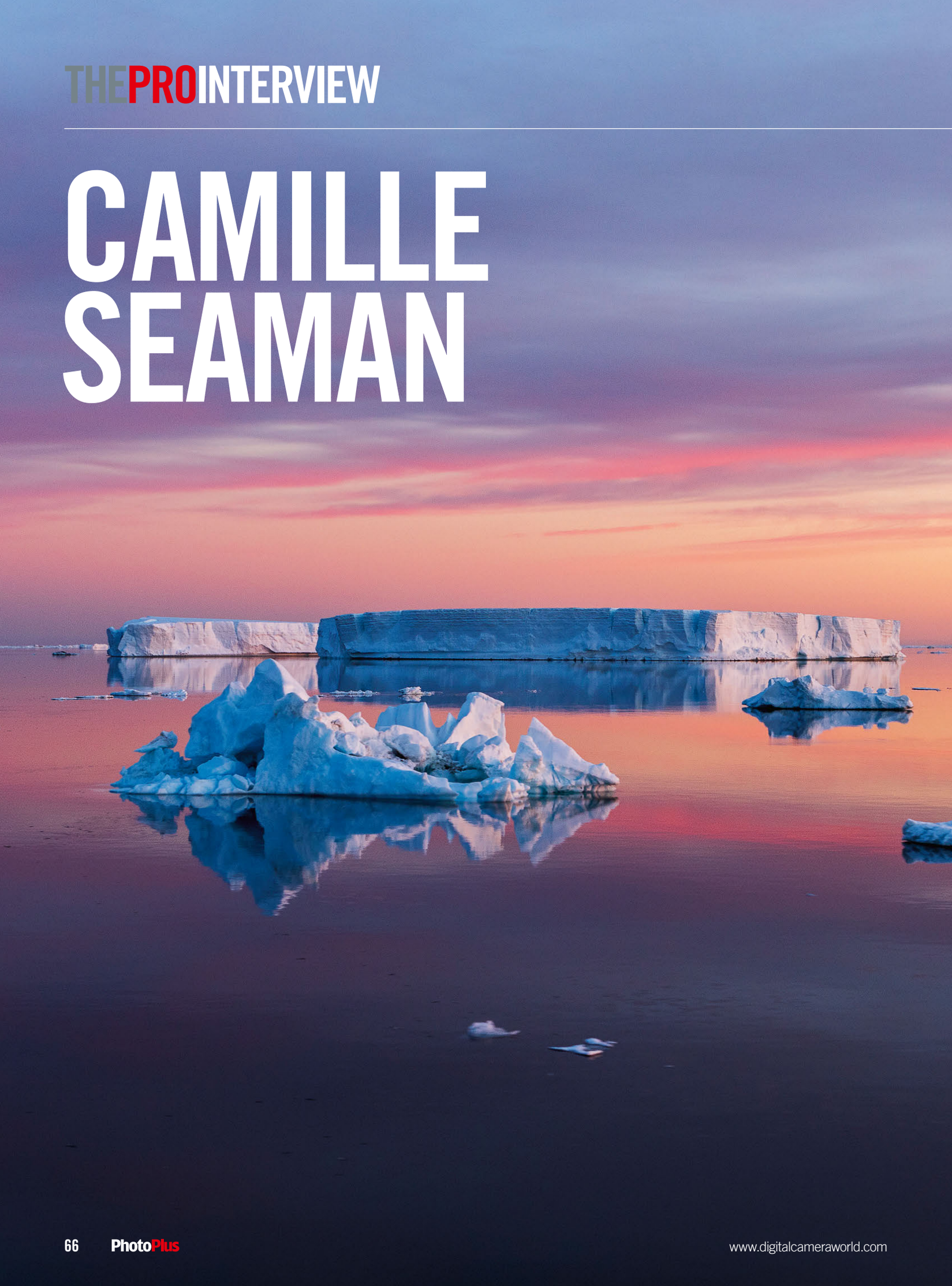
CAMILLE SEAMAN



***Camille Seaman** describes herself as a bi-polar photographer, but she's referring to her passion for shooting the frozen ends of the earth. Keith Wilson discovers that the distances she's travelled apply as much to her personal journey as they do to her travels*

ALTHOUGH one of the world's most renowned photographers of the Arctic and Antarctica, Camille Seaman may never have ventured to the earth's vast polar regions if she hadn't decided back in 1999 to give up her seat on a flight. It's commonplace in America for domestic flights to be oversold, and passengers are enticed to give up their seats in exchange for a free return flight at a future date. In Camille's case, she was offered "a free round-trip ticket to anywhere the airline flew." She had recently moved from New York to California to escape the harsh east coast winters and, as she puts it, "Had no desire, ambition, or interest at all to go to any place cold." But all that changed. Camille's free ticket was with Alaska Airlines and her curiosity got the better of her – she decided to fly to the Arctic outpost of Kotzebue on the frozen shores of the Bering Strait, which separates Alaska and Siberia. Walking on the sea ice in this alien environment had a transformational impact upon her.

01 ICEBERGS REFLECTED AT SUNRISE ON THE SOLSTICE, WEDDELL SEA III
From Camille's most recent series, *A Matter of Time*. Shot in Antarctica

Lens	Canon EF 24-70mm f/2.8L USM
Exposure	1/40 sec, f/6.3, ISO500

02 ISBJØRN AT MIDNIGHT
Smith Sund, North Greenland, shot in August 2009, from Camille's series *Melting Away: Polar Bears*

Lens	Canon EF 70-300mm f/4-5.6 DO IS USM
Exposure	1/250 sec, f/5.6, ISO160

03 BLUE UNDERSIDE REVEALED DETAIL
Svalbard, 5 July 2010, from the *Last Iceberg Series III*. On overcast days, the turquoise blue icebergs calved from the Kongsfjord Glacier reveal their true colours

Lens	Canon EF 28-135mm f/3.5-5.6 IS USM
Exposure	1/320 sec, f/13, ISO200

04 ICEBERG IN BLOOD RED SEA
Lemaire Channel, Antarctica, from 29 December 2016

Lens	Canon EF 24-70mm f/2.8L USM
Exposure	1/100 sec, f/5, ISO1000

Although she didn't know at the time, Camille was a few weeks pregnant: "My journey as a mother began as I walked on that ice." A few years later she would return to the Arctic, this time to the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, but it was on her first trip to Antarctica in 2004 that she was "truly blown away in every sense of the word…"

How would you describe Antarctica?
It's almost like the place has this hum to it. It has such immensity, it has a weight and presence. Even if it's completely silent there's something to that place that is overwhelming, so I began to photograph there. It's one of those places either you like it or you don't – and if you like it, look out, because it can be very expensive to keep going back. I remember days after getting back from that first trip thinking, "How do I get back?" Except for a gap between 2012 and 2016, then COVID-19, I've gone every year.

How have you changed as a photographer over that period?
I think I'm a much better photographer technically, I understand how to expose properly in those environments. I am one of those ETTR people – expose towards the right – and I preach the religion of trust your histogram. When I first went down there it was film, then digital, so I had to learn how digital worked there. Also, I believe that for many photographers our work is a reflection of ourselves. So, I find my early work is very noir, somewhat dark and brooding, meditative. Now, if you look at the arc of my work it's very intense and colourful, but still meditative. It seems every year the colours get crazier and crazier. So, I'm not sure if I wasn't able to see that before because of where I was in my life, or if it just wasn't there.

You moved to Ireland four years ago. What attracted you there?
Partly because they speak some sort of English! Seriously, a lot of things together made it a good time to leave the US. My daughter was going off to university, my rent was ridiculously expensive, I was unhappy with the administration at the time. I personally need the sea, the ocean, and I wanted to find a place that was affordable and near the coast, and Ireland is very affordable as it turns out. I have a sea view in West Clare, an hour south of Galway, and an hour west of Limerick.

I imagine you find it to be quite inspiring?
Especially now. The winter light is my favourite here. You can never get tired of the light and the storms, it's always constantly changing and, because we're right on the coast, you definitely feel it.

And you definitely feel the wind…
I like that too. It's fun to see it rain sideways! I spent 29 years living in California where it was blue sky every day, no interesting clouds, occasional cumulus nimbus, really just fog; fog and then blue sky, it's quite a contrast here. The drama of the sky is just fantastic.

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What made you decide that you wanted to become a photographer in the end?
I had the experience of growing up in New York City as a teenager. I left home at the age of 15, and I didn't ever really think of myself as homeless, but I was. I was sleeping on friends' couches and going to the Fame High School of Music and the Arts. They recognized that I was at risk of falling through the cracks and getting into trouble, so they put me in this after-school programme where they gave me my first ever serious camera, a Nikkormat film camera, and they said go out and photograph your experience.

How did you get on with your first experiences of photography?
I didn't think of it as anything special – until 9/11. When 9/11 happened, one of the jobs I had to support myself was as a New York City bike messenger, so I would deliver parcels and post all the time in those towers, all the way up to 103rd 104th floor, so I knew those buildings. I recorded them quite often in my photographs, with me and my punk rock friends just doing shenanigans around New York, so when they fell I understood the importance of a photograph as a historic document, as proof that something or someone existed.

Where were you when the news broke?
I was in Berkeley, California, and when that happened and a few months later when we were bombing Afghanistan, I remember sitting on my couch and thinking, "What can I do to show that there's something beautiful about this life and this planet?" It was like a light switch came on and I knew that I wanted to use my camera to document my life.

I just knew that is why I wanted to become a photographer. That was what I wanted to continuously convey in my images and I hope that if anyone were to look at my entire body of work they would see that that is the consistent concept or theme.

Back then, 20 years ago now, did you have a broader subject range in your photography than you do now?
I would say it was narrower, because I was really interested in photographing my life with my new child, my life in Berkeley, the neighbourhood and the little trips that we would go on as a family. I wasn't thinking I'm going to document climate change. I put this intention out there that photography is what I wanted to do and these doors started opening and pushing me into all these different places. Honestly, I had no ambition to be a polar photographer or chase tornadoes, or any of those things.

> **"When they fell I understood the importance of a photograph as a historic document"**

It all happened organically, in terms of what stories you photographed?
Yes, I think partly because of the way I was raised. My Shinnecock grandfather – there's a small tribe on the eastern tip of Long Island in New York – he raised me specifically to know many amazing things. One thing in particular he said, "If a door opens, even if it's not one that you planned, go through it. It might just take you to a place that is more of what you actually want than you could even know." So, walk through those doors – 'Here's a free ticket to Alaska!' Why not? Then, there were these people pulling up on snowmobiles asking "Do you need a ride?" Why not? I think a lot of my life has

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05 GRAND PINNACLE ICEBERG
Photographed in East Greenland, August 2006, from the *Last Iceberg Series I*

Lens	90mm

06 ON THE EDGE
Svalbard, June 2010, from the series, *Melting Away: Polar Bears*. This two-year-old polar bear cub is almost old enough to leave her mother, who was out of shot about 300 metres away

Lens	Canon EF 70-300mm f/4-5.6 DO IS USM
Exposure	1/400 sec, f/10, ISO400

been not so much an absolute yes, but more of a "Why not?"

What are you trying to show people with your photos of Antarctica and the Arctic in relation to climate change?
The intention is still the same. Jacques Cousteau said that you will not save what you don't love and you won't love what you don't know. I feel that this is a time in our history where so many of us are more screen-based and less outside, more urban-based and less aware of nature and the outside world, so it's important to keep reminding people in whatever way that I can that this is our incredible planet. This is our heritage, it's our environment and we should know about it, and if you know about it you will love it. So, the images I have made, even since my first trip in 2004, have always been to say, this is our planet, this exists here. This is not some science fiction movie, this is here, this is ours. I hope that my images will trigger a desire in the viewer to start or continue or develop a relationship with our planet in whatever way is meaningful to that specific person. Maybe it's not ice to them, maybe it's jungle or coral reefs, or mountains, but I hope that it encourages them to find the thing that they specifically love about being an earthling.

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Your grandfather taught you the importance of being connected to nature, that trees and plants and fish aren't merely objects...
Exactly. They're more than that, they're your relatives.

So, how important was that lesson to what you're trying to achieve with your photography?
For a long time, I took it for granted that I was raised with that perception and awareness. I thought everybody knew that. The older I got the more I realized

"Jacques Cousteau said that you will not save what you don't love, and you won't love what you don't know"

how untrue that was. I do feel that I have a magic secret power. People always wonder, "Why do animals come so close to you? Why do you get these amazing experiences?" And I say it's because I don't see myself as separate from them, and they know it, they feel it. This is something that can be practised and learned. There is a difference between fear and respect. I think so many people in the world fear nature, they fear the wild, they fear animals and unknowns, whereas I've been raised to respect it, and when you respect something that doesn't mean you need to fear it; it means you know the power of it and you respect it.

Was it the connection to your own ancestry that drew you to create your collection of Native American portraits?
No, that was me responding to the frustration of being told by people, when they would find out that I was of

STORY BEHIND THE SHOT

We are still here

For her book of portraits of Native Americans, Camille Seaman asked each of her sitters the same key question…

What did you ask them?
So, before I sat them down to photograph them, I would say, "If this is the (only) image that survives of you 100 or 200 years from now, how do you want to be seen?" Some would wear their feathers, all their regalia that they had made, and some would be their punk rock self, just their normal selves, and I think that's how it should be.

That's a terrific question...
No matter who I photograph, I say "If this is the one that your descendants will know you by, how do you want them to know you?" I think it's important that we get to define ourselves and so I think that's part of why *We Are Still Here* was titled as such. I also think it's important to take portrait photography out of this impermanent selfie mode that we're in right now. By saying, if this is the image that survives 100 years from now, it makes you think, "Oh, it might have longevity" as opposed to "It's only up for as long as the internet lasts."

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07 MIDNIGHT SUNSET
Lemaire Channel, Antarctica, shot on 14 January 2017

Lens	Canon EF 28-70mm f/2.8L USM
Exposure	1/2000 sec, f/16, ISO800

08 STRANDED ICEBERGS DETAIL II
Cape Bird, Antarctica, 25 December 2006, from the *Last Iceberg Series III*. Camille spent Christmas Day cruising on a Zodiac around these icebergs, which are stuck to the sea floor near the shallow coast.

Lens	35mm
Exposure	1/1000 sec, ISO400

09 CHRISTIAN BRANDON WEAVER
At the Shinnecock Pow Wow, in Southampton, New York, back in September 2015, from the Native American portrait series, *We Are Still Here*

Lens	Canon EF 50mm f/1.2L USM
Exposure	1/200 sec, f/2.5, ISO500

"I so fell in love with the R5 that I am selling all of my Canon DSLR equipment"

indigenous background, they would say, "Well, you don't look Indian!" And I would think, "Well, what do you know outside of Hollywood's version of what being native is?" Also, there was a poll that I read of second graders in the US, when asked did they think that there were still American Indians alive, they said no. That just broke my heart, that kids are growing up thinking that we don't exist because we don't walk around in leather and beads and feathers. It's sad that indigenous people are asked to live in a static time bubble as people and cultures that aren't allowed to evolve.

Let's talk Canon gear, what do you always pack for Antarctica?
Before COVID-19, when I was in Antarctica in February 2020, I had my EOS-1D X, my 5D Mark IV and all the pro L-series lenses. I can't go down there with equipment that isn't well weather-sealed. With the climate being what it is now, it's more likely that you'll have wet snow or rain than just cold conditions, so I always carry a dry bag. As you're always going from the ship to shore in a boat and there's lots of splashing, I carry my gear in a waterproof roll-top backpack. In there I always have a super absorbent micro towel to dry my gear off. I always have a lens cloth attached to me with a little clip so it can't blow away in the wind. Because the wind is the driving force in Antarctica you can still get water drops on your lens, even with your lens hood properly fitted, so I'm always wiping my lens and when I get back to the ship I make sure I'm wiping everything down and let it dry.

Any malfunctions or mishaps?
I've never had a problem with any of my Canon gear, except for the time when my camera strap was so wet that, as I walked out of the small boat and onto the shore in less than half a metre of water, it slipped off my neck and into the water.

Oh no!
Yeah. I lost a 5D and a 35mm f/1.4 lens. Thank goodness, the card was fine and I still had the images. But over time I watched the salt crystals grow in the camera. I kept it for a few years as a reminder to check your camera strap.

You've just come back from Antarctica, how did your gear differ from two years ago?
I've had a brief affair with Sony mirrorless because I wasn't happy with where Canon was (with mirrorless). I love what mirrorless can do. I got used to the EVF, I loved that I could photograph more silently. Then I got the R5, but I had an accident with my wrist and I needed surgery, so going onto the ship I was only one month out of a cast and I wasn't sure that I'd have the strength to hold the R5 with my big heavy lenses on it.

What did you do?
I brought the Sony and the R5 and I kept


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PROFILE

Camille Seaman

Fine-art photographer

Camille Seaman was born in 1969 to a Native American (Shinnecock tribe) father and African American mother. She graduated in 1992 from the State University of New York at Purchase, where she studied photography with Jan Groover and John Cohen. Her photographs have been published in *National Geographic*, *GEO*, *TIME*, *New York Times Sunday magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Outside*, *Zeit Wissen*, *Men's Journal*, *Seed*, *Camera Arts*, *PDN*, *American Photo* and many others. Her books include *The Last Iceberg*, *Melting Away* and *The Big Cloud*. Since 2007, Camille's work has been exhibited across the USA including a solo show at the National Academy of Sciences, Washington DC. An inspiring speaker, Camille is a TED Senior Fellow – her 2011 TED Talk has been viewed more than a million times. She strongly believes in capturing photographs that articulate that humans are not separate from nature.
www.camilleseaman.com

the R5 mostly around the ship until the last ten days when I felt I had the strength and wouldn't drop the camera. I'm so glad that I brought it with me. I so fell in love with the R5 that I am selling all of my Canon DSLR equipment and my lenses and getting all RF lenses. I was just so impressed with the quality. I love the 45-megapixel files and image sharpness.

That's a great test drive for the mirrorless camera...
And to be able to compare the Sony next to the Canon. My hands aren't very large and the R5 just feels right in my hand, and that means something. The ergonomics of the R5 are perfect for me.

Do you mostly use wide-angles for polar landscapes?
My favourite lens is 35mm, because that's how we see. In Antarctica, I was curious about how the R5 closes the shutter when you're changing the lens, which meant no dust on the sensor. That's a huge issue in Antarctica. I can't tell you how many photographs are unusable because of the dust. Because of the conditions down there you just don't change lenses. Before this year, I was carrying two bodies with two lenses and then you're hiking up some slope in the snow.

You can imagine that it gets cumbersome pretty quickly, so being able to change a lens in Antarctica is priceless and not having to worry about dust on the sensor. So, this year I had the 24-70mm f/2.8 and that was very comfortable for most of what I was photographing at the time.

What's your single best piece of advice to anyone who is starting out in photography?
I would say to know what makes the way that you see the world different from anyone else. I'll elaborate… I've been a judge on many photo competitions now, and inevitably we see incredibly competent images, but they all seem to be copying something they saw. "Oh, Camille's a judge, I'll send in my iceberg image." The reality is, and this is true of all magazines, museums, galleries, no-one wants to see you make an image the way I made it. They want to see your unique perspective of the world. They want to see something they haven't seen before in a way that they haven't seen it before. And therein lies your challenge as a photographer.