



# Jake Rajs

## The Eye of America

by R. B. Stuart

Tucked away in an old converted firehouse on the North Fork, is international photographer Jake Rajs whose dramatic landscapes have graced the pages of LIFE, Esquire, OMNI, Travel & Leisure and others. This quiet, unsuspecting visual artist possesses the talent of harnessing the moment when mother nature strikes a pose.

His hypnotic photographs caught the eye of the high-end, coffee table book publisher, Rizzoli, who published six limited collector editions, two of which Walter Cronkite wrote the introduction, "Atlantic" [2007] and "These United States" [2003]. Readers Digest took notice of Rajs' ability to capture majestic landscapes across the U.S. by voting him "Best American Photographer" in 2003.

In 1976 Rajs dreamt of the statue of liberty diminutively wedged in between the Twin Towers. He searched the now priceless spot on a map, and drove around to get the right angle, shooting it at sunset from Bayonne, N. J. "It was a spot that I went to over 50 times and shot 10 frames before I got it."

In 1985 at 33 years old Rajs submitted ten years of photographs from around NYC to an editor at Rizzoli. They instantly knew the stellar portfolio warranted a book and, "Manhattan: An Island in Focus" was published. "It was a dream come true. Within four months the book came out." Whether or not a book is successful he says depends on the public. "Every book is a chance. You risk time and money...but ultimately it's up to the public...and if they like it or not."

Within five years the 38 year-old photographer published a second Rizzoli book, "America," it sold 150,000 copies now with German and French editions. If Rajs didn't know what the public thought of his work...Rizzoli sure did.

Since then, over a 23 year period, 16 breathtaking picture books have been published of NYC to the North Fork and across the U. S. The humble photographer scoffs he still 'doesn't feel like he's made it.' "I think you're only as good as your last project. I've succeeded, but you're always experiencing a tension. Subject matter changes and a new project may excite you, but it determines if you're successful or not. I never say a picture is great...I leave that up to someone else."

And when standing in front of an image he can tell if it's going to be a good picture. "Although I don't stand in a spot longer than an hour---but I go there 50 - 60 times. Certain places call you to return again and again. Like Monet painting at different times of the day, or season, I do the same thing when I find a spot I'm moved by." Rajs says he constantly visits museums and is influenced by the artwork of Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin and DeVinci. Admitting, "Painters, influence me more than photographers do."

When shooting powerful, soulful images Rajs says there's certain moments, and times when the light is majestic. "The sky and nature just

reveals itself and its magnificence. So you're always driving, walking, flying....looking for something unique."

Generally Rajs begins taking pictures to tell a story. "Each photo is a paragraph, and each book is a novel...a visual story. And the story dictates what I photograph, a lot of time they don't have people in them. It's like mixing science fiction and a romance novel. As a writer you have material in your mind---as a photographer you have to experience something, so as to know what the book will feel like as a story." Adding the inspiration of the story propels him forward to take pictures.

The editing process is what he finds most difficult, Rajs has to weed through 20,000 images to get the 200 pictures that will be used in a book. "There is an emotional attachment for me with each picture. Whether I drove 10,000 miles to get the shot, doesn't mean it's a good photograph. So it's a hard process trying to sift through all the images," he admits. Ultimately it's up to him, the photo editor and designer to sort through them, but when seeking an objective eye, Rajs refers to his wife Amy or friends.

When he relocated to Orient Point he discovered a bounty of picturesque jewels. Monacelli Press published them in a 2006 picture book, "Between Sea and Sky: Landscapes of Long Islands North Fork." And in summer

2008 will release a South Fork book, "Beyond the Dunes."

Rajs, born in Poland moved to Israel before relocating to Brooklyn at age eight. Given his European eye...he sees America in a unique way. "I have an appreciation for this country...it was my fathers dream to come here. And I find it a magical place---that you live the life you dream of." Growing up in Israel, Rajs lived in a one story two-room house without electricity---using an out-house. "So at eight when I was sailing through N.Y. Harbor it was transforming and breathtaking. To see the Statue of Liberty, and the sun glistening on the water, brought me to tears."

With over three decades of shooting throughout the U.S. Rajs feels this country still provides him with the material he needs for future stories. "I enjoy all of America---I don't exclude any state. They each have something unique. Lately, my passions have been directed more towards the coast and water." This spring Rizzoli will publish, "Cape Cod and The Islands."

Rajs hopes the legacy of his books will make the world a better place. "My photographs preserve a certain landscape or building, an appreciation of nature and urban. In parts, I hope they appreciate how unique and special the world around them is."

