

## Interview with Kim Weston

Contributed by Edward Mendes  
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We recently had the opportunity to visit photographer Kim Weston at his home and studio outside of Carmel, CA. Kim has been working with the human figure for almost 30 years, creating some of the subjects most beautiful and creative work during that time. Kim is a wonderfully personable guy, during our time with we discuss not only his work but also his family and his vision of photography. Enjoy!

### Master Series Interview

Kim Weston

Kim has been working with the human figure for almost 30 years, creating some of the subjects most beautiful and creative work during that time. His images are technically perfect and emotionally telling, relating what is going on in his life at that time. While being a black and white film shooter his entire career, he is now moving into the color arena by incorporating color paints to some of his black and white images. While sharing the family name of other icons in the photography world such as his grandfather Edward, father Cole and uncle Brett, Kim has done more than just follow in their footsteps, he has developed a vision that has allowed him to make his own large footprints in the photography world. We had an opportunity to visit Kim at his home, Wildcat Hill, just outside Carmel, Ca recently to do the interview. Kim is a wonderfully personable guy, opening not only his studio to us but also his darkroom and the darkroom and home of his grandfather Edward. During our time with Kim we discuss not only his work but also his family and his vision of photography. You can also watch the interview in the Whitespider Video section or listen to it in the Whitespider Podcast section of Whitespider.org. Enjoy!

Edward Mendes: We always start the interview asking "How did you get into photography?" I think a lot of people probably think, "Hey, it's Kim Weston, photography was kind of a given profession." But everyone has their own journey that leads them to love photography, what was yours?

Kim Weston: I of course grew up around cameras, when I was a little kid dad was always going off into the darkroom. At a very young age I was picking up a camera and asking what it was, I think I was about 6 when I started shooting. I used to help my father in the darkroom, at that time he was doing portrait work. So my job in the darkroom was to do the fixing (of the film). I just loved it, I loved the quietness of the darkroom, the darkness, I was a very shy kid and when I started photographing it was a way for me to show the world the way I saw it and at that early age, especially being that shy and introverted actually, the camera gave me a way to express myself. I started with medium format, a Rolli, and quickly switched to a 4x5 and that's what I used until about 15 or 20 years ago when I switched to 8x10 and I use both of them every once in a while.

EM: Your dad shot portraits to make money, have you ever done anything else?

KW: I've never done anything commercial. It's an interesting thing, I was talking to a couple of friends who are very good fine art photographers but they also do commercial work to make a living. I was never good at that, I just didn't have the temperament, and I didn't have what it took to work in the commercial atmosphere. What I did to make money, and I had to make money even with a great last name as I wasn't selling a ton of work, was construction and carpentry, for 30 years. That helped me when I moved into the studio, building sets.

EM: Which helps now, your work isn't little in scale, it's a production, you paint the walls you build the set. Take us through the process from idea to creation of the image.

KW: I think the whole thing that attracted me to the control of a studio setting was the fact that everything in the photograph was mine so anything you saw in my photograph I did, it wasn't by accident; it wasn't by finding something out in nature. I did that when I was younger, I'd travel around with my uncle Brett and my dad, we'd all get in the car and head off to Yosemite or the east side of the Sierras and photograph stuff. I liked doing it but I was never really satisfied with the results. What I wanted to do with photography was get more out of it for me. So the idea of working in the studio and building the sets really appealed to me. Plus I didn't have to leave my family, I didn't have to travel, I could come down here to the studio and worked anytime I wanted, day or night, so I wasn't trapped by having to go out and photograph. That was very pleasing to me and the fact that everything in the photograph was mine, so those elements added up to me working for nearly 30 years in the studio.

EM: Staying close to home for your work has obviously helped your family life; do you think that has helped your photography?

KW: Yes, it's very important for me to have whatever I'm working on at my finger tips at anytime. So a studio is perfect for that, because it's something I can always come down and work on. If I'm sketching up for the next series or doing research for the next series, it's all done here in the studio, all my research books are here in the studio, so what it does is make my art part of my life. Not just something I do on a trip; my whole life is my art.

EM: How do you come up with your ideas for images?

KW: All my references come from painters, if you look at my reference books there's no photographers in it, I've always loved paintings and looking at paintings. It doesn't matter who the painter is, I'll go to a book store in New York or San Francisco and I go right to the art section and start thumbing through. Whatever artist it is, the vision I see in a painting evokes an emotion in me that I can translate into a set and into my photography, that's basically where I get my ideas.

EM: Looking at other people's art. That's where it all gets started.

KW: That happens throughout history. I went to a show of Diego Rivera down at the LA county museum and I was stunned, it was a retrospective, and you look at Rivera's work and you remember the Calities and some of his great murals. But it was shocking to see this show because he went to Paris and he copied every single

famous artist in Paris. There was the cubist, there was Seurat, who did the point of light paintings, but they were Rivera's. So it's a way of learning and having influence, we're all influenced by stuff so you take that information in and then you bring it out in your own vision. EM: That's right, you see what others do and how they use things then you add a bit of yourself into it and you come up with your own vision. KW: Yeah, sometimes you can start on your own but a lot of times you need that little kick. You're not going to do anything brand new, especially in photography, everyone's photographed the nude, it's just everyone's interpretation of it. It's fascinating, finding what I call your voice, I didn't find my initial voice, and I still find other languages in there, but my initial voice until I was in my late 20's and early 30's. EM: So there's still hope for all of us out there? KW: Right, I hope. I'm still finding new things in my photographs, using the smaller camera and painting, it's very important to me to keep active mentally and keep the creative juices going in my mind. EM: You mentioned using a smaller camera, you've been using a 4x5 and 8x10 your whole career and now you're using a 6x7. How has that freed you up? KW: I call it my camera with wings, this camera (the 8x10) is so anchored to the ground and I love using it and I've used it for years, but it's a very stationary camera, it works very well in the studio, of course my grandfather used it everywhere. After my dad died I inherited the RB and it sat here forever, I thought "Ah it's just a little junkie camera, it's a point-and-shoot, I'm not going to use that". So, I was interviewing a bunch of models and I was photographing them with the 8x10, these are girls that I've meant for the first time and a lot of them have never modeled before. It takes so long to mature with a model and to get along with a model, so I was burning a lot of film with the 8x10. Gina came to me and said "Why don't you shoot them with a smaller camera? It's less intrusive, the 8x10 is a big camera and you get under the hood". I said "OK, that makes sense", so I started shooting with that (RB67) and I thought "Oh, this is great"; you can move around the subject matter, you can hand hold it if you want and like I said it became my camera with wings. It was a really freeing up of creativity to, it opened up a whole new vision for me. EM: Now you can shoot different angles. KW: I know, well you can move around your subject matter where with this (8x10) you can't. This is great when I was doing sets because I'd already know what I wanted to photograph. I'd sketched it out and everything was ready, I knew exactly my vision in the camera and how I wanted the models, it was very staged almost like it was recording the theatrical stage. This opens up, I mean the freedom and it was really revolutionary to me because it's less intrusive, you're not trying to have a conversation with the models with this big clunky camera, yeah I love it. EM: You mentioned building a rapport with the models; your family alone I think has influenced hundreds of thousands of photographers to shoot nudes or just models in general. How important is that rapport and what do you do to build it? KW: Well, when I found my best model I married her. EM: That's a great idea. KW: Exactly, so much of my work is spontaneous. So I'll be working on an idea and to have my model living with me was so perfect, otherwise you would have to set a date the model can come down and it doesn't flow really easily. So Gina was my model for about fifteen years and when she stopped, it's an interesting connection, when she stopped modeling for me I started working less and less in the studio. I had less control over the situation and it just sort of lost that feeling that I had, being able to work at anytime and have my model right there with me. But that relationship with a model is absolutely important, so important that I would photograph a model three or four times before I even consider getting something from it. Finding that person you can work with and you have that connection with is so important and if it's not there I don't care how beautiful the model is it's not going to work. So I have a couple models that I'm working on right now and a friend, and she's a photographer, that relationship between the two of us is so important and takes a long time to cultivate. EM: It has to be mutual. Its one thing if they're not feeling it, it's obvious, but if you're not feeling it then it won't work either. KW: I'm no good, I'm absolutely no good, I mean when do a workshop and go into a situation where there are three girls there or a guy and I have to photograph I can't, I just don't shoot like that. I find that a lot of people who shoot models, when I teach a workshop, will just come in and just start shooting and I say, "What are you doing?" And, "Where is your conversation with the model?" They sit there and they are hiding behind the camera, there's no connection, there is no vocal communication between them, the guy or girl is just shooting, shooting, shooting. I'd say, "Stop! This is not just a piece of flesh there; why not make it an important exchange between the two of you? Ask her or him what do you want, let's work together on this." To me it's not just a pretty face that you are photographing. EM: In the best nudes, and in your work we see it all the time, they have an organic feel to it. KW: Look at my grandfather, he married or had affairs with most of his models. I'm not saying you have to do that but that (connection) is very important. I photograph life, I don't just photograph a beautiful model, and I photograph my life, so that connection with the model is very important. EM: So long story short, when you find a good model just marry them. KW: Right, but then you know she (Gina) doesn't what to model anymore so I have to photograph somebody. It's hard, it's really hard, there again is probably why I'm not doing a lot of the set building, because the set building was very emotional for me, very personal and I needed to share that with someone I intimating knew, and of course Gina worked perfectly for that. It's interesting how things happen I'm now doing less and less studio work and more and more shooting out in nature with models or in buildings in Mexico and Scotland, so my whole vision has changed. EM: The work you've done in Mexico, you don't have much time with the models beforehand but the images are striking. KW: I just got really lucky; both times I've photographed in Mexico once in Wahiawa, once in Pueblo it just so happens the models, different girls, were just exceptional. They also come to it knowing me I guess and want to model for me; they want that connection which is really important, and they move well, movement is the paramount thing in a model; most of my greatest models all have dance experience of some sort, so that movement is much more important than what the figure looks like. It's part of the formula. EM: Do you see yourself moving more into the landscape and away from the figurative? KW: Yes, I'm moving in that direction more. Actually, I may

stop doing these (figurative) for a while and do just landscapes. Maybe I see the landscape differently, maybe I'm more mature now and I can tackle that problem with a little bit more skill than I use to, so I got out my dad's old lens, the great old 34 inch lens with the cobalt shutter and got them all fixed up. I'll always photograph the figure, I think now with my painting on the photographs it opens up a whole new avenue and if you think about it, it's more going back to what I did in the studio because I'm using the older images to paint on and old situations that I can revisit and re-energize with emotion that's really appealing to me. And again, it's something I can do in my studio at anytime. EM: And it adds some freedom that you may not get with the straight image. KW: Oh ya, it's just like "My God" you can actually do this and paint in a way that I really want to, and I'm really fascinated with it. It's like anytime you see something and you say "it's great, it's new and it's fresh" and it's like starting over. I've done photography my whole life and I'm good at it, not that I'm tired of it but you're always trying to spark your interest. EM: No matter what you do it gets a little monotonous. Being a landscape photographer it's a bit easier to just go somewhere you haven't been before. KW: Exactly, I use to travel with Brett; it was the most frustrating thing. My friend Randy and I would travel with them (Brett and Cole Weston), we were young back then and they (Brett and Cole Weston) would come zooming up to Mono Lake and they'd jump out of their trucks and look, "Well, I've seen it better", and jump back into their trucks and take off, because they had seen it better, better clouds, better conditions and Randy and were like, uh? Let's take a picture. EM: Speaking of traveling with your dad and Brett, it's pretty safe to say that your family has influenced many photographers, and you've had an opportunity to be there first hand. Personally with your dad and Brett and at least with hands on time, print wise, with your grandfather. How has each one of them influenced you both personally and in your work? KW: It's an interesting thing, of course I didn't know my grandfather, I met him once and I was very young and he was very old. I never knew that connection when I was growing up, even when I was young and working in the darkroom with my dad, I didn't know Edward Weston was a famous photographer. When I started to work with my father with the negatives; can you imagine sitting there and helping your dad print Pepper #30? That was my connection with Edward, being able to go through all of those images. Even though I didn't know what he was seeing, and this happens with any type of art form, you see what you might think you would have seen in that scene or the emotion you might have felt. Dad was different because he was a color photographer, dad use to get mad because I use to spend a lot of time with my uncle Brett. Not because he was just a black and white photographer but he was probably the most dedicated artist I have ever met and I think you like to surround yourself with people like that, that's what he did, he was a photographer and an artist and every single day he did something. It's infectious to be around somebody like that, he was very simple in so many ways, but so incredible talented with his vision and how he honed it. My dad was much more theatrical, he liked people, and he liked to get out in front of people. He loved to do interviews like this, I dread it, once it gets going it's O.K, but where I dread it my dad thrived on it, he was very good at it, he was schooled in theater. He and I had a different father and son relationship, which was tumultuous at times, so he didn't teach me a lot, though he did teach me the skills of printing which is an invaluable skill, he was a great printer. But the passion for the art and the time you spend on it I learned from my uncle Brett. It was just phenomenal, not that I would live his lifestyle, he gave up a lot. The most important things to me is my wife and my son, they come before photography, with Brett it was the other way around, that was his sacrifice. I made my life so it wouldn't sacrifice my family, hence again working in the studio where I didn't have to leave them. EM: You've had the best of both worlds, with your dad the technical side of things and with Brett you learned how to live the lifestyle. KW: It's so funny because when I was first dating Gina I took her over to meet Brett and it was snakebite time, which is cocktail time. When Zack was born, he really loved Zack though you wouldn't think he would, he had only one child Erica, but every time you met him, and I think it was the different era he grew up in, he would always ask "How's Zack?" or he would always play with Zack. Where my dad was just the opposite, it was like Zack stole too much attention, my dad liked attention and so anything that came into his life that stole attention, he pushed away. So, back to the story, we showed up at Brett's and he mixes us drinks and we sit down and we chat, and he was just wonderful to listen to. We leave and while driving home Gina asks "Did he just move there?" and I said "No, why?" and she said, "Because there's nothing in the house". And I said "No he's lived there ten years". That was Brett; he had maybe four or five of his photographs on the wall and four or five of his sculptures, he was an incredible wood sculptor, and a chair that he sat in and a sofa and that was it. The only knick-knacks he would have would be if someone sent him a melted piece of lead that was cool looking or an old door that he would photograph but he would throw it away after he photographed it. He worked at like three in the morning so I'd have to go out, I was his assistant for 15 years, so I'd leave here at 3 and be there at 3:30am and he would be in his darkroom and printing away. He had this thing about him; he had his sayings, and every time it was the same, you'd almost think he was a little off. So I'd come into the darkroom and he'd say "Hey bub, I've been up for hours printing." Every-single-time I went into the darkroom he would say the same thing, and he did that throughout his life with certain things. I would help him with his dishes and I remember one morning, we had just finished printing and I was going to go wash this big greasy frying pan that he had and he heard me in the kitchen and he said, "What are you doing in there?" And I said, "I'm just doing your dishes" and he said, "No, don't touch anything!" And I said "Why, it just this old greasy pot?" and he said, "I'm gonna photograph that" and sure enough, he shot it that day, developed it and the next morning he was printing that image, this great close-up abstract of the bottom of this frying pan with a whole bunch of grease in it. He had that incredible thirst for visual stuff that was infectious. EM: Everything became a subject. KW: Everything EM: Which is great but can also sometimes tie your hands with the way you live. KW: Yeah, he loved women but he wasn't very successful in relationships and you can see why because he was pinpointed, it was his

vision and that's it, it's all that mattered. But for me it was a great lesson to learn how to approach art if you're serious about it, it's you; it's how you live your life. EM: Speaking about art, as you get older as an artist, you change a lot; you mature, in the subjects you choose, to composition, the way you print etc. What do you see in your own prints when looking at images from 15, 20 or even 30 years ago? KW: That I was a shitty printer back then. In my family I was always being compared to either my dad or my uncle or my grandfather, and it's something I've always excepted, it's never been a problem. If I would have let it get to me I would have never have been able to show a print, because in a lot of ways they would never match up with my grandfather's quality. This is a huge fight I use to have with my father, I'd say "Dad, I love my grandfather's work, but I'm just as good of an "artist" as he is" and dad would just flip. Dad didn't see it that way; dad saw Edward up here and everyone else below, including himself. I saw myself side-by-side with him (Edward) and dad never figured that vision out and he always thought I was being arrogant or something like that, and a lot of times an artist has to be. Going back to the quality of prints, I look at some of the old stuff and I go, "What was I thinking?" I'm a much better printer now. But all those same statements are valid, you can't just start anywhere. To me it's a ladder that you climb, as long as you're going up the ladder you're in good shape. When you stop and get comfortable at a certain height on that ladder, that's when you have a problem and photography lends itself to that. You can take a bunch of good images and all of the sudden you become known for those images, look at Ansel, Moonrise and a couple of Yosemite things and that's his life and he stayed there. We were talking earlier about new work and groups that we've formed where artists come and bring new work, that what it's about. For a lot of people those old images are like a pacifier that they can always go back to. For ten years, to prove to myself that it was the process that was important not the image, I made one-of-a-kind prints, so I'd mount the negative on the back of the print. I don't suggest people do that, but for me I needed to, because I'd sit in the darkroom with my uncle Brett and we would print 60 Holland Canal's in the morning and I said "Brett, this is not art" and he said "No, I'm printing money" and he was, but that money facilitated him to have the freedom from work. So, there's kind of a catch-22 there, but for me I needed to be able to let the photograph go and rely on the process, not the print to enrich me as an artist. EM: Brett lived the artist life and you've said your family is more important, was making one-of-a-kind prints your way of mixing the two? Saying, I'm the artist and I'll do as I please. KW: Yeah, and actually you look now and I'm going back to one-of-a-kind with my painted photographs, there all one-of-a-kind. That's always been a battle with me and photography, that it's a reproducible art, which is wonderful, a lot of people can enjoy a single image, but we all see things and do things differently, we all have little demons and we all work it out somehow, and that's what I love about it, it's always fluid and changing. EM: I want to get to your new work, looking around the studio it looks like that's what you're doing right now. KW: Yeah, again it's great; I can come in and work on it in the middle of the night. I was printing this morning at 4:30am, I love to print and I love to paint, the biggest thing in being an artist is getting yourself motivated, there's so much to do, I could fill my day with just doing this but I have a garden, a wife, a child and a car that needs to get smogged. My wife and my son and our property here and our family is number one, the painting and the photography is a wonderful mix, I mix that in, I have to do it. If Gina and Zack disappeared then this is what I would do all the time. EM: Your images, before and after painting, are completely new images and it's wonderful to see this alternative view. KW: It is interesting, you take an image that I've printed as a straight photograph and now to be able to paint it, in a lot of ways photography is very limited, it sees what the eye sees basically, and you look at any great artist and a lot of times they try and tweak the camera because the camera is a record of what you're seeing and it's almost too realistic for me. So the painting opens up actually, maybe what I was thinking at the time of the photograph. EM: I was thinking it was more of seeing a change in your mind set from when you created the photograph years ago to now, but it's really more about bringing out the original emotion you had when you took it. KW: Yes, the original emotion of that photograph when I took it, the painting allows me to do that. That's another great think about photography; I can paint the same image again and again and again. It's like squeezing some great fruit, it just juicy stuff and the oil paint is fun to play with, its nasty stuff to get right and I'm just learning, I'm not a great painter, but I just love it. EM: Why did you choose black and what over color? I know your dad kind of choose color to separate himself from his dad. KW: Kind of? Yeah, that's exactly why he did it. I just grew up with black and white, it's what I learned. They didn't have color processes that you could do yourself; if they did they were very involved. My eye was for black and white, but look at what I'm doing now, I can color with my paints, all my sets were painted in color they weren't painted in black and white, I love color, we see in color. It's interesting that at this age that I'm actually going back and coloring these things, it goes to show me that it's not so much the black and white, it's the process of the photograph. The image is just a record, I don't do black and white because it's "artier" at all, I do it because I'm comfortable with it and it's something I can print. I tried to print (color) when dad got sick and I was working with him and doing his color work and it was just so hard to get it right because color is so exact and that's what I hate about it color (printing). Whereas with painting I can make the model blue and it's acceptable, but if you have a blue model in a color photograph it doesn't work. EM: Everyone loves to nit-pick the color in a photograph, particularly photographers. KW: Yeah, and it would just drive me nuts, and I told my dad "I can't do this", so we had them shipped out to an expert. EM: You mentioned the process, and I think with photography in general, it's more about the process than actually taking the picture. It's more about the journey you went on to capture the image than it is the image itself. With color photography, you send the paper through the processor and it comes out the other side in a few minutes and it's done, or you send it off. With black and white though you actually get your hands wet. KW: I love that. I had a tutorial the other day, this guy, has been in photography forever and wanted to learn platinum printing, we were talking and I said I remembered the first time I looked in a tray in

my dad's darkroom in the dark and that white piece of paper turned into an image and that was magic and it is to this day, that is magic. EM: How many kids has that gotten? KW: I know it affects some people; to me it was such a simple thing but such a huge statement. EM: Digital is obviously huge, particularly in the last five years it's really exploded. You've been a darkroom guy your entire career, is there a place in the digital world for you? KW: Not for me but I think digital is great, it's like any discipline it just needs to be mastered. I see a big mistake in people that have never done analog and have just gone straight to digital. I have them in my workshops, over 50% of the people in my workshops are digital, a lot of them have really bad habits. They shoot way too much, they've lost control over what they're doing just because they can shoot so much. I've had some students shoot 2,000 images and I ask "Why?" and they answer, "Because I can". It's defeating the purpose, if there is something there that you really love, if you have a model and you're looking at them and the shape and the line why not just take one picture? It's those bad habits that they get into, I'll look in their viewfinder and I'll say, "What's that over here?" and they'll say "Don't worry about that, I'll take it out in Photoshop". Why not use the ground glass to compose your image right here, right now? So, some people that don't have some background in analog seem to be waffling around in the digital world. Watch, it will come to a head because there are so many things you can do with digital, where do you stop? When you're sitting in front of that computer in Photoshop tweaking this and tweaking that but there has to be an end to the process. A lot of people get so frustrated, they think "I could have done this" and they go back in and they do that. That's what so great about analog, you get through a process and in the end a finished print and the latitude of that finished print is very minimal, is it a good print or a bad print, period. EM: It's a fine line, where to stop, and you see it in analog to but it's so easy to go overboard in digital. You see so many images that are over processed. When you work in the darkroom you get a background that carries over into digital. KW: That's so important; it's like learning art history without the first 10,000 years. Why not take that class, learn it and it becomes part of your arsenal of tools and it gives you a lot more discipline with the digital world. EM: When you build a house you need a foundation. KW: Right, you don't start at the roof and work your way down. But I love digital, I think there's a great place for it, some of my good friends do nothing but digital. EM: You mentioned Brett used to have a happy hour, I know Ansel used to do the same; but who does that anymore? I think you should bring it back, and when you do, I hope we're invited. Thanks for having us. KW: Absolutely.

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