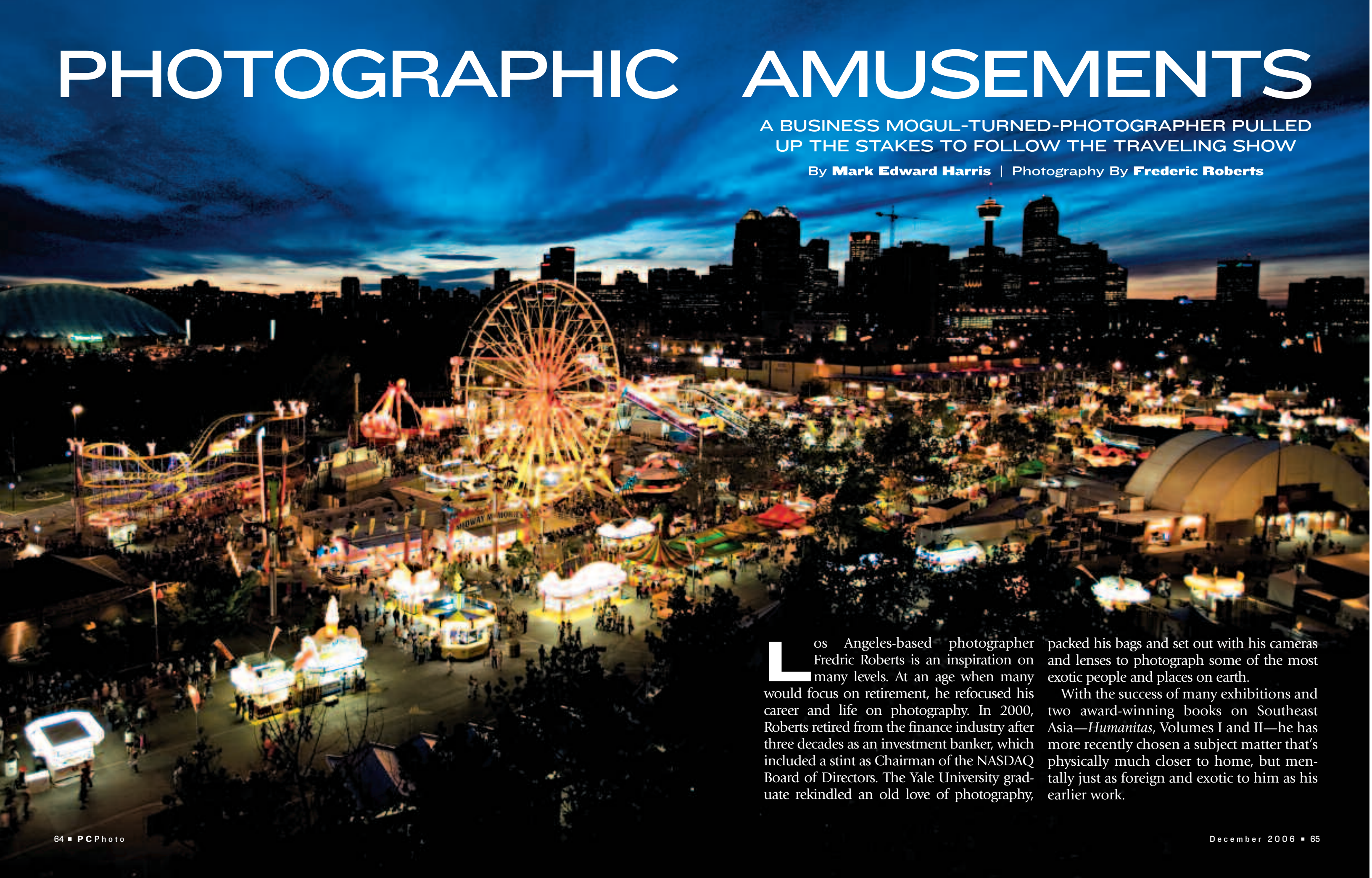


# PHOTOGRAPHIC AMUSEMENTS

A BUSINESS MOGUL-TURNED-PHOTOGRAPHER PULLED UP THE STAKES TO FOLLOW THE TRAVELING SHOW

By **Mark Edward Harris** | Photography By **Frederic Roberts**



Los Angeles-based photographer Frederic Roberts is an inspiration on many levels. At an age when many would focus on retirement, he refocused his career and life on photography. In 2000, Roberts retired from the finance industry after three decades as an investment banker, which included a stint as Chairman of the NASDAQ Board of Directors. The Yale University graduate rekindled an old love of photography,

packed his bags and set out with his cameras and lenses to photograph some of the most exotic people and places on earth.

With the success of many exhibitions and two award-winning books on Southeast Asia—*Humanitas*, Volumes I and II—he has more recently chosen a subject matter that's physically much closer to home, but mentally just as foreign and exotic to him as his earlier work.



One of the challenges of photographing carnivals is to communicate the sensory overload. Roberts observes that, "The midway is about sight and sound and smell and taste and also the sensation of going on rides." As a photographer, explore ways to use visual effects to convey the excitement and energy of the experience.

Roberts has been crisscrossing North America to photograph state fairs, known as "midways" in the vernacular of the industry. He's returning with imagery that conveys the essence of this classic American experience.

**PCPhoto:** How did your project on fairs come about? It seems, at first glance, uncharacteristic from your previous work in Southeast Asia.

**Fred Roberts:** Before I even had my first gallery show, I had lunch with a friend of mine, Fred Rosen, who was buying midway companies. We were really talking about it as if I were in my old life as an investment banker, and I thought it was a brilliant idea. He said, "I would love you to take pictures of the fairs."

**PCPhoto:** It's a big departure from your *Humanitas* series, which focused on exotic lands and people from areas such as Tibet, Rajasthan, China, Thailand and Bhutan.

**Roberts:** That's what I told him. I thought he should find a more commercially oriented





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photographer. He said, "I like your style; I want you to do it." We ended up, a few months later, in Florida at the same time. He was there running the Miami Youth Fair, so I dropped in, just as an observer, and loved it.

**PCPhoto:** What counts as the midway section of a fair?

**Roberts:** Midway is the section of the fair where the rides and games are. There are usually some food concessions around. It doesn't include the prize pigs and the homemade pies, or guys selling hot tubs and pots and pans and dog collars.

**PCPhoto:** Were you a big fan of fairs as a child?

**Roberts:** No. We had a little amusement park where I lived on Long Island called Kiddie City. I used to go there and throw up.

**PCPhoto:** Which is the first fair you went to with a camera instead of a paper bag?

**Roberts:** The Calgary Stampede. It's a whole world unto itself, actually, sort of two worlds. There's the world of the people who operate the rides—these amazing characters ranging from men covered with tattoos smoking unfiltered cigarettes to clean-cut college kids. The other world is the patrons. There are different types of people at every fair, and different types of people at different times of the day. It's a real microcosmic view of the world. If you were born in New York and grew up in Los Angeles as I did, you really have no idea what the middle of the country is all about.

**PCPhoto:** What kinds of people go to the fairs?

**Roberts:** People from the heartland. The nature of the fair crowd changes during the course of the day. During the daytime, it's all parents and kids. Then it gets to be teenagers. Then late at night, you get tough guys. I'm doing some portraits, but they're mostly of people eating, because the food at fairs is really unbelievable: deep-fried Twinkies, deep-fried Oreos, the biggest cinnamon buns you ever saw and ribbon fries with cheese sauce. At the first fair I went to, I tried everything. Now I'm just sticking to turkey legs.

**PCPhoto:** Where have you photographed so far?



"My style primarily consists of two techniques," says Roberts. "One is to do a lot of layered compositions with people, only some of whom are in focus." His second technique is to include "some moving and some frozen elements in the same frame." These ideas help him get images that move beyond simple snapshots of the scene.

**Roberts:** I've been to Indianapolis and Calgary twice. I've also been to Miami and Albuquerque, and I'm heading to Toronto and Jackson, Mississippi.

**PCPhoto:** How do people react to you photographing them?

**Roberts:** Everyone is curious. But unlike my other work, I don't photograph a lot of people. I'm shooting much more abstract images. People are relatively known subjects for me, so doing this type of work has been a real departure.

**PCPhoto:** What do you look for in creating an image?

**Roberts:** I often work in layers where I have something going on in the background and something going on in the foreground. One of the difficulties is that the rides don't run in tandem. So I have to wait. I never really know if I have a shot or not until I get back to the hotel at night and download the images, and then analyze what I've done. "Was my shutter speed too fast or too slow? Am I moving the camera too quickly on my pan shots? Are my exposures okay?" You can't completely plan for this stuff. It's more intuitive and spontaneous.

**PCPhoto:** Doesn't the immediate feedback of your camera's LCD help?

**Roberts:** For a lot of this work, the LCD is too small to see what I need to see. I can't really see the blurs well enough to judge them. I need to see the images on my computer screen.



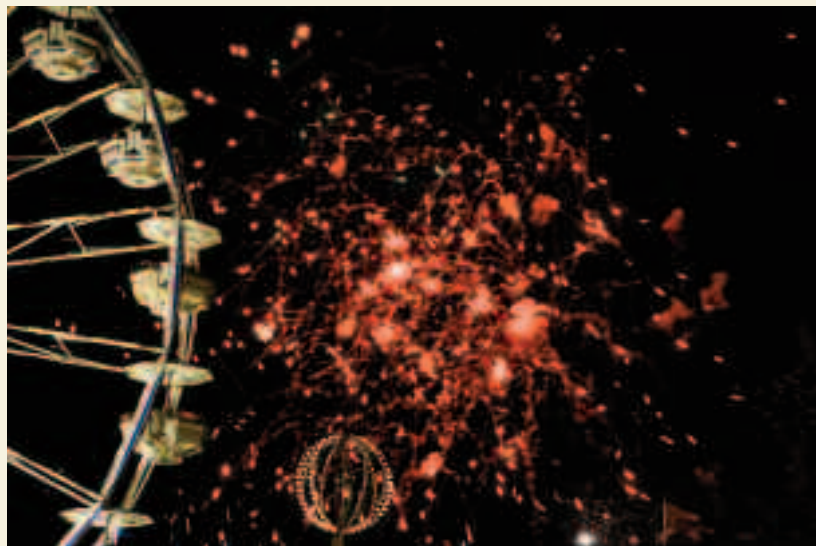
My Canon D-SLR gives me excellent technical feedback relating to exposure, and I do use that, but the creative aspect of the image is hard to evaluate on the small screen. It's enough for me to go back to the hotel and look at the shots on my laptop. I write notes to myself, then use them the next day when I go back out to shoot. "Go back and shoot this and wait until the other ride is going" or "Go back and use a faster shutter speed for this ride."

**PCPhoto:** Do you have a preferred time of day for making these images?

**Roberts:** My favorite time to shoot is just after sunset. You get a great mix of the ambient light that's still lingering and the electric lights of the fair beginning to take over.

**PCPhoto:** Do you go on some of the rides to shoot from a rider's point of view?

**Roberts:** I could never go on those rides—I don't think I would last two minutes. For what I'm doing, I'm better off on terra firma anyway. My style primarily consists of two techniques. One is to do a lot of layered compositions with people, only some of whom are in focus. I like working with a shallow depth of field—it shows people living in a complex world with a lot of relationships. The second part of my technique is to have some moving and some frozen elements in the same frame. This is an outgrowth of the relationships I have with the people that I photograph. If you're not completely in sync with these people, you can't make these pictures.



**PCPhoto:** Do you use a consistent aperture or shutter speed with these techniques?

**Roberts:** Not really, it depends on the speed of the movement and my sort of intuitive sense of that movement. The first success I had with this technique was a photo called "Gau Ghat" from my first book. Things are moving and I have to get into that rhythm. There's definitely a similar rhythmic challenge in the midway photography.

Unlike Roberts' earlier work, which focused primarily on people, his carnival series is mostly form, color, light and motion. When he does include people, they're rendered more as abstract objects than as characters. "People are relatively known subjects for me, so doing this type of work has been a real departure," says Roberts.

**PCPhoto:** What camera equipment are you working with?

**Roberts:** I've been working with a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II. My workhorse lens is a 24-70mm. One of the big advantages of shooting digitally is easy ISO control. Ninety percent of the time, I'm working handheld. I start out at ISO 50 or 100 and, as it gets darker, I go up to around 400.

**PCPhoto:** Do you combine images in Photoshop?

**Roberts:** I don't do anything in Photoshop that you wouldn't normally do in a wet darkroom. That's what's right for me. I have Nash Editions do any color corrections that need to be done, then print them out on Epson Premium Luster paper which has a great color gamut. I'm doing 44x64-inch prints. My work is all about color. I need dazzling color and Epson Premium Luster gives me that.

**PCPhoto:** What do you look for in a scene?

**Roberts:** Abstract beauty, movement, lights, form. It's about the people in the middle, even though they're abstract. Unlike the photographs for my first two books, which people say are poetic and spiritual of people in Asia, this is pure abstraction. I just rip the lid off my head and do what I absolutely don't usually do.

Other people who have shot fairs have either shot in black and white or focused on archetype individuals. They're doing the sort of shots I did in Asia for the *Humanitas* series.

**PCPhoto:** No matter where you're shooting, you seem to

fill the frame and go about your photography with the Robert Capa mantra: "If your photos aren't good enough, you're not close enough."

**Roberts:** That's why I'm not doing environmental portraits at the fairs. When I do them, for instance, in my Asian work, I spend a lot of time with people. I don't just walk up to them and say, "I want to take your picture." I spend some time with them so I can relate to them, and the pictures reflect that feeling. With the fair, these people are in a hurry, and I'm intruding on them. I do have some people shots, but it slows me down and it slows them down.

Even though my photographs are, for the most part, of objects rather than people, I think the work is still about humanity and a part of American culture.

The midway is about sight and sound and smell and taste and also the sensation of going on rides I'm never going to go on. What's amazing is that, if you go back a couple of days after the fair has ended, there's nothing there. It's just an empty fairground. My photos are a permanent memory of a temporal place. PC

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Select images from Fredric Roberts' *Humanitas* series will be on display at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York through February 2007. For more information, visit Roberts' Website at [www.fredricroberts.com](http://www.fredricroberts.com).