



Low & slow WITH A CAMERA

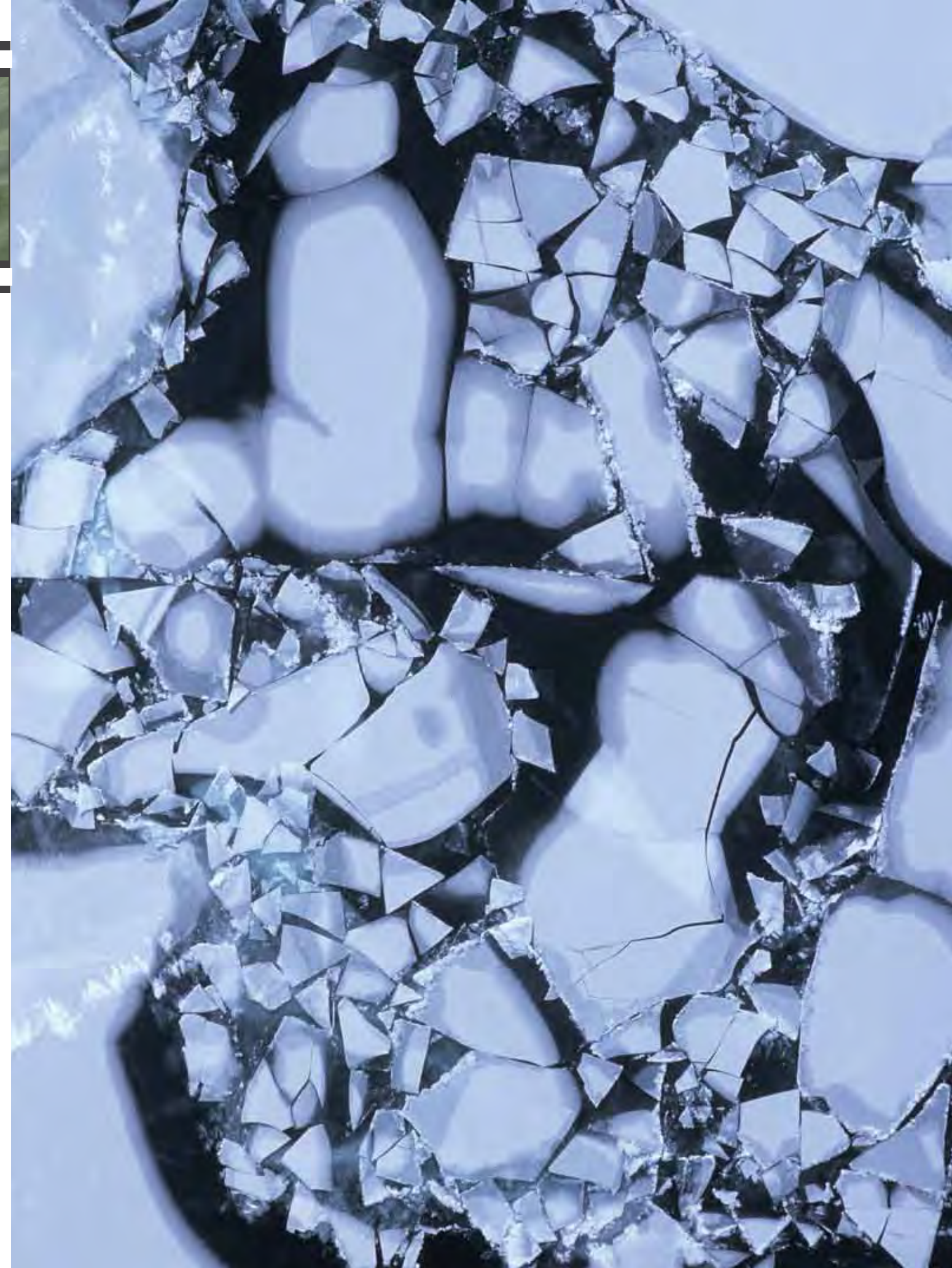
BY LYN FREEMAN

“IF YOU CAN’T FEEL THE
LIGHT ON THE FILM, YOU’RE
NOT A PHOTOGRAPHER.”

If museums of the world have one thing in common, it’s their testament to singular visions — the sculptor who, unlike everyone before him, could see a statue inside a lump of raw granite, the painter whose brushstrokes put the smile of mankind on the lips of the Madonna. Jim Wark began flying more than 50 years ago and has spent decades crisscrossing the Northern Hemisphere in a small airplane, watching with a special eye as the world goes by beneath his wings. But what makes his cross-country travels so special is that he brings a camera. His unique photographic interpretations of the world below put him in a class by himself.

In fact, his eye for aerial art is so unique that Wark’s client list is eye-popping — the American Museum of Natural History, the United States Postal Service, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and on and on. The attraction to his images isn’t limited to the United States; Wark has had to hire representatives in Paris and Australia to broker his work.

The simplicity of his airplane, a fabric-covered Husky, is reiterated in his photographic philosophy. “I like to think I’m taking the picture, not the camera.” Wark uses high-end Canon digital cameras and lenses, but isn’t ready yet to abandon his favorite Leica film camera. “A photographer told me a long time ago that if you can’t feel the light on the film, then you’re not a photographer, and I can, I really can. I can’t



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feel the light in pixels or whatever they are.”

His work is as solitary as the extraordinary views of the world that pass below him. Wark almost always travels alone, using the second seat in his Husky to transport the necessities of his lifestyle. “I carry a couple of cans of Fix-A-Flat, two tents, an axe, a saw, an engine heater, a lot of canned food and a couple of gallons of water,” he says. A pair of snowshoes is tucked under the rear seat. He often lands in the middle of nowhere to spend the night.

One night in Alaska, Wark awoke to the sound of a bear going through his supplies, which were stashed a few hundred feet from his tent. “He was over there eating a can of Pringles, so I started walking toward him with my shotgun,” Wark remembers. “I got to where I was about 50 feet from him; I raised the gun and shot over his head. The sound went off through the canyon, just this deafening roar, and the bear didn’t even look up. I thought, well, I’m gonna get right up in his face, and he’s either going to leave or he’s going to die.”

Wark walked to within 25 feet of the bruin before it finally looked up. The big



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“IN THE ALMOST 50 YEARS HE HAS BEEN FLYING, JIM WARK HAS BORNE WITNESS TO A CHANGING WORLD.”

bear snorted and then finally decided to retreat into the bush. “It wasn’t till I got back to Colorado two weeks later that I realized after I fired the first shot, I hadn’t chambered the next round, so if he’d have come at me, I’d have had to beat him to death.”

In the almost 50 years he has been flying, Jim Wark has borne witness to a changing world. Working for NOAA on an assignment to photograph the commercial harbor in Houston, Wark experienced the new post-9/11 challenges of his work.

“Even though I was going to be talking to ATC the whole time, I called the Houston Port Authority and told them what I was going to do. They wanted to know all about it, but they also made me call the Port Police. They wanted to know everything I was going to do as well, and then they directed me to the Coast Guard. Both the Coast Guard and Port Police called Washington.” And it’s not just Texas.

“You can’t fly around metro areas anymore,” says Wark. “I used to fly over downtown Denver, and you could fly within 500 feet of those buildings and get fantastic shots. Anyplace — Chicago, New York — you could fly right by the World Trade Center and get great pictures. Now, it’ll probably never be the same.”

Still, Wark’s conspicuous view of the world allows him to find value wherever he goes, and sometimes in ways that may not be immediately obvious. One day flying over the mountains in Wyoming, he was on top of a deep undercast that went all the way to the ground when the Husky’s engine quit.

After attempts for a restart failed, he put the airplane into a glide.

“I looked up at the sky,” recalls Wark. “The sky was so blue it was almost black, and I wondered, well, is this the last time I’m gonna see that?” The airplane settled into the clouds below.


“...CAMERA IN HAND, FLYING LOW & SLOW ACROSS AMERICA.”

Descending at about 500 feet a minute, Wark had almost 15 minutes inside the 7,000-foot cloud deck. “There was no sense of panic or anything,” he remembers. “It was like an instrument approach where you wait for that darkening just before you break out, you keep waiting, and then here it is, it’s dark now, okay, this is showtime.”

At no more than 100 feet above the ground, Wark saw a paved county road in front of him. “It first occurred to me that I’d died and gone to heaven,” he smiles. “There was a car coming and he passed underneath me. After that, it was a piece of cake.” A highway patrol officer helped him move the Husky to the side of the road and gave him a ride into the nearby town of Elk Mountain.

“What great luck,” Wark beams. “I stayed in this bed-and-breakfast there, which was run by an Englishwoman, and I was the only guest. She fixed me the best meal I’ve ever had in my life.” He shakes his head and looks away for a moment, as if sorting through some of his airborne adventures. “God, I love flying,” he looks back to say.

Wark just released a new coffee-table book called *Crisscrossing America*. Another book, this one focusing on the vanishing wilderness in America, will follow within the next couple of months. Four more books featuring Wark’s work are available on his website, AirPhotoNA.com, and his publisher is already discussing four new books to follow.

One thing about Wark’s future is certain: He’ll be spending more time in his airplane, alone, camera in hand, flying low and slow across America. 



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