

# PETER BASTIANELLI-KERZE I AM MY ART

By Mike Reed



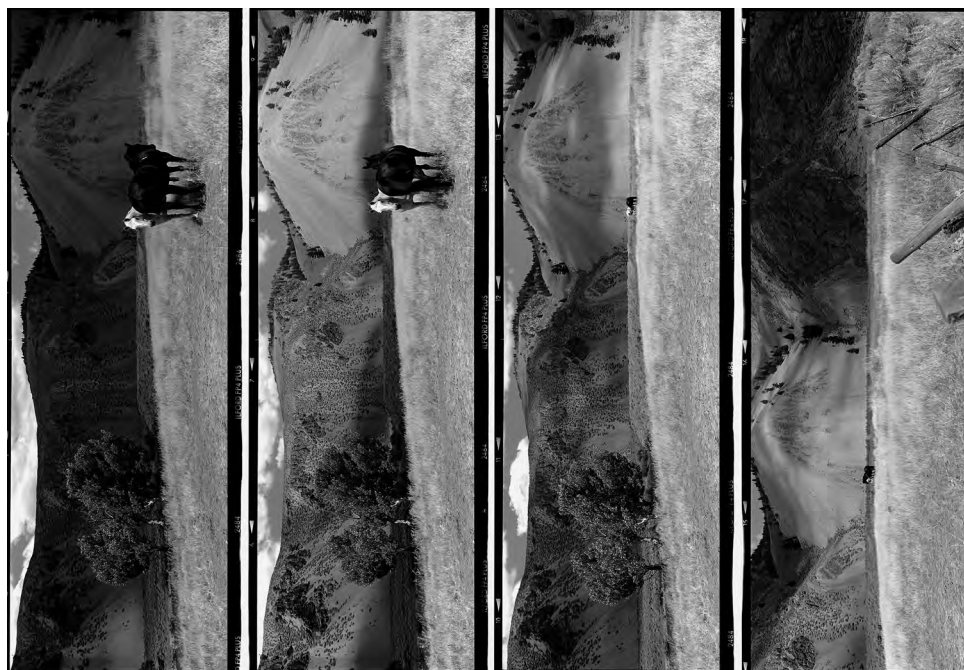
A while ago I found a button lying in the street and on it were the words, "I Am My Art." After pondering a moment, it occurred to me that the button could be saying either of two things; "I Am My Art" might be a vaguely ironic way of announcing that the wearer is an artist, or it could be trying to communicate that art and life are so seamlessly intertwined that any attempt to separate them would be futile. It is in the latter sense of the phrase that the photography of Peter Bastianelli-Kerze should be viewed.

Unlike so many of us, Peter does not feel the need to define himself by his profession. Indeed, if anyone were to ask him what he "does," I doubt that he would immediately understand the question. I know him as a cook, Iron Ranger, sausage maker, motorcyclist, raconteur, outdoorsman, builder, and, incidentally, photographer. I'm not sure exactly what Peter would say his profession is, but it's apparent that he gets as much satisfaction from making a perfect salami, zelodic, or capicola as he does from making a picture.

Peter is able to find so much beauty in the prosaic because he has a genuine regard for the dignity of ordinary things. Lesser photographers often reduce humble subjects to slick sentimentality, but through Peter's lens anything from a pile of logs to a nondescript clump of brush becomes a minor revelation.



Cows Series, Palo, Minnesota



### Authenticity and Vision

Veteran American newsman Daniel Schorr once said, “Sincerity: If you can fake it, you’ve got it made.” Unfortunately, legions of artists have taken Schorr’s words to heart and have become so adept at tarting up photographs with digital sleight of hand that you can never really tell what it is you’re looking at. Peter stubbornly refuses to participate in the idolatry of the computer. He dismisses the idea of digitally manipulating his images with a characteristic retort: “I never manipulate anything but meat” (referring, I’m sure, to sausage making).

I doubt that Peter would refer to his aesthetic agenda with such high-calorie terminology as “creative vision,” but his work does revolve around the singularity of a genuine delight with almost everything. Audiences resonate with his authenticity and passion, and it is for this reason that Peter’s creative vision is so compelling.

Peter’s own description of this vision varies from day to day. Initially he might say, “Well, it’s like when my buddy, Jimmy Fenmore, dared me to walk the length of a high peaked roof. He went first and made it, but I told him that I was scared and didn’t want to do it. He yelled back at me, ‘C’mon—all you have to do is put your mind down in your feet!’ Taking pictures is kind of like that.”

On another day he might describe it like this: “Taking pictures is like skeet shooting. It seems like such a simple thing, but not many people have the ability to see. I mean, sure, you have to know some things, but when it comes right down to it, you focus yourself, then point and shoot.” And on yet another occasion he might say, “The whole thing has to do with divine inspiration.”

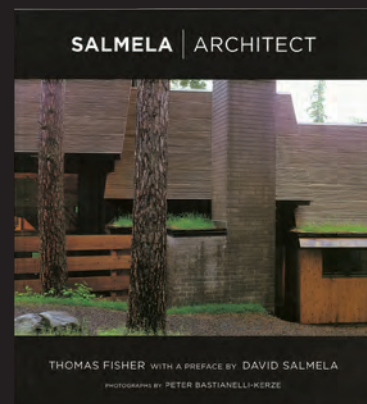
His fundamental technique is idiosyncratic and even faintly Luddite. Along with not owning a computer, he doesn’t have a fax machine, an email address, or even a studio or darkroom. Nor is he all that interested in discussing photographic technique and equipment. When I ask him what sort of equipment he uses, he replies, “You know, the regular stuff.”

### A Longstanding Relationship

Peter’s photography is frequently associated with the architectural work of David Salmela, FAIA, an accomplished and widely admired architect based in Duluth (Salmela’s Streeter House, which was photographed by Peter, is featured on page 46, and a photograph of Salmela’s Jackson Meadow is shown on page 54). The two have been friends and collaborators for more than 30 years. About their first meeting in the 1970s, Salmela says, “He came into my office and something about him got my attention. He looked like he might have come from California—plus he was wearing a white linen suit and a Panama hat.”

Salmela is unabashed in his enthusiasm for Peter’s work. “Peter is a genius architectural photographer—I mean, he’s a genius architectural and cultural photographer. His pictures are like stories. He once shot a series of photos of an old farmstead and gave them to me. The pictures don’t change very much

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### PRINTS IN PRINT

Peter Bastianelli-Kerze has presented David Salmela’s award-winning architecture for the past three decades, and some might argue that the photographer’s eye has been a factor in the architect’s success. What is certainly true is that those of us who have followed Salmela’s career have come to see and understand his buildings through Bastianelli-Kerze’s lens, whether we realize it or not. Such is the creative bond between these two collaborators.

For an excellent compendium of Salmela’s work—and proof of how extensively Bastianelli-Kerze has shaped our view of that work—check out *Salmela Architect* (University of Minnesota Press, 2005) by Thomas Fisher, Assoc. AIA. The lavishly illustrated volume combines Bastianelli-Kerze’s evocative, often panoramic, color photography with Fisher’s insights into the architect’s captivating blend of modern and traditional design. A generous use of plans, sections, and elevations rounds out what is a must-own book for any Salmela or Bastianelli-Kerze enthusiast.

—Christopher Hudson

# I Am My Art

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from one to the next, but when viewed as a whole they have a strongly narrative quality.”

I would add that deciding when to stop is one of the most difficult decisions an artist has to make. Too often really fine work is taken one step too far, or leaves important elements unresolved. In the best of Peter’s work, one gets a feeling of completeness and repose, as if the story has been developed and brought to a conclusion.

This sense of completeness complements the architect’s work by showing that the building’s aesthetic potential has been fully realized. In Salmela’s opinion, Peter has an innate sense of how a building relates to the space and environment it occupies. “A building must be designed to exist with what’s there,” Salmela says, “and working with Peter helps me see the potential of a project. His photos give you a place to stand.”

Peter recalls a project that he and Salmela worked on together: “David had walked around looking at the building so many times that he’d worn a path around it. I walked around the project, too, but my path was around an entirely different place.”

Not surprisingly, Peter’s intuitive approach doesn’t work for clients who insist on controlling how an image should look. Salmela asserts that photographers on assignment tolerate different amounts of client input.

“Commercial work is a ratio of personal expression and client demands that is skewed to around 75 percent to 25 percent in favor of the client. With Peter, it’s just the opposite.”

Salmela jokingly calls Peter a “non-artist artist,” probably because most artists want to be recognized as artists, but for Peter being labeled as such would be limiting and superfluous.

Peter’s vision, then, derives its acuity not from a studied understanding of modern photographic technique, but from a panoramic enjoyment of all he sees and experiences. In a sense, it is his determination to please himself that makes his work ring with authenticity; he simply refuses to think of photography as a job.

In the applied arts, it’s all too easy to let economic rather than artistic considerations drive our work. Appreciating how Peter sees the world has made me a better artist; he is my constant reminder that the distinction between personal and commercial work isn’t so wide after all, and that art should reflect a delight taken in the world. **AMN**