

# **Tom Epperson**

## **Selected Biography**

In 2005, Tom Epperson was honored with a solo exhibition at the Ayala Museum, one of the most important cultural institutions of the Philippines. Entitled *One Light*, the exhibition featured 55 portraits taken over the course of the past 20 years of people from all walks of life, shot using only one light source. Socialites, musicians, actors, businessmen, family and ordinary folks were exhibited. His 2007 exhibition in Manila, *Frozen*, an event sponsored by BMW Philippines, consisted of about 40 images of a variety of flowers frozen in water.

Although currently based in Manila, which has been his home for the last 23 years, Tom was actually born in Cleveland, Ohio. He got his first camera at the age of 11, but would not begin studying photography until he reached 18. In those years, Tom was also an avid surfer, and would spend the better part of his youth traveling throughout the United States. It was in his stop at Hawaii that he got a call to work for Hanna Barbera as a cameraman, which turned out to be the beginning of a long and meaningful stint in the animation industry.

His transition from animation to photography was not without complexity, as he had to uproot himself from his native land and move to more exotic locations such as Australia, Korea and the Philippines before realizing his true calling. In 1985, Tom was sent to the Philippines by Burbank Films, a Sydney-based animation studio he used to work for, to help set up a studio in Manila while teaching the proper use of an animation camera under a three-month contract. This unexpectedly turned into three years before returning once again to Australia. After reading an article in *American Photo* about French-born photojournalist and war photographer Katherine Leroy, whose life story had so inspired him, Tom instantly decided to quit his job in animation, a job that spanned 14 years, to become a photographer.

After working as a freelance photo assistant in Sydney with photographers who were into a wide variety of disciplines such as fashion, food, still life and commercial work, Tom headed back to Manila in 1990 to pursue his career in photography.

Tom is married to a Filipina, Jennifer, and has a daughter named Aryanna. He still surfs and plays the harmonica for a local Filipino blues band, The Blue Rats.

## **Artist Statement**

## **Discovering Ice**

As a child growing up in Ohio, I remember seeing things frozen in the nearby rivers and lakes. That distinct memory from my childhood prompted me to start experimenting with ice.

## **Debuting with Ice**

For my first experiment, I placed flowers in the freezer, the outcome of which was totally different from what I had envisioned. The image of the frozen lakes that I recall was totally different from what resulted when I froze the flowers. The latter had more texture, energy and depth. The water seemed to have had a life of its own. After more experiments, I came to realize that I had very little control over the medium, which I considered as both an advantage and a disadvantage. It was kind of exciting, having to rely on a bit of luck to come up with something unexpected yet desired.

To fully understand and take stock of this newfound art of freezing, I did a bit of research on the Internet to find certain techniques that could help me achieve a certain effect that I had in mind. One thing I learned that really stood out for me was how to freeze water that would result in a clear, glass-like appearance. After trying it out, though, I noticed that some of the energy from the first freezing experiment was lost so I decided to just keep things as simple as possible with the hope that the effect desired would materialize.

## **Working with ice**

I started really getting into ice as a medium while doing a series of frozen flowers that I used in my one-man show, *Frozen*. Over the course of 4 months, I froze flowers and ended up with a total of 40 images. That process taught me a great deal on what worked and what did not work relative to ice.

Working with ice reminded me a bit of baking. If you leave the subject in the freezer not long enough, it comes out half ice, half water. If you leave it in too long and it actually over-freezes, the ice comes out very cracked and brittle. I would normally wait for a certain period of time before working with the iced object that had just been taken out of the freezer. Once the ice starts to soften and becomes clear, I begin to carve away unwanted ice or even re-shape the ice if necessary. I also discovered that different types of water give different results. I find tap water as the kind that worked best for what I was trying to achieve.

As soon as the block of ice reached the studio, I would work at a frantic pace as I am working with something that is constantly changing with every minute that passes. Each subject matter requires a different lighting approach, but I basically start off by using just one light, which I move around until I achieve the desired effect. I also learned that lighting ice is noticeably similar to lighting glass, as both subjects responded to light in pretty much the same way. As for the subject,

I would shoot it over the course of roughly two hours and obtain a variety of images. If I needed the object to appear more clearly, I would either just wait for the ice to defreeze or speed up the melting process by pouring boiling water over the ice.

The key aspect of ice that has constantly heightened my fascination with the medium is the fact that you never know how things would turn out. Ice has a short life span unlike other more perpetual mediums such as stone, clay or glass. With ice, there were certain subjects that I had to freeze at least 4 times before I arrived at the look I had envisioned, while there were other subjects that were seemingly effortless to work with that required only one shot. What little control I did have in determining the container to use, the amount of time that the subject would be left inside the freezer and the type of water to be used, somewhat reminds me of what fascinated me about photography in the first place, especially the darkroom, where I could not wait to process my film to see if I had captured what I saw through my camera.

The whole idea of this exhibition came about while I was watching a documentary on TV about the environment and how scientists believe there will be another Ice Age. I thought, what if another ice age did happen within the year? What would the next generation of people or those who survived find in the ice?

I decided to focus my story on one family, a Filipino family, and some of their most treasured belongings, most of which existed elsewhere, while some were uniquely inherent in the Philippines. Examples of the frozen objects include the crucifix, the rosary, dried fish, *sampaguita* flowers and the *balisong* (a collapsible knife used for self-defense). The objective behind this theme is to show traces of other cultures in the Philippines while it continues to retain its own identity, a reality that one hopes to preserve despite changing eras and distant futures.