

Baltimore

# The Double Life Of Peggy Fox

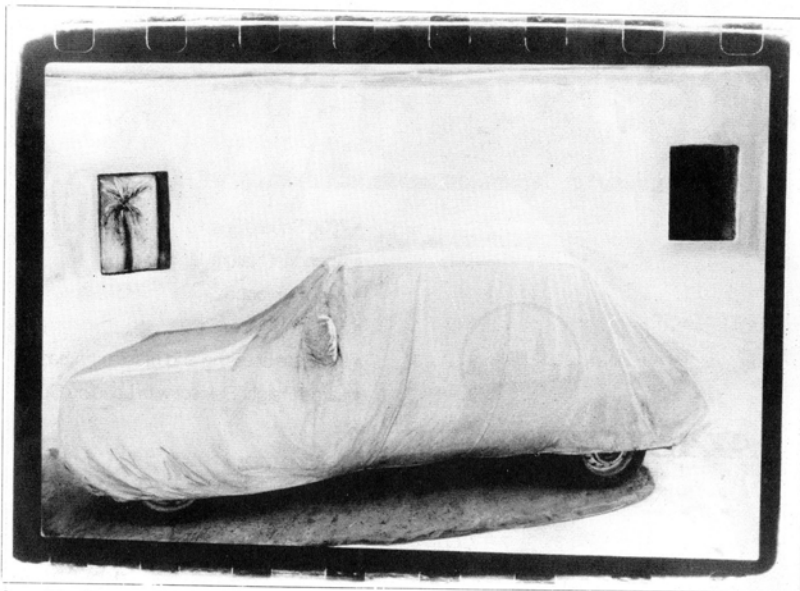
by Betty C. Ford

There was a time in Peggy Fox's career when her colleagues in fine art photography warned, "Don't tell anyone you're doing commercial work, they'll think you've sold out." At the same time, cohorts in the commercial field cautioned, "Don't let clients know you do art photography, they'll think you're a flake."

Fifteen years of ignoring this well-meant advice has led Fox down a dual track. She has achieved success in art photography while supporting herself and her two children with commercial assignments. Now, with a commission to execute a 10 x 200-foot photo mural for Baltimore's new Johns Hopkins subway station, she is delighted to find her two worlds converging.

The gigantic collage—still in the mock-up stage—is a blend of the realistic and the imaginative. Images of briefcase-wielding commuters merge with a star map of the hemisphere; rural symbols fall in with urban metaphors; shadows mirror bright figures and quiet blends with bustle. In this piece, Fox is able to combine her superior printing technique with fanciful invention to create a work using some of her favorite themes: shadow versus reality, the decisive moment, landscape transformed into other meanings.

Such a project might seem daunting to many, but not to Fox who is accustomed to producing 50 x 50-inch photographic prints in her own darkroom. The subway mural may even be easier



One of Fox's personal works, based on a transformed landscape.

in some ways: it will be photographically reproduced in a four-color half-tone process—silk-screened porcelain on enamel. Fox will have the prints for it produced by a commercial lab. The working model of the mural, spread out in her studio alongside architectural elevations of the station, gives the viewer an idea of what train passengers will experience in passing it.

Many of its motifs also appear in Fox's fine art pieces. A recent series of diptychs explores the relationship between reality and appearance, through hand-painted double images of shadows and realistic figures placed in generous architectural spaces.

Currently Fox, whose art photography is handled by the Griffin McGear Gallery in New York, is working on a set of prints she calls "The Landscape As Metaphor." In this series she transforms traditional vistas into symbolic figures: a view of the Roman Coliseum, for example, through the use of shadows and paint, is made to depict the head of a warrior.

But if Fox's fine art work is experimental, her commercial work is traditional and communicates instantly. An AT&T ad, "Promises Kept, Promises To Keep," shows a grandfather and curly-headed tot having a wonderful time together.



Peggy Fox.

er. Their almost-silhouetted figures, placed against an architecturally intricate open doorway, leaves no doubt as to the message. She also works regularly for the Kennedy Institute, a hospital for multiply handicapped children and succeeds masterfully in portraying the incredible courage she finds there.

Fox grew up in Philadelphia and studied at Moore College of Art before marrying and moving to Baltimore. Here, she attended the prestigious Maryland Institute of Art, then taught at a private high school for eight years.

She was a reluctant convert to photography about 15 years ago. "At some point, I hit a painter's block. A friend, an amateur photographer, urged me to take it up. I kept saying I wasn't interested in photography—but with my first roll I was hooked."

Fox understood immediately that the camera solved her drawing and painting problems and held great potential as a form of expression for her. She began doing people pictures, inspired by her discovery of Cartier-Bresson. "I started off doing kids, then I began to sell the pictures. I did a lot of family portraits, but with a twist. I always tried to be original, tried to put them in a setting that was a little less expected. Putting people in a setting and trying to get that story about what was going on between them—that was my first major push in terms of what I was trying to accomplish."

A 1974 trip out West marked the beginning of her landscape work. On her return, Fox printed up a selection of both new and previous work and put together a portfolio. "I had a combination of people and landscapes . . . metaphors . . . pictures with a dual meaning. I took them around to art directors who said, 'Don't call us . . .' The stuff was great, I couldn't understand why they didn't hire me on the spot," she says, laughing.

"I thought I was good but needed to hear it

from someone else, so I called up the Baltimore Museum of Art and asked if they gave criticisms. They set me up with Jay Fisher, who is now the curator of prints. He and two other people looked through my pictures without saying a word. I sweated profusely. At the end of it, he looked up and said, 'How would you like to have a show?' They were doing a series of regional photographers and wanted me for a one-person show."

Encouraged by this and other exhibits and by an increasing number of assignments, Fox took a leave of absence from her job and began to freelance. She did a lot of magazine work and continued to exhibit. "I was lucky enough to be one of the people chosen to do the Equitable photographic survey." The banking group engaged a group of photographers in a year-long project to capture the state of Maryland on film. "I photographed in St. Mary's County (southern Maryland on the Western shore of the Chesapeake Bay) and Fell's Point (a harbor section of Baltimore). I was thrilled to think anyone would pay me to do something I loved so much."

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**Fox: "Commercial work gives me a discipline I appreciate and keeps me pushing ahead technically."**

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Even with these successes, freelancing meant financial struggle. Divorced by this time, and with two children to support, Fox remembers, "We ate a lot of chili." She laughs about the time her growing son popped in with a friend after school and—for a snack—devoured their week's supply of ground beef in one sitting. She is still amazed that the two—now adults and on their own—never harbored resentment at living on a rather meager budget, and even became her cheering section. "We were all in this together."

In the early part of her career, Fox saw the work of Deborah Turbeville. "I loved the colors she was getting, but I didn't want to work in color film, so I got out the paints and started in. I liked the idea of being able to manipulate the color, it seemed to me you could make much more of a statement." Since this time, Fox has been hand-coloring and painting much of her work—both fine art and commercial.

This experimentation marked the beginning of a bifurcation in her work. "I decided to push the personal aspect, while—in the commercial work—really maintaining quality and doing it on demand. I think going back and forth between the two, even though it drives me crazy, does keep both fresh.

"The art is open-ended. That's my playground," she continues. "If I don't like it, I can just throw it away. The commercial gives me a discipline that I really appreciate. It keeps me pushing ahead technically and has helped immeasurably in dealing with people. Besides, I think some of my commercial work is just as exciting as my more experimental work." A recent annual report for a bank proved quite challenging. It involved producing hand-colored portraits of employees posed in architectural spaces, people who were not accustomed to being photographed and, in some cases, did not want to be. Says Fox, "It was an opportunity to do something experimental for a client not generally associated with such a courageous step, yet the pictures are traditional, classic."

Although she is pleased to find the two facets of her work—the fine art and commercial—blending, Fox doesn't want to lose the energy created by maintaining a tension between the two. "It's funny to see I'm being hired to do things that are my art, to get really experimental. It's something I didn't really expect to happen . . . but I hope there will always be a part of me that is still out there trying new things that they haven't caught up to yet." ■