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New Mexico Photo Tour

Fall/Winter 2006

SHELTER FROM THE STORM: The Photography of Kirk Gittings

Threatening Storm. Kirk Gittings paused in Chaco Canyon to frame Pueblo Alto as he ran ahead of a deluge. (1982)

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This photograph, and the other photographs in this Photo Tour, are from *New Mexico Magazine's* new photography book, *SHELTER FROM THE STORM: The Photography of Kirk Gittings*, written by Gussie Fauntleroy, foreword by V.B. Price, **available in our online catalog.**

Shelter from the Storm

By Gussie Fauntleroy

Kirk Gittings has made his living as an architectural photographer for more than 20 years, yet much of his fine art as well as commercial work can be said to involve images of home. Home in the usual sense of residential structures, but also churches as home for the spirit, and Ancestral Puebloan ruins as the home of ancient peoples of the Southwest. In each case, the 55-year-old Albuquerque-based photographer captures the essence of true home: the implied and deeply meaningful presence of human activity – and shelter for that activity – even while actual figures are almost never included in his imagery.

Gittings has been at home in New Mexico for most of his life. The son of an Army radar technician, who later transferred to the Air Force, he lived on an isolated, expansive mesa west of Albuquerque from third grade through high school. He spent countless boyhood hours exploring eroding mounds that once were Puebloan ruins near the Rio Puerco. He pondered over petroglyphs scratched into the rock face of volcanic outcroppings. These things fired his early imaginings about the people who once inhabited this land – people with whom he felt a distant yet distinct kinship after learning that two of his 18th-century ancestors were married to Native American women.

Gittings earned a bachelor's from the University of New Mexico in 1972, with an emphasis in photography. After several years away from the camera he returned to school for a master's in photography from the University of Calgary in Alberta, Canada. It was there that his vision, conceptual understanding and technical photographic skills began to reinforce each other to produce images of enduring beauty and power.

"Light defines landscapes, creating shadows that sculpt form, revealing texture," Gittings wrote some years later in an article for *View Camera* magazine. He was referring in particular to the effects of New Mexico's legendary intense, clear light on the extraordinary landforms of Chaco Canyon and other areas in the state's northwestern corner. With its immaculately constructed, multistory stone edifices and circular kivas, or sacred structures built into the ground, the Ancestral Puebloan site became the focus of a 12-year photographic journey for Gittings. The project culminated in the 1991 publication of the book, *Chaco Body*, which featured his photographs and the words of Albuquerque poet V.B. Price.

Chaco Body expresses Gittings' lifelong fascination with a land "alive with meaning . . . (and) layers of human presence over time," as he describes it. The Chaco work provided some of his earliest large-format experience, which became the basis of a

long and distinguished career in architectural photography. While many of his collectors and clients are based in other parts of the country and world, Gittings considers himself fortunate that most of the structures he photographs are located within the state he calls home.

For many years, Gittings has shared his insights, expertise and experience through teaching and leading photographic workshops – most notably as an adjunct professor at the University of New Mexico, and as visiting artist and instructor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He also writes on various aspects of photography for national and international publications. Throughout his work, whether fine art or commercial, there runs a passion the artist articulated many years ago: "Photography for me," he explained, "is not a means of dispassionately observing the world, but a means of involvement through which I express my feelings for life." <http://www.nmmagazine.com/PHOTOTOURS/gittings.html>