

North of Boston nature shapes photographer's images

By Steve Landwehr, Staff writer
Salem News

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IPSWICH - Most people dream in Technicolor, even though the sensory organs responsible for color vision are fast asleep. Dorothy Kerper Monnelly may be the exception.

"I think I must be wired for black and white," the Ipswich photographer said. "It's the way I see things."

Monnelly just had her first book of photos published, a remarkable collection of loving tributes to the place she's called home for more than three decades, all of them in black and white.

"Between Land and Sea: The Great Marsh," is filled with Monnelly's attempts to capture the forms and shapes of the largest salt marsh in New England and the play of light and shadow upon them. It's an appropriate milieu for the artist, who has lived on Fox Creek Road in the heart of the Ipswich stretch of the marsh for 33 years.

Monnelly, 69, has traveled as far as Hawaii in her pursuit of art forms in nature, but for this book she stuck a little closer to home.

"Ninety percent (of the images in the book) are within walking distance of this house," she said in an interview last week.

Walking distance takes on a little more importance in Monnelly's case. She uses what is known as wide-format camera, a modern version of the camera used by the famous nature photographer Ansel Adams, who is best known for his black and white images of California's Yosemite Valley.

The camera takes photos on sheets of 4-inch by 5-inch negatives, two negatives on each film holder. The advantage of the format is far sharper images than a 35 mm camera could ever produce. One of the major drawbacks is weight.

The petite Monnelly typically heads into the field with 35 pounds of equipment strapped to her waist and perched on her shoulder. She's figured out creative ways to bring the gear along, including strapping it to a toboggan.

Everything on these cameras is manual, and setting up for each shot is time-consuming. Long exposures are often needed, making any kind of motion a serious concern. And when Monnelly looks at the image coming through her lens, it's upside down.

Add all that up and it's easy to understand why Monnelly says large-format photography is, "very absorbing."

Born in upstate New York, Monnelly attended college in Boston. She was drawn to Ipswich by the same attraction that lures many newcomers, Crane Beach, where she and her roommates often walked the beach year-round.

After she and her husband, Ed, settled down, Monnelly began teaching in the Gifted and Talented Education programs in Ipswich's grammar schools. She took a leave of absence to pursue her interest in photography in 1991 and hasn't gone back.

Monnelly's professional skills proved therapeutic after Sept. 11, 2001. A week after terrorists hijacked three planes and changed everything, Monnelly began a series of photos she ended up calling, "Reconciliation Sand Patterns," images of the patterns sculpted by sea and wind on Crane Beach. They comforted Monnelly.

"The world I loved and lived with was still here," she said.

If you go

- * Who: Ipswich photographer Dorothy Kerper Monnelly
- * What: Signing and discussion of her new book "Between Land and Sea: The Great Marsh."
- * Where: Crane Estate on Castle Hill, Argilla Road, Ipswich
- * When: Sunday, March 4 at 3 p.m.
- * How: Admission is free for members of The Trustees of Reservations and \$10 for all others. For more, call 978-921-1944 ext. 8815.

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