

# Chasing the Light

Photographer John McDermott captures Asia's ancient ruins, inspired by the dreamy effects of a solar eclipse

BY ILARIA MARIA SALA



John McDermott at the entrance to Angkor Thom, the “Great City of Angkor” in Cambodia.

It all started in October of 1995, when Asia witnessed one of its longest total solar eclipses. John McDermott, then working as a photographer for a business magazine in Bangkok, had decided to travel to Cambodia for the cosmological event, and to watch it from the 12th-century Hindu temples of Angkor Wat. “A solar eclipse is always incredible. It does something to the light that makes everything seem flatter and more special,” McDermott explains. “But seeing an eclipse in Angkor Wat was just mind-boggling, and I decided then and there that I wanted to make photographs with that otherworldly, astronomical quality that the eclipse created.”

Which is how the Little Rock, Arkansas, native, who has since 2003 been based in Siem Reap—the nearest city to the temples—started to “chase the light,” seeking to replicate the same dreamy effect that the solar eclipse produced. Armed with his many cameras and black-and-white infrared film cartridges from Kodak, a specialty film that was discontinued in 2007, he started pacing the temples of Angkor year after year, shooting thousands of photographs.

The dramatic results of McDermott’s efforts can be seen in his 2009 book *Elegy: Reflections on Angkor*, which offers a comprehensive photographic portrait of the achievement of the ancient Khmer builders and architects. The grainy black-and-white stills document an extraordinary archeological feat that still puzzles experts. The photographs have a distinctly pictographic quality to them, which brings to mind the sketches of the temple complex made by the first French explorers to stumble upon it in the mid-19th century, when it was barely visible among Cambodia’s luxuriant vegetation.

Since that first visit in 1995, McDermott has been totally captivated by the country, and he now runs three galleries there that show his own works as well as those of a few up-and-coming Cambodian artists. “It is an unusual situation,” he admits. “Since the temples are the main draw for tourists visiting Cambodia, they are interested in photographs of Angkor Wat. When I show these pictures in other countries, however, people are shocked. I even get letters from some who decide to travel to Asia to see the temples for themselves.”

After a series of successful shows at the Sundaram Tagore galleries in Beverly Hills, New York, and Hong Kong, McDermott has expanded his quest to chase the light. His current project is taking him to a number of temple valleys in other Asian countries—hopefully before global tourism changes them forever. “I am not anti-tourism,” he explains. “Tourism brings employment and a chance at education to many countries—but inevitably it also brings other, less desirable changes. For the temples, this has meant a loss of some of their magic and spirituality.”

In anticipation of such developments, McDermott is now rushing to photograph places that exist currently as “alien landscapes in our midst,” but are on the cusp of transformation by being put on the tourist track. “I want my work to serve a historical purpose as well, to document what is on the verge of being modified completely,” he says. To that end, he has begun shooting in locations that include the Temple Valley in Bagan, Myanmar, and Sukhothai in Thailand—both of which may not survive as they are for much longer.

Sundaram Tagore, the owner of the galleries, says that McDermott “epitomizes the notion of East-West dialogue. He’s a Western-born artist living in Cambodia, and his deep love for the vanishing parts of Asia is captured powerfully in his work.”

These days, McDermott’s passion for the texture of ancient stones in tropical



***The Golden Dome*, 2011, depicts the Tanti Kyi Taung Pagoda in Myanmar (top). *Solar Eclipse*, 1995, shot at the Angkor Wat temples (above left). *Ta Prohm Doorway*, 2012, shows Angkor Wat's signature trees (above right). *Elephants at the Gate*, 2000, in Angkor Thom (bottom).**

sunlight is guiding his lens even further afield, all the way to the monumental complex of Petra, in Jordan. "I still have a fridge full of rolls of discontinued infrared film, because it gives me the basis for that ethereal appearance I am looking for," the photographer says, "and I love the way it maintains the stones' darker texture against the light."

In preparation for the day that the infrared supply in his fridge runs out, however, McDermott also makes use of a similar effect that can be produced digitally, even though its edge is "too clean," in his words, compared to film. "This digital process has to be used with caution," he explains, "since it has a tendency to turn greens and whites into transparent, luminescent bright spots among the sober black, white, and gray tints—and emphasizing that light excessively can seem very gimmicky. So I try to play down these infrared characteristics, in order to retain the dreaminess"—the same dreaminess of a total solar eclipse in 1995 that fascinated him so, and has kept him



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on the road ever since.

