

Kurt Markus, 1947-2022



Photo by Jewel

Kurt Markus, an internationally acclaimed fine art photographer known for his black-and-white portraits, magazine and fashion work, and luminous landscapes, died in Santa Fe on June 12, after a battle with Parkinson's disease and Lewy body disease. He was 75 years old.

The recipient of many of American photography's highest honors, including several Clio Awards and *Life* magazine's Alfred Eisenstaedt Award, Markus also directed music videos and documentaries, wrote screenplays, and shot advertising campaigns for such diverse clients as BMW, Nike, US West and Lee Jeans. His work was presented at numerous museums and prestigious emporiums of fine art, including the Peter Fetterman Gallery in Santa Monica, the Obscura Gallery in Santa Fe, and New York City's Staley-Wise Gallery. Critics praised his "unique vision" and his "powerful sense of realism." A reviewer in *The New Yorker* once called his images "quietly, unfailingly artful." Among his many accolades, in 1994 Markus was one of five photographers selected to participate in a 25th anniversary special edition of *Rolling Stone* presenting the living legends of rock-n-roll.

Markus, who lived much of his adult life in Kalispell, Montana, was a devoted husband and father, and a loyal friend known for his calm demeanor, his dry sense of humor, and his deep sense of personal honor. “When I think of Kurt,” recalled one of his closest friends, Buzz Shiely, “I see a thoughtful, honest man, smiling at me from beneath a black Stetson.” Suzy Moore, a longtime family friend who served as Markus’s studio manager, described him as “such a perfect human—kind, modest, a warm spirit. Wherever he went, he was always just Kurt: A regular guy happy with simple things.”

Markus approached his photographic subjects with what he called a “simple-heartedness,” and he remained stubbornly old-school in his methods. A virtuoso in the dark room—his “escape hatch,” as he called it—he fastidiously printed and toned his own gelatin silver prints, and he was suspicious of digital sleights of hand. “I believe only in the rectangle,” he said. “Filling that rectangle with a photograph remains the most challenging thing you can do. If you have to go outside of it, bringing in other non-photographic things to put inside, you run the risk of gimmickry. For me, the most powerful expression is the simplest.”

Kurt Michael Markus was born in Whitefish, Montana, on April 6, 1947, the son of Raymond Markus and Juanita Johnson. Although he grew up immersed in the great outdoors, Markus knew from an early age that the world of ranching and field work was not a life for him. “I was born a daydreamer,” he said, “and I know of no slot for one of those on any ranch.”

He attended West Point, where he was known as a thoughtful student and a natural athlete—among other sports, he threw the javelin. “At West Point, Kurt looked like some Scandinavian god—blonde hair, perfect body, all the girls fell for him,” recalled Shiely, who roomed with Markus at the military academy. After graduation, Markus became a member of the elite U.S. Army Rangers. But he learned by hard experience that the military was no profession

for him. Recalled Markus: “When I got out of the Army in the early 70s, I knew one thing—that whatever I was going to do with my life, I wanted to love it and believe in it.”

So, he trained his love and faith on photography. Inspired by Edward Weston, Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, and a handful of other fine-art practitioners, Markus taught himself the rudiments of the craft and went to work. His camera took him, quite literally, around the world—from the Solomon Islands to Yemen (where he was briefly kidnapped at gunpoint), from the sand dunes of Namibia to the bottom of the Grand Canyon.

Markus was perhaps best known for his portraits of cowboys in the American West, a subject that, given his Montana background, came naturally to him. His cowboy images—gritty, respectful, and somehow timeless—possess an elegiac quality as they document a world of toil and rugged competence that’s slowly vanishing from the American landscape. Markus published three books of cowboy photography: *After Barbed Wire*, *Buckaroo*, and *Cowpuncher*, which in 2002 was named the most outstanding art book of year by the Cowboy Hall of Fame.

“Kurt caught the spirit of the American West like no one else has,” says the acclaimed photographer Bruce Weber, one of Markus’s lifelong friends. “He left behind a lasting record of the West that we won’t see done in quite the same way again. He had so much respect for that world—not just the cowboys themselves, but the horses, the saddles and gear, the landscapes. He captured it all.”

“Everything you’ve read about the West and cowboys is in some strange fashion true,” Markus said. His early work with cowboys formed a significant part of his education as a photographer. “I learned how to load film on horseback at a trot—and in driving snow,” he mused. “I learned how to be ready, to stay out of the way, and to always thank the cook.”

A quality of raw authenticity—an “unslickness,” as it’s been described—ran through Markus’s portraits, whether his subject was a celebrity actor (Meryl Streep), a world-famous musician (BB King), a prizewinning author (Cormac McCarthy), an international supermodel (Cindy Crawford), or just ordinary folk. “In the world of photography, it’s very rare to find a truly original artist, but Kurt was that” says Etheleen Staley of the Staley-Wise Gallery. She describes his work as “very pure, no gimmicks, very sensitive and thoughtful, but at the same time very stylish. He was the sort of person who would not want to be called ‘stylish,’ but he was, very much so.” One thing that set him apart from so many other photographers, Staley says, was his proficiency in the dark room. “He was a master printer. There’s very little of that anymore—it’s considered artisan work, almost. It’s all gone digital. Printing his own stuff gave his images such a profound clarity and depth.”

He enjoyed cultivating a collaborative bond with the people he shot, a relationship built on mutual trust. In his photographs, there was a subtle tug-of-war between what was revealed and what was withheld. Said Markus: “I have entered into an unspoken, unwritten, and generally inscrutable pact with the people I have photographed and lived among: If I promise not to tell all I know about them, they will do the same for me.”

Another subject that long captivated Markus was the sport of boxing. He photographed world-champions—Mike Tyson, for example—but most of his boxing portraits paid homage to lesser-known aspirants struggling at the periphery of the sport, in far-flung places like Dublin, Mexico City, and Havana. “I see in a boxer’s body an ideal of maleness, a body both glorified by severe conditioning and humbled by punishment,” Markus wrote. “No more muscle than necessary, no less, either. Stripped, vulnerable, they show their greatness.”

Markus also enjoyed a distinguished career as one of the world's preeminent fashion photographers. His fashion work graced the covers and pages of such magazines as *Vogue*, *GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, *Mirabella*, *Esquire*, *Elle*, and *Harper's Bazaar*, and he traveled the world shooting for clients that included Armani, Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Banana Republic, and Liz Claiborne. Reviewers praised the steady grace and understated sensuality of his fashion photographs, noting his sense of "style and wit." With Markus behind the camera, wrote one observer, "models are people and not just mannequins, and they contribute their personality to the work."

Supermodel Christy Turlington, who Markus photographed many times at far-flung locations around the world, describes Markus as "a perfectionist—so much time, care, and intelligent thought goes into every image. He subscribes to the idea that you don't rush things that are special." Turlington and Markus traveled to Madagascar and climbed Kenya's Mt. Kilimanjaro, among other shared adventures. "Even though he was one of the very best photographers in the fashion world, to call him a fashion photographer wouldn't be quite accurate," she says. Turlington described a session with Markus as "a study in craft," in which photographer and subject are creative co-conspirators. "He sees the space, the angles, the composition, the possibilities. His mind is always going. But there is a quiet curiosity and a sense of respect that encourages you to be free and allows surprises to happen." Turlington and Markus have created a book called "Christy" which will be published the end of this year. With sadness Kurt will not be able to see his final book.

Markus attributed the success of his multi-faceted career to relentless hard work, but also to a willingness always to remain open to unexpected opportunities. "I think the really valuable experiences are the ones that come out of nowhere while you're plodding along on a journey," he

said. “But persistence is valuable, too. I always worked hard, always showed up. Sweat is part of the equation.” He believed, almost mystically, that his camera had a will of its own. “It is an instrument of serendipity,” he wrote, “and it takes its own pleasure with things and people apart from my best intentions and desires.”

In recent years, Markus spent much of his time capturing one of the world’s most spectacular and iconic landscapes, Monument Valley. His images of that Navajo sandstone wilderness, through every season and in all sorts of weather, possess the same entrancing elements that imbue his world-class portraits—a dignified sensuality, an aversion to gimmick, a granular realism, and a spirit “simple-heartedness.”

“His Monument Valley work is just extraordinary,” says Bruce Weber. “He went there for years and although he caught something different with every visit, the images always had the same quality of reverence and majesty.”

Wherever his Linhof field camera took him, Markus regarded himself as a blessed man, a dumbstruck pilgrim in the world of photographic art. “I consider it a gift to have found photography and made my life in it,” he said. “I never thought of it as a job. I’ve always associated the click of the shutter with the word ‘Yes.’ ”

He is survived by his wife (who was also his agent and producer) of thirty-eight years, Maria Markus of Santa Fe; son Weston Markus and fiancé Jess Kreps of New York City and son Ian Markus of Santa Fe; daughter, Jade Markus, and her husband Brian Campbell of Missoula, Montana; sister Shelley and her husband Robert Love of Columbia Falls, Montana; nephew Orion Love and his wife Joanna Gehrig Columbia Falls Montana; and niece Keeley Love and her husband Kent Bulifant, Portland Oregon. No memorial service has been planned.

Markus will be buried in Tuscarora Cemetery in Nevada's Great Basin—a lonesome place not far from where he shot some of his early portraits of cowboys. When asked why he picked such a remote and forlorn spot for a gravesite, he quipped, with a self-deprecating grin: “I didn't want people to feel guilty for not coming to see me after I'm gone.”