus on his vision rather than on the tool itself. “I’ve always considered the make and format of a camera to be ultimately low on the priority scale when it comes to making pictures,” he explains. “I think personal vision is far more important. A sense of aesthetics, a personal connection with the subject matter, an inquiring and inquisitive mind — these factors outweigh whatever equipment you use.”³ Perhaps more so than any other camera, the Holga demands that the photographer work with absolute intentionality. Since its available settings are limited, the Holga is an unexpected leveler, placing much of the creative control in the hands of the photographer and challenging him or her to make judicious decisions.

At the same time, Holga’s indelible fingerprint is evident and unmistakable. While the photographer might occupy the driver’s seat and have purview over the general destination, the camera autonomously accumulates feedback along the route, which it uses to pinpoint the image’s metaphorical coordinates. It is this element of uncertainty, which can deepen the artist’s own lyrical play, that draws photographers like Kenna to the Holga. He notes that the cameras are “quirky, whimsical, and unpredictable — a few of the many reasons I love them. I am often pleasantly

surprised by the unexpected results I get, as well as occasionally disappointed. Holgas, in my experience, have a habit of keeping you guessing—surprise and spontaneity are hallmarks of their images.”⁴ The Holga thus starts the photographer down an unknowable path that only resolves itself once the film has been developed.

Because Kenna uses his Holga in tandem with his Hasselblads, the Holga photographs overlap seamlessly with his larger practice. They are not reserved, for instance, for a specific type of subject matter—further evidence of his belief that the camera itself is relatively unimportant next to one’s vision. This vision, for Kenna, is deeply caught up in both comprehending and apprehending the spirit of a place:

My consistent interest lies in the relationship, juxtaposition, even the confrontation between the landscape and everything that we place in it. Memories, traces, footprints, the latent atmosphere of a place—these are my true influences. Empty sports stadiums, old mills, abandoned structures, and seafront buildings that have been built for our activities—when they are not being actively used can be strangely surrealistic, and I am fascinated by them. I try to photograph the invisible behind the visible.⁵

Kenna’s photographs therefore do not solely comprise the explicit optical information that impresses upon the viewer’s mind; rather, their fundamental power is in their ability to conjure that which is vague and veiled, galvanizing a response to something that operates outside the sensory. For example, *Ferro da Gondola* (2006) is not simply a photograph of the prow of a gondola proudly bearing its ornamental *ferro*. Instead, the image speaks to the hundreds of miles of Venetian waterways that the boat has traversed, the gondoliers who have guided it under bridges and through narrow passages, the innumerable lovers it has shuttled to candlelight dinners in darkened piazzas, the history it has witnessed. Such details do not immediately give themselves up but rather are summoned by way of the unique alchemy generated

between Kenna and the Holga: at the center of the image the artist has located the gondola's closely cropped black hull, which is set in relief against the lighter waters that frame it. As the eye moves along the hull toward the image's left edge, the gondola begins to lose prominence due to decreasing peripheral tonal contrast. This serves to shift the viewer's focus, drawing the eye up to Venice, a hazy apparition on the horizon, before propelling it back down to the in-focus boat. It is within the various relationships forged between a scene's visible elements that the story of the unseen — the genius loci — begins to develop.

This desire to capture a suggestion of something unseen but felt lends itself well to what might be considered ghostly or preternatural subject matter: that which exists beyond the veil. A number of Kenna's Holga photographs, for example, feature headstones and funerary art. And although these objects might serve as literal markers of death, the images themselves feel flush with life and activity. In one, titled *Graveside Statue* (2008) and taken at Milan's Cimitero Monumentale, Kenna's choice of vantage point and handling of light transform a marble statue into a living, breathing mourner. A cemetery is also the setting of *Gravestones and Tree* (2009), which depicts the graves of several dozen British servicemen, many unidentified, who died on the Somme battlefields during World War I. Further afield, a tree stands defiantly in the midground. It is a solemn place, but the atmosphere feels electric, as if invigorated by a continual deluge of fresh, raw air. The gravestones to the right are blurred, some of them nearly double-exposed, suggesting the presence of something unknown and inexplicable.

Kenna's photographs of cities cloaked in darkness or obscured by atmospheric conditions also bear this ethereal, almost spectral quality. In *ICC, Study 2* (2011), Hong Kong, seen from across Kowloon Bay, assumes a phantomlike presence due to a thick layer of fog that shrouds its urban downtown. The murky air, further dramatized by the Holga's propensity to dematerialize form and create shadowy borders, produces a somewhat disorienting effect: Is the viewer sailing toward the buildings or are the buildings quickly tunneling toward the viewer?

Other photographs take on the cryptic air of noir, such as *Empire State Building, Study 4* (2007), which depicts the eponymous iconic American skyscraper towering darkly above New York, and *Golden Gate Bridge, Study 16* (2009), with its solitary street light and suggestion of the precipice beyond.

Such images are counterbalanced by those that project a palpable sense of nostalgia. Due to their low-fidelity look, which recalls the patina of an antique, Holga photographs often solicit moments from times past. For instance, while the merry-go-round in *Carousel Horse* (2009) and amusement-park ride in *Starflyer* (2013) might be modern-day constructions, they feel as if they have been plucked out of a bygone era, which the Holga helps recreate. For this same reason, the camera enhances the feelings of childhood anticipation activated by *Christmas Lights* (2007) and the spirit of mid-century Americana in *Harbor Sign* (2009), as both scenes appeal to sentimentality and a longing for what once was.

Another hallmark of Kenna's work — especially his work with the Holga — is an economy of style. This minimalist resolve opens the photograph up to the power of suggestion, so that the spaces between forms, the absence of unessential details, and the often close-up capture of a given scene result in images that are pregnant with possibility. With fewer competing elements, greater visual tension — the kind that stirs the imagination — can be built up. In this way, Kenna likens his photographs to “visual haiku poems, rather than full-length novels.”⁶ His tree portraits elegantly accomplish this feat by summoning entire worlds in just a few simple strokes, as exemplified by the tightly cropped weeping willow in *Setting Sun* (2008) and the snow-covered Christmas-like tree, sole occupant of a wintery landscape, in *Lone Tree, Study 2* (2004). Other photographs harness minimalism in different ways, though they all foster a rhapsodic journey for the eye as it moves across the composition.

Trees also make for good conversation partners, Kenna observes, which is critical to his process. When he visits a location he wants to photograph, he has no preconceptions about the duration of his stay. Instead, he remains for however long is necessary to engage in a productive, intimate conversation with the landscape,

which could ultimately take hours or days. During these interactions, he is constantly looking at, taking in, and responding to what is around him. He notes the importance of remaining open during these sessions: "A degree of curiosity ... goes a long way. An acknowledgment that the process is about collaboration — rather than ego — has served me well."⁷ His photographs of pathways and passages are particularly imbued with this sense of collaboration, since the vantage point from which to photograph a path requires a special back-and-forth in order to forge the desired narrative: For what purpose was this path built? Where does it lead? Who has trodden it? One striking example among his works is *Old Boat Ramp* (2008), an image of a decaying set of rail ties that Kenna composed head-on, giving viewers the impression that they are standing on top of the ramp itself. However, before it reaches a vanishing point on the horizon of the rocky, water-flooded landscape, the ramp ends abruptly, aimlessly, in the midground. The puzzle it presents is heightened by another deft compositional choice: Kenna omits the body of water upon which the ferried boats are released, so that the only evidence of it is its absence.

Kenna's view toward the enigmatic and the intangible is predicated not on a fascination with the otherworldly but rather on a deep sense of reverence for this world. Born in 1953 into a large Catholic family in Lancashire, England, Kenna had initially aspired to become a priest. Life revolved around the church, and priests were not only looked up to in his community but also invested with the greatest authority. Although Kenna is no longer a practicing Catholic, the notion of reverence that operates within religion has found a place within his own personal and aesthetic language. As his photographs demonstrate, he has traded the sacred ground of the parish church for the larger sanctuary of Earth itself. The impact of religion is also illustrated by way of his aforementioned interest in all things concealed: "Fundamental to Catholicism is the belief in a god, hidden, unseen, but always present. In church, the presence of this invisible god is symbolized by a burning candle or light near the altar. Perhaps because of these early influences, I think that, no matter what is visible in front of the camera, I am really trying to hint

at what is unseen.”⁸ And while religious buildings and objects do occasionally appear within his landscapes — Hindu temples, Shinto shrines, Buddhist sculptures, Christian crosses — their presence opens up contemplation about self, place, and belief in a manner anathema to that which dogma would prescribe.

Art ultimately replaced religion in the years following Kenna’s decision to leave seminary school at the age of seventeen. He first attended the Banbury School of Art in Oxfordshire before enrolling at the London College of Printing, now known as the London College of Communication, where he studied photography for three years. Although he initially prioritized the commercial aspects of the medium, an introduction to fine art photography — particularly the tradition of landscape photography — would inspire him to change directions. Kenna names Eugène Atget, Bill Brandt, Alfred Stieglitz, and Josef Sudek as core influences whose art he studied closely as a means of finding his own visual voice. Courses on the history of Western art also played a formative role in his development, and he became captivated by landscape painters such as John Constable, Caspar David Friedrich, and J.M.W. Turner, among others. In fact, many of Kenna’s mature works exhibit an unmistakable painterly quality, a reflection of his approach to photography. What interests him is not the “truth” of a single, precise moment but rather accretions of time and light — a proxy for layers of paint — and thus history and narrative. This same philosophical framework has been seemingly written into the logic of the Holga, informing each click of the shutter.

With the Holga, Kenna reveals the world in new and extraordinary ways, uncovering moments that the naked eye would not have otherwise apprehended. The camera’s simple mechanisms call for a spontaneous response, which Kenna, through years of close looking and intimate engagement, has become adept at negotiating. It is therefore no wonder he is able to achieve expertly composed images of birds in flight, or, for example, the moment inky powerlines, as seen through the window of a moving train, fall into perfect alignment with the reflection of the train’s interior lights upon that same window (*Thalys View*, 2010).

But this dexterity does not eradicate the factor of uncertainty that in many ways defines the experience of both the Holga and life in general. A plane captured at close range from below is partially encircled by a brilliant lens flare, transforming it into an aeronautical compass of sorts (*Low-Flying Plane*, 2016); a barren tree's peripheral branches bleed into the image's darkened borders, creating the illusion of a corona of foliage (*Dusk Tree*, 2008); and a stone chapel becomes virtually indistinguishable from the rocky landscape upon which it sits, a product of unwitting underexposure (*Saint-Aubert Chapel*, 2004). These and other elements contribute to the soul of the photograph, the life unseen, the mysterious inner workings of nature and creativity—to the genius loci that can be experienced but never replicated or reduced to a set of constituent components, as if an equation to be neatly solved. "I don't like to be in control too much," Kenna remarks. "I think it's best if things happen irrespective of me or outside of what I'm doing. I think nature itself is such a beautiful phenomenon. Trying to control it all the time tames it somehow."⁹ That such an inexpensive, unassuming toy camera has the rare capacity to tap into such profound truths is a testament to the underrated powers of trust, simplicity, and play.

1 "The Holga Manual," Freestyle Photographic Suppliers (Hollywood, CA, 2011), http://www.freestylephoto.biz/static/pdf/product_pdfs/holga/holga-manual.pdf.

2 Gerald H. Karmele, quoted in John Biggs, "Goodbye to Holga, the Wacky Camera Blast from the Past," *TechCrunch*, November 30, 2015, <https://techcrunch.com/2015/11/30/goodbye-to-holga-the-wacky-camera-blast-from-the-past/>.

3 Michael Kenna, quoted in "Michael Kenna: A Man with a Camera," interview by David Roberts, *Looking Glass Magazine*, no. 14, August 2016, p. 22.

4 Michael Kenna, quoted in an interview with HolgaDirect, October 2012, reposted on the personal blog of Ben Trusler, April 27, 2013, <https://bentrusler.wordpress.com/2013/04/27/michael-kenna-2/>.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Kenna, quoted in "A Man with a Camera," p. 12.

7 Kenna, quoted in HolgaDirect interview.

8 Kenna, quoted in "A Man with a Camera," p. 12.

9 Michael Kenna, quoted in Erin Clark, "Alone with Michael Kenna," *ArtWorks Magazine*, June 2007, p. 121.



GRAVESTONE WOMAN
Cimitero San Michele, Venice, Italy. 2006