



March, 2025

What a difference only a few years make. I wrote the essay below about the newly-discovered photographs of Joan Archibald, who signed her work as Kali, for the first edition of the book on her work, *Kali Artographer*, which was published by Powerhouse Books in 2021. The trade edition followed in 2023. Since then, one of the main settings of the essay, the Pacific Palisades, where Kali lived and worked, was destroyed in a catastrophic fire that was incomprehensibly shocking even for the people of Los Angeles, who are used to the big, scary forest fires which trigger evacuations most every year. This time it was different, with the Pacific Palisades being all-but-destroyed, including the Archibald house at 16900 Enchanted Place. So, now with the devastation of one of the great neighborhoods in a great city, the world that Kali inhabited in her last years is all-but-gone. There is a sudden, enhanced sense of not only time-passed, but time permanently erased. It makes her already eerie work, snapshots of time past, all the more haunting.

July 2020

A few years back, I received an email from Len Prince about a lost trove of photographs. Len and I had met when I was a writer at *Vanity Fair* and he was one of the magazine's top photographers, a master of light whose work, in its glamour and rigorous classicism, was at times reminiscent of George Hurrell or Cecil Beaton. Len had even taken a few portraits of me, and included some in a monograph of his work.

There was a backstory I needed to know, Len told me. He'd once been married Susan Archibald, and while they divorced in 1987, they were still close, and it had come to pass, that Susan's mother, Joan, was an avid—and, according to Len, shockingly original—photographer. Joan Archibald, who signed her photographs "Kali," had died in January of 2019, and when Susan was cleaning out her house in Pacific Palisades, she'd stumbled upon hundreds upon hundreds of prints, negatives and Polaroids. The work was so powerful that Len said he went down a curatorial rabbit hole from which he was just emerging.

Susan had shipped him the whole trove to his farm house in upstate New York, and for two full years, Len commenced sorting, conserving, and obsessing. There was, he told me, a book in this lost archive, and he wanted me to see the draft of the layout, which had been done by the venerable graphic designer Sam Shahid. A few days later, the very heavy printout of the preliminary layout arrived in a large box from Shahid's Manhattan studio. I remember cutting open the box and thinking to myself, "These guys have really gone overboard. Three volumes? On a photographer in the Pacific Palisades no one ever heard of? Sam Shahid has gone down the rabbit hole, too!"

I started to turn pages.

I was soon in the rabbit hole.

The purpose of Len's getting in touch was to ask me to write an introduction to the book that would bring Kali's work to the world. When I began paging through Sam's drafts of the volumes, skepticism fell away. I soon became enveloped by the world of Kali, effectively peering in to an eerie lost era of Los Angeles, Malibu, and greater California of the 1960s and 70s, the period right before my own Los Angeles youth. I was a convert.

Sam had divided Kali's work into three separate volumes, designed to fit into an elegant cloth slipcase. This was the perfect conceit, as Kali's work falls very neatly into three genres: "Portraits and Landscapes", which can be thought of as the High Kali period, where she was, as you will read below, innovating with developing processes, colorization, and formatting. "Polaroids", largely from the same period, but for Kali, another experimental medium in which he augmented the developing process, to create unique effects, and "Outer Space", which can be thought of as Late Kali, photos made when she was older and a shut-in at her Pacific Palisades house, obsessed by otherworldly objects viewed and photographed through closed circuit security monitors. A fourth volume, containing my original introduction, reprised here in shorter form, and photos of the artist and ephemera from her salad days, was added after I went a bit hog wild with my assessment of Joan Archibald's work as Kali.

By the time I arrived at the final page of the original layouts, I felt as if I had taken a Proustian journey back to the slightly frightening Elysium of late-mid-century in the place that, at about that time, came to be called Cali, the province marked in everyone's minds by the Manson murders, Janice Joplin's death, and the contrasting governorships of Ronald Reagan and Jerry Brown. It was actually a trip, as they used to say in that period, without a trace of irony. And what a gift and great good luck to have had Susan Archibald discover these photos and to have delivered them to the loving, curatorial hands of Len Prince, who entrusted the gifted Sam Shahid, who enshrined them so perfectly in book form. As you will read here, this is how Kali affected me. What you will learn over subsequent pages is how she will affect you.

I moved recently to a house in a canyon in Los Angeles, which is similar in its situation to the house in which I grew up in a neighboring foothill section of the city. Like the house my parents had, this property has views on to nearby canyon ridges. It is all quite picturesque in these canyons—as well as voyeuristic—because of views on to the backs of other canyon homes, framed by tall, non-indigenous trees. In the distance—after dusk— there are city lights; in the foreground, coyotes. Overhead, in the L.A. canyons, with surprising frequency, there is the thunder of police helicopters. As I have not lived in an L.A. canyon for some years, the effect of returning is Proustian, being back above the city I live in, where I am from, now half-remembering, half experiencing anew the microclimate of these hills. The marine layer, the same botanical perfumes wafting seasonally—orange blossom; then night-blooming jasmine; then frangipani; then sage—over the driveway, or the pool decks, which retain, to the touch of bare feet, the afternoon heat.

This ridge, with this view and attendant memories, is an especially good perch to be on as I peruse the photos in this book you are about to explore. The photos of Joan Archibald—or Kali, as she styled herself in about 1964 —evoke a deep feeling, or better yet, realization of Los Angeles, or greater Los Angeles, or The Southland, as local TV news talent for some reason have long insisted on calling it. The photos in these volumes, for the most part, came from a similar, timelessly picturesque canyon. They were developed in makeshift darkrooms. Those that didn't come from the garage darkroom in the nearby canyon came from the companion terrain of the L.A. canyon-dweller: The Desert, developed in a master bath darkroom in Palm Springs, to be specific.

Canyon and desert were the main environments of Kali, who, for the explosively productive years of her life—from the mid 1960s to the mid 2000s—was a secretive, and therefore obscure, master of the visual arts, hidden among the mostly conventional West L.A. housewives of her generation; the woody station wagon-driving carpool moms and the occasional white Mercedes-driving grande dames indigenous to The Southland canyons and the stylish desert cities of the 1960s and 1970s. Joan Archibald—or Kali, in the darkroom—turns out to have been one the great chroniclers, and interpreters, of the waning 20th century years of her adopted hometown; a secret historian of the era we now know mostly from the heavily marketed triumphs of The Beach Boys, The Doors, Joni Mitchell, Joan Didion, and *Shampoo*.

What you have in front of you is, in effect, a discovered memoir; an interior monologue in visual form. And, while thoroughly personal, the images—for the most part never-before-seen, and maybe never intended to be seen—will stir up memories and emotions for anyone who got even a peek at those hazy, dazed years of psychedelic, hippie, haywire L.A., virtually indescribable to anyone who turned up here any time after the dawn of the 80s, when the city simultaneously cleaned up its air, got good restaurants, and the freeways were no longer commonly referred to by their more romantic given names: the Santa Ana, the Ventura, the Hollywood.

Kali was born Joan Maire Yarusso in 1932, Islip, New York. She married Bob Archibald, a trumpet player. He was apparently on the road a lot. Joan Archibald was divorced by the age of 30, and, according to her daughter, Susan Archibald, got in a car and headed across the country. She ended up in the Malibu of 1962. With her good looks and some allure, she became a fixture at the beach parties of the era, which extended from house-to-house and rolled from orange-tinted sunset into the grey Malibu dawn.



Robert and Joan Archibald and their children, c. early 1960s (courtesy of Rugged Entertainment)



Joan Archibald with her children, Robert and Susan
(courtesy of Rugged Entertainment)



Joan Archibald, 1960s
(courtesy of Artnet)



From an unedited transcript of a conversation with Susan Archibald, regarding her recollections from this period:

Well my mom had two children and she needed to get away and my brother and me we went to boarding school and my mom needed to expand herself whatever she was searching for and she landed in Malibu and she was hobnobbing with Richard Chamberlain and I have a couple snapshots of him with my mom and my mom fit right in because she was a stunner. So my mom rented a place and she was in real estate for a minute and then my mom needed to find a place, through my grandmother's guidance, because my grandmother was the matriarch of the family and she told my mother that Malibu was not a place for her kids. After that, my mother went to Palm Springs and she bought Sandra Dee and Bobby Darin's house and you know you can already feel my mom is starting to break free. Frank Sinatra wanted to date my mom but my mom wanted nothing to do with him.



Palm Springs house
(courtesy of Rugged Entertainment)

845 FAIR CIRCLE DRIVE, IN PALM SPRINGS—FORMER HOME OF SANDRA DEE AND BOBBY DARIN, reads the listing on a Pinterest page from a Google search. No more information. No mention of its more recent occupant: Kali.

The swimming pool in the back was probably what mattered most to Kali when she lived there, as she used it as a giant wash for photographic prints.

From the Susan Archibald transcript:

She would let the chlorine go down to ground zero. I would know that I wasn't going to be swimming that day in the pool. There would be a ton of prints floating around in the pool when I woke up and she would be having these massive prints some of them on rolls and she'd be rinsing them and drying them in the sun I mean like the old fashioned way in the 60s and 70s she was washing the prints and doing her printing in her master bathroom on Fair Circle Drive and then she would get them dry and then start to paint them with Krylon paint, she would use sand, she would use everything unconventional known to man.



Joan Archibald in Palm Springs c. 1960s
(courtesy of Rugged Entertainment)

Kali took photography classes at The College of the Desert, in Palm Desert, down Fred Warring Drive from Palm Springs. But no one knows exactly when and how her style developed. She had, at one time, been interested in painting. She painted wine bottles. Only one of those wine bottles survived a flood and break-ins at the house on Fair Circle Drive. The urge to paint never was sublimated by a consuming, seemingly manic, foray into photography. An improvised dark room in the master bath of the Palm Springs house—where Sandra Dee put on her face and Bobby Darin greased his pompadour—started churning out 16x20 black and white prints on silver Portriga paper, semi-gloss or canvas-textured, all with rough edges. Many of them multiple exposures. Then, after a stop bath in Sandra Dee's Roman tub, the prints were floated in the pool; the water of the pool would become colored with Dr. Ph. Martin inks, for tints; spray developer may be applied, which could create abstraction; swirling prints in the uncleaned pool caught bugs and desert sand on the surface for texture. The prints were sun dried on the pool deck, where more sand or bugs may have stuck to them.

After this process, the prints ceased to be simply photography. They were impressionistic or expressionistic works. They seemed to have no category, which prompted Kali trademark her work: Artography (unrecorded at this point). This went along with the name change to Kali (probably in 1964) and a recorded copyright, Kali Kolor Ltd. The back of the works were stamped with a wood cut-style "Kali" logo. Its design shrieks psychedelic era. The name Kali, for Joan Archibald of Islip, Long Island, is a kind of rebranding inspiration rivaling Rock Hudson for Roy Harold Scherer, Jr., or, for that matter, Sandra Dee for Alexandra Zuck.



Devendorf Park Hople Model,
Carmel, CA, 1967
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Face (Blue and Green),
Palm Springs, CA, 1968
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Globes Architecture Black and White,
Palm Springs, CA, 1970
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Debbie with Kitty,
Palm Springs, CA, 1969
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)

Her portrait and landscape subjects, and treatment of these images, depict a serial acid trip—one she may or may not, in fact, have been on—articulated as well as anyone who ever made the attempt. Certain characters recur: Debbie, classic beauty; Susan, model, daughter; Mary, Renaissance visage; Kali, artist on the edge; Paul in the Speedo, satellite of love.



Su One Eye,
Palm Springs, CA, 1970
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Mary, Blue, Bluegreen,
Palm Springs, CA, 1968
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Mary Carmel,
Palm Springs, CA, 1968
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Self-portrait
(courtesy of Rugged Entertainment)



Paul, Light My Fire,
Palm Springs, CA, 1968
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)

Later on, when Polaroid film became the rage, she added a new step to her process. She would copy the swimming pool-processed prints in slide form, then project them with her Bessler enlarger and shoot the projected images with a Polaroid camera. On occasion, she would layer little pieces of transparencies over the slide, adding bridges, water, flowers, arabesques, etc.



Kali Waves and Kali with Stars, 1972
(courtesy of artnet)



Fabric Mary, Palm Springs, CA, 1969
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Polaroid
(courtesy of Rugged Entertainment)



Polaroid
(courtesy of Rugged Entertainment)

A few days into looking at the images in the "Portraits and Landscapes" volume, I thought I should re-read Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, as I could not get what I remembered from it out of my head. As I was reading it, and, alternately, staring at the black and white photo of the stacked freeway overpasses, and, a few pages later, the attractive couple not quite connecting, with an overlaid exposure of a menacing, atomic age motherboard of some sort, it seemed to me that the text of *Play It As It Lays* could be poured in next to these images and somehow match up perfectly. Both of the works capture the disquieting potential for the devastating mood which relentlessly fair-skied Southern California can breed—a creeping ennui verging into madness which both Joan Didion and Joan Archibald's work captures. They each evoke looming cataclysm; alienation underneath facades of beauty; potential loss of control in the form of Santa Ana wind, earthquake, fire, or, just possibly, in these canyons and the desert, rattlesnake.

In the November, 1970 edition of *Camera 35* magazine, there was the only article ever published on the work of Kali. The article is called "Eyes By Kali," and it ran with some of her photos focusing on young people's eyes, the magazine's editors clearly at pains to pick a theme from her voluminous portfolio. "Kali is...a young woman who lives in Palm Springs, California, and creates painterly pictures for a living," reads the text. "Her subjects range from her teenage daughter to the family cat to anything and everything that she might encounter with her camera....Kali feels her Artography (a word she coined and has since copyrighted) is a category of visual communication complete unto itself....No argument there. They offer physical texture and surface modulations that are beyond the capabilities of mere machines. In fact, there is not a way to reproduce one of her images; as a result each of them is an original. Which, of course, enables her to sell them in galleries, not as photographs that can be run off in multiples, but as unique works of art."



Male Surfers, Carmel, CA, 1967
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Camera 35, November 1970 cover
(courtesy of Kali Artography)



Camera 35, November 1970 intro
(courtesy of Kali Artography)

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There might have been, as *Camera 35* suggests, some Artography sold. Susan suggests that Kali sometimes sent her work to the Transworld Feature Syndicate, a now-defunct photo agency. There are no records of any sales. There was only one known gallery show of Kali's work, which was, according to Susan, in Monterey, in the early 1970s. "Ansel Adams stopped by and he saw my mother's work and was, like, 'Wow, who is this person?' Ansel Adams thought something of my mother's work in the day. I believe he lived in Monterey at the time." Mostly, the hundreds of prints were tossed into storage cabinets and large, white, hard-shell American Tourister suitcases, never to be seen until now.

From the Susan Archibald transcript:

It started in Palm Springs which is pretty weird. In the late 60s, my mom would take my brother and me out in her '62 Studebaker and all of a sudden she would see something like going over a power line and at that time from Palm Springs to Indio, California wasn't that built up so it was very dark going to Indio and my mother would see these sightings and then she'd go home and call whomever. The airport, whoever would listen to her. And they basically shunned her out; they were trying to shut her up. But my mother, I remember her drawing these crazy drawings. Circular and really weird. And they never believed my mom and they shut her up.

In 1973, Kali married Karl Davis, Jr., a lawyer. They met in Palm Springs and lived together at his house at 16900 Enchanted Place, in the canyons of the Pacific Palisades, just south of Malibu. Kali set up a second darkroom in the garage, and the oval swimming pool in the back yard functioned as the wash tray. Kali continued to take the meticulously kept 1962 Studebaker Hawk Gran Turismo out to Palm Springs, though she no longer frequented the fading nightclubs of the affluent desert colony. It was at Jilly Rizzo's in Palm Springs that Kali snapped her photo of Sinatra performing over a closed circuit monitor, in the safety of the green room. Sinatra used to tell her to slip in the side door of Jilly's and to watch his show from the green room.



House icons in red indicate structures burned in the 2025 wildfires. The structure where Kali once resided on Enchanted Place was lost.



Kali with her second husband, Karl Davis
(courtesy of Artnet)



Post remodel real estate listing for 16900 Enchanted Place, Pacific Palisades
(courtesy of Compass)

Kali did not stop taking photos and developing photos. As Karl had money, there was no imperative to sell Artography, but the dark rooms were still active— especially in the Pacific Palisades, where, after Karl died in 2000, Kali became a quasi-shut in. "She always loved animals," says Susan. "When Karl died, she started feeding raccoons and pumas in her yard. She had six or eight infrared cameras in the back of the Palisades house."

The UFOs, Susan believes, had been following her mother for years in both barren Indio County and in the Palisades canyon. There was an uptick in the sightings after Karl died.

From the Susan Archibald transcript:

Orbs or orbies she called them and my mother started documenting them with the film she was shooting on the infrared feeds in the Pacific Palisades house. She was doing Polaroids of these images which were outstanding. She would call me up and say, Susan you need to get up here right now! I lived eight hours away.



Departure, Pacific Palisades, CA, 2004
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



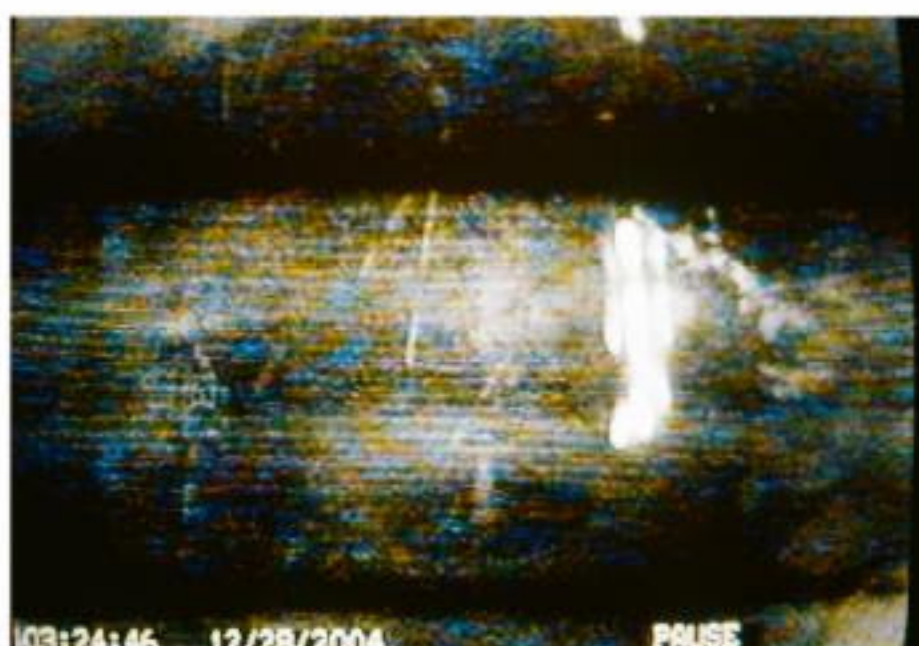
Jet Tail 5, Pacific Palisades, CA, 2003
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Kali Being Taken, Pacific Palisades, CA, 2004
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



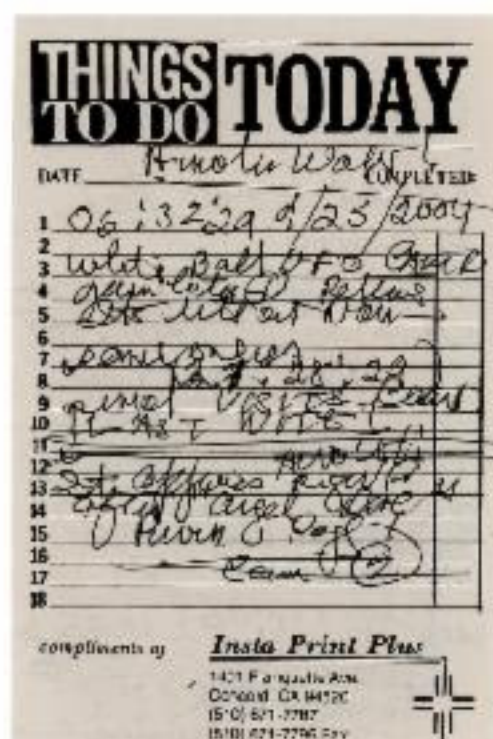
Morphing UFO, April 27, 2004
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Untitled (Figure 1), Pacific Palisades, CA, 2004
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Wow, Alien Entity UFO, Pacific Palisades, CA, August 4, 2003
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)



Things To Do Today,
January 25, 2004
(courtesy of Staley-Wise Gallery)

Most of the film of the orbs was never processed. Kali recorded, obsessively, the appearance of the flashes and unidentified images in her closed circuit monitors, sketched them, and made notes, logging the time codes in her journal and on the bottom of Polaroids. The unprocessed film was discovered in a flight bag by Susan in 16900 Enchanted Circle. It was recently processed, and selections appear here in "Outer Space". Approximately 500 more unprocessed rolls were mistakenly thrown out by a cleaner. The time codes in the journals, matched with the time codes from the infrared monitors on the processed film, give an immediacy, and insight into Kali's late nights in the canyon house, in blue lit rooms:

A Polaroid of the infrared screen for camera 4, labeled in pen: "01.11.14 4/23/2004 ET-LANDED-POOL CAM 4".

From the corresponding journal page, with its sketch of what Kali saw from camera 4, on the screen: "A SOLID WHITE GLOWING WINGED FLYING CREATURE THIS ONE LOOKS LIKE ALL WINGS AND NO LEGS AS ON [PAGE] 153 BUT LEGS OR EXTENSIONS COULD BE PULLED IN FOR FLIGHT. DRAWING CAN'T DO IT JUSTICE."

The journals are extensive. Kali frequently contacted the FBI and the Air Force to report sightings. They paid no attention. She continued to make detailed records for years.

In 2017, suffering from Parkinson's and memory loss, Kali was found wandering in the canyon near 16900 Enchanted Place. She was picked up by authorities, and placed in a public assisted living facility. Eventually, Susan was contacted, and she was moved to a private nursing home.

As 16900 Enchanted Place was being cleared of her belongings, all of the photos in these volumes were discovered, amounting to a major discovery of an almost-lost oeuvre from a genre-defining artist.

On January 14, 2019, Kali died from complications of Parkinson's disease. She was 87. Since the discovery of the photographs of Vivian Maier, and the posthumous publication and celebration of her work, the thrilling prospect of finding other unknown or forgotten masters of the art form has more than ever been in the back of many an aesthetes' mind. The particular excitement derives from the utter improbability that there could be complete archives of unsung masters out there, either in attics or in the cupboards of hoarder houses or, as was the case with Maier, in a neglected storage unit whose contents were put up for auction. Maier, after her work was posted on a Flickr account, became a viral Web sensation, and was quickly appraised to be the equal of Diane Arbus and Robert Frank, her rough contemporaries, both celebrated in their lifetimes. Maier, in the wake of her posthumous fame (boosted by a documentary film, books, gallery exhibitions, and a raft of press coverage).

Kali seems to be a different kind of rare breed. The record shows that she started to get some recognition for her work, but then retreated. Was she insecure? Distracted? Thrown by a tragic event? Suffering a mental break? Comfortable in her identity as the wife of a prosperous lawyer who lived in close proximity to Ronald and Nancy Reagan in the Pacific Palisades and in Sandra Dee and Bobby Darin's house in Palm Springs? Or was it the sexism of the times, combined with the lack of seriousness attached to the art of photography? We will never know for sure. But one of the key standards of artistic judgment is the so-called test of time. In that regard, the delayed discovery of Kali's complete works, long shuttered in her scattershot archive, may have been a favor to everyone—and Kali, most of all. Her 60s and 70s work is evocative of its time. Much of it looks like the Age of Aquarius, and if it had been widely known at that time, it may have been judged as dated by the time the go-go 80s had set in. Tie-dye shirts and VW busses were something to snicker at when I was in middle school. Leg-warmers, Dolphin shorts and Varnets had taken hold. Hair seemed to us what Yankee Doodle Dandy must have seemed like to our parents. But, by hiding her work, Kali, intentionally or not, avoids any charge that her skill—I'd venture genius—can have been diluted by having the "fashion of the day injected into it to gain wider acceptance," as a critic once defined the main demerit of the test of time standard. We can, as this book proves, better appreciate, and, yes, judge the work of Joan Archibald aka Kali at a distance, and, in what amounts to a catalogue raisonné, better appraise the depth and breadth of her work: The architectural and landscape photography, the portrait work, the high Artography of the hippie era, and, finally what herein is grouped as "Outer Space." Viewed all together, it's an astonishing, coherent oeuvre, with marked stylistic shifts and distinct periods. Most of all, it's an utter joy, and the rarest kind of visual feast, not to mention a journey of discovery in multiple dimensions. Kali vs. the test of time. If you are ready, turn the page!