



*Clyde Butcher and Large Format Camera  
Portrait by Woody Walters*

Before achieving international fame as “The Ansel Adams of the Everglades,” Clyde Butcher spent nearly three decades as a veritable starving artist, always searching for the right balance of creativity and consumer appeal that would bring his photography to a wide audience. A gregarious soul now known for his environmental activism and wide-brimmed cowboy hats, the Kansas City-born Butcher switched from black and white photography that he sold at parking lot art shows to color prints, to mass-producing commercial artwork that he says, “would match consumers’ gold couches and shag carpets.”

Then in 1986, Butcher’s 17-year-old son Ted was killed by a drunk driver. The loss caused a profound sea change in Butcher, one that saw him eschew the ever-changing tastes of the fickle commercial art world. Instead of chasing sales, he headed into the Everglades to reflect, heal, and produce the epic black and white images that now hang in the homes of celebrities and royalty—Queen Elizabeth owns a print of Butcher’s “Ochopee.” Shooting in large format black and white, Butcher often stands in the waters of the Everglades in hip waders, braving heat, rain, and even alligators, to record the textures and depth of Florida’s wildest landscapes.

The results are exquisite prints that capture Florida’s primordial beauty. Creating huge images, Butcher calls the viewer to step into the Everglades, to notice the otherworldly structures that are the twisted trunks of live oaks, the drowsy hang of Spanish moss, the reflection on water of skies so wide they take on an element of the religious. Color photographs of the Everglades can drown the viewer in green; Butcher’s black and white work patiently records every palm frond and blade of grass.

Butcher, 75, suffered a stroke last May, from which he continues to recover. Assisted as always by his wife of 54 years, Niki Butcher, and daughter Jackie Butcher Obendorf, Clyde Butcher operates galleries in Venice, St. Armands, and Big Cypress National Preserve. He also owns the 13-acre “Loose Screw Sanctuary” in Big Cypress, offering swamp walks and a bungalow and cottage where fans can stay and visit Butcher’s beloved Everglades, perhaps even meeting the master himself.

*Requisite* found Clyde Butcher in his Venice gallery in September, signing prints and calendars for a line of admiring well-wishers. The affable Florida icon took a few moments to offer thoughts on his career, his motivations, and the secret to producing great art.

*This interview has been edited for clarity.*

WP How are you feeling since your stroke?

CLYDE BUTCHER

Honestly? (Laughs) Depressed. It feels like there is a magnet in my leg, keeping it tied to the ground. I hate being tired, too.

WP But you are still taking photographs?

CLYDE BUTCHER

Of course. We were just out taking a shot at the Sleeping Turtle Preserve [on the Myakka River in Venice].

WP Many people who aspire to be artists don't consider the business side of things. But that was never the case for you?

CLYDE BUTCHER

My reason to become an artist was always to make a living. I was an architect in California when I first saw Ansel Adams's work in 1961. I had never wanted a nine-to-five job, so I quit architecture in 1969 and soon we were living in a tent-trailer. We basically did the arts shows from 1981-1996, selling pictures by hand.

WP How were you able to handle the pressure of providing for a family during your starving artist years?

CLYDE BUTCHER

People often ask me, 'What does it take to become a successful artist?' I tell them, 'Well, you can't worry about losing your house, losing your car, losing your wife, losing your kids.' You can't worry about that stuff. You have to be absolutely stubborn. I just felt this was what I wanted to do. I never really worried. (Laughs) I also liked the chaos.

WP Did seeing what people liked at art shows influence your work?

CLYDE BUTCHER

Oh, yes. We decided to go to color photography because people could match the pictures to their couches. I eventually had a [home décor] art business in California with 200 employees, a 70,000-square-foot building—we were doing business with Spencer Gifts, Wards, Sears, and it got to \$11 million a year. We expanded too fast; we were bankrupt by 1982. Don't build a business on credit. Make sure you have a lot of money before you start it.

**WP** Why did you shift away from commercial artwork?

**CLYDE BUTCHER**

After Ted was killed, we were at an art show and I was looking at my color work, and I knew I needed to go back to my roots and back to black and white. I didn't care if anything sold. I took all my commercial color work to the dump: \$400,000 worth. I went into the Everglades, was always shooting in the water. I did my first art show in November of that same year in black and white.

**WP** You were finally making the images you are now famous for—how did these artistic black and white images reach an art-buying audience?

**CLYDE BUTCHER**

I sold some to Burt Reynolds at a West Palm Beach art show. Then the Department of Environmental Protection wanted 35 photographs for a new building. I said to myself, 'Oh boy! You are going to make a lot, it's really going to help us out.' Then the DEP tells me, 'But we can't pay for them.' After I gave those pictures to the DEP, a couple came and wanted to do a PBS documentary on the Everglades. They already had a photographer for the project, but a DEP guy told them, 'You've got to use Clyde.' [Suddenly] I gained nationwide exposure.

**WP** What kind of practical advice can you offer aspiring artists?

**CLYDE BUTCHER**

Most artists have this closed attitude, they're only about pure art; they say, 'I'm not open to any change.' But how I felt was that when doors open, you can either go through them or shut them. If someone would open their wallet at an art show and buy something, I felt I must be doing something right. Something that happens to artists who do art shows, they do a show, their work doesn't sell, they go to another show and take the same work. Every time I did an art show, I put at least one new picture up.

**WP** Is there any secret to making great art?

**CLYDE BUTCHER**

(Laughs) If it's your passion, just keep doing it. There is no formula—if you have enough passion, you will figure out a way of doing it. My final thought is that art has to come from the heart, period. Be creative. That is the end of the story.

*For more information visit [ClydeButcher.com](http://ClydeButcher.com)*