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CHRISTOPHER LITTLE'S WORLDVIEW

By Rinker Buck

Corporate downsizing and changes wrought by technology are by now almost a cliché of 21st-century life, but rarely do we think of today's financial Darwinism affecting talented artists.

But that is exactly the dilemma faced by Norfolk photographer Christopher Little, who about 10 years ago began experiencing the effects of a drastic remaking of the New York photo market. At the time, Little was a legendary *People*, *Time* and *New York Times Magazine* photographer, with more than 300 magazine and book covers to his credit. His portfolio included celebrities and public figures as diverse as Mick Jagger, Oprah Winfrey and George Bush.

But by the mid-1990s, his income was slowly being whittled away by cost-cutting at the once lavish Time Inc., celebrities' demanding more control over their images, and the ease of plucking pictures off the Internet. The photojournalism world as he knew it was grinding to an end.

In the last decade, though, within the idyllic, mountainous confines of the Litchfield County village of Norfolk, Little, 59, has rediscovered himself. One result of this midlife makeover is a remarkable series of landscape photographs that sold out on their opening day but will remain on display until July 31 at the Norfolk Library.

Little, the descendant of a comfortable Hartford manufacturing family, is one of those people for whom the phrase "charmed life" was invented. He was raised in Manhattan but spent his summers at a beachfront home in the Fenwick section of Old Saybrook, where his next-door neighbor and friend was Katharine Hepburn. After Hotchkiss and Yale, Little moved to New York to try his hand at professional photography, and by the age of 25 he had already progressed enough to win an assignment for the premiere issue of *People* in 1974, which Time Inc. had launched in part to fill the circulation vacuum created by the 1972 closing of the weekly *Life*.

"When I first got to Time Inc. in the early 1970s, the old *Life* tradition of respecting photographers was still intact, and we were treated like gods," Little says. "At the drop of a hat, we were sent anywhere in the world to photograph what the editors

considered important or elegant. One week it would be to cover the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth in London. The next week it would be Moscow.”

Colleagues from the period credit Little’s careful manners and elegant accent, and his flexibility with difficult subjects, for his rapid climb up the ladder at Time Inc.

“Chris’ personality was so charming that the reporters loved going out on assignment with him,” says Mary Fanette, who for 20 years was a People picture editor. “And he was so liked by the subjects he shot that he almost invariably became their friends. His enthusiasm was infectious, and every new assignment was an adventure for him.”

Back in New York, Little’s growing reputation as a globe-trotting photographer won him invitations to all the right parties. He became the subject of New Yorker “Talk of the Town” pieces, and his photographs were regularly appearing in major exhibitions in New York, Washington and Chicago. In 1983 and 1984, Little was selected to serve as a judge in the Miss America Pageant.

“I can remember getting to the Century Club at night, and there was this very elegant guy, Christopher Little,” says Richard Stolley, the founding editor of People. “Writers were supposed to be members of the Century, not photographers, but Chris always epitomized someone from the American aristocracy who was doing something that aristocrats never did – shoot news pictures. But despite his background, he became very successful in this scrappy profession.”

By the time he was in his early 30s, Little was the official photographer and traveling companion of the Aga Khan and conservative icon William F. Buckley Jr., who became a close friend. He regularly traveled with both of them around the world, and in the 1980s, Little took the photographs for Buckley’s three best-selling sailing memoirs and also shot all of the pictures for three critically praised architecture books.

But shortly after Little and his wife, Betsey, moved to Litchfield County in 1992, magazine publishing in New York was rocked by corporate takeovers, budget cuts and the disruptions in converting from film to digital technology. The plan had been for Little to occasionally commute to New York and to continue to accept assignments around the world. But that work began to dry up just as another big revenue source for Little – reselling his pictures to other magazines – slowed because of consolidation in the photo-agency business.

“Once the corporate takeovers began and the bean counters came in, the mentality became that the audiences for these magazines was too dumb to know the difference between an assigned shoot by someone like me and just a pickup from a paparazzi,” Little says. “I could see that Time Inc. had lost its roots in great photography.”

Besides, Little was beginning to turn inward, losing interest in the glamorous identity he had enjoyed for a quarter-century. A travel memoir about sailing the Maine coast, published in 1994, convinced him that he was more interested in writing than photography, and he began writing fiction. As his wife's real estate business thrived, Little began devoting more time to himself and pursuing new interests, immersing himself in the small-town life of Norfolk. He became president of the Norfolk library board and obtained an emergency medical technician certificate, eventually becoming deputy chief of the volunteer Norfolk LionsClub ambulance corps.

National Public Radio correspondent Anne Garrels, who lives in Norfolk when she isn't broadcasting from Baghdad, is a close friend of Little's and briefly served with him on the ambulance corps. She remembers watching him going through personal changes in 2001, when they both took their EMT course together.

"I think Chris was just ready for his old life to end and to start a new one," Garrels says. "We all have to face this issue. The world is changing, and I am going to have to reinvent myself. But it wasn't easy for Chris, and to suddenly do something so different after so much early success is scary. It's an emotionally risky time."

Little didn't intend to rediscover himself photographically. On morning walks with his dogs through the dark woods and dramatic mountain views near his home on Doolittle Lake, he began experimenting with a professional-quality full-frame Canon digital camera, realizing that he could achieve a range of accuracy and light that simply wasn't possible in the old days of film.

Using a technique called High Dynamic Range, Little began shooting the same landscape with three exposures – a normal exposure for midtones, a grossly overexposed image for deep shadows and an underexposed one for bright highlights such as sky, cloud or a shiny rock. Then, with modern digital software, he merged the three exposures into one image. This technique, Little says, allows the camera to re-create what the eye actually sees – a wispy, pastel cloud, say, high above a green tree line.

With traditional film, photographers had to make a choice. If they exposed for a cloud suffused with light, the forest in the foreground would turn almost black. But an exposure for the forest would distort both the color and darkness of the sky. Traditional film, in short – think of Ansel Adams or Edward Weston's stark, shadowed images – forced the photographer to select lighting that the eye doesn't actually see.

"What people don't realize is that our eyes are constantly adjusting for exposures and light without us sensing it," Little says. "The old film couldn't replicate the full range of what the eye actually sees. I began to be more and more excited, and more artistically engaged, in the process of composing landscapes that would present viewers with a fuller spectrum of color and light. It's mostly all about that – light. But I was also finding

myself spiritually as I wandered the woods, composed, and then decided which images were worth printing.”

From hundreds of images made during the past six or seven years, Little chose 30 landscape and wildlife pictures when the Norfolk Library asked him to display his work. At the opening of the show July 6, a slide presentation of Little’s earlier work – including portraits of Katharine Hepburn, John Lennon and Isabella Rossellini – was projected onto a screen in the library’s reception hall. Lines of people stood in front of the projection screen, fixated by the parade of elegantly photographed celebrities going by.

“A lot of people in town were just amazed because they only knew Chris Little the EMT guy, this reassuring presence whenever the ambulance has to be called,” says Garrels. “They just didn’t know that Chris had this totally different, famous life.”

Little, for his part, is astonished that his show sold out on the first day, and at the number of calls he’s received from other photographers and artists expressing enthusiasm about his new direction in landscape photography.

“The only thing I knew when I hung this show is that I had found myself artistically, and that this was very gratifying on a personal level,” Little says. “But getting used to my pictures’ being in demand again is going to take a little while.”