



# No focus, but dead-on aim

Paul Weideman | The New Mexican

**The photograph** Donald Woodman calls *The Rodeo and the West #23* is a dark blur of action, man on bull. If you look at it without knowing about the rodeo context, it's pretty abstract. Once you know, it is a rodeo moment you feel viscerally. "That photo's on the wall of a veterinarian here in Belen [N.M.] who's an ex-rodeo cowboy," Woodman said. "They have it in the surgery, and they love it."

One of the fun things about the action-packed *Rodeo and the West* series is that Woodman shot with a really old Brownie camera, a piece of equipment that owes its functionality to duct tape — and has a 4x5 Polaroid back Frankensteined onto it. The viewfinder is nearly useless, so Woodman just aims it intuitively. And the shutter speed is so slow it's best at making blurry pictures. "It's very slow, but it all worked out well," he said. "It worked out to my vision."

The photographer, who learned about his trade's tools — typically fine but cumbersome view cameras — at the sides of Ezra Stoller and Minor White, chose the early-20th-century Kodak Brownie to establish a more direct link to his subjects. "I wanted to find a way to directly translate what I saw through the camera," he said. "So I have this hand-held camera that has a mirror system for viewing, but it's so obscure you really can't look through it. It was about developing a way of understanding how the camera saw and how I saw the world and translating it to film."

For his 1980s rodeo series Woodman mixed traditional photography, making silver gelatin prints from his Polaroid Type 55 negatives, with newer technology at the back end: he scanned the prints, took care of retouching in Photoshop, and then printed with an inkjet machine.

Fast-forward to 1998 and a Woodman project to shoot clouds floating in the blue sky. In the *Fifteen Clouds* series, he engaged himself in a tribute to Alfred Stieglitz's notion of "equivalents," in which the photographer who strives to capture a vision that profoundly resonates with his character or psyche may then most fully convey its impact to others.

Woodman also used *Fifteen Clouds* to explore presentation possibilities. After capturing cloud images with a Polaroid Spectra camera, he scanned the small Polaroid prints and then inventively used a variation of the etching process known as chine collé to produce exceptional prints with an Iris inkjet printer. "That was my first foray into the digital medium," he said. "I look at digital as another tool in the camera bag. I'm always distressed when people ask, 'Are you a digital photographer?' What does that mean?"



Donald Woodman: *The Rodeo and the West #23*, 1988/2005, inkjet print from Polaroid Type 55 negative

Images courtesy Zane Bennett Contemporary Art



Left, *Cloud #2*, from *Fifteen Clouds*, 1988  
Iris print on Chine Colle from Polaroid Spectra print

Bottom, *The Rodeo and the West #43*, 1988/2005,  
inkjet print from Polaroid Type 55 negative

“There are things I can still do in the darkroom better than I can do in Photoshop, and there are some things I can do easier in Photoshop. I have my digital setup in one corner of the darkroom space and my Durst enlarger and sink and chemicals on the other side.”

When he makes prints the old-fashioned way, Woodman mixes his own chemicals, as he learned over the years by frequent reference to the *Kodak Black-and-White Darkroom Dataguide*. He usually uses two developing solutions, Kodak Selectol Soft and an Ilford developer, depending on whether he wants to emphasize the image’s midtones or shadow values.

Woodman earned a bachelor’s degree in architecture at the University of Cincinnati in 1969 while working as an assistant to the architectural photographer Ezra Stoller. He assisted White at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1970 to 1972, then relocated to New Mexico, where he spent five years at the National Solar Observatory at Sacramento Peak doing scientific photography and managing the observatory’s film-processing laboratory.

During his time at the observatory Woodman established a solar-filming facility. The experience sparked an interest in filmmaking, and he was soon learning more in courses at New Mexico State University. He worked on film and video projects while at the University of Houston to study photography with George Krause.

Woodman served as personal assistant to painter Agnes Martin from 1977 to 1983, during which time he also created series of black-and-white photographs using Polaroid’s Type 55 film, the only instant-image film that also yields a negative the photographer may enlarge in the same way as regular camera film.

He has been a fan of the Polaroid process for many years. “I sort of got hooked on it when I was living in Boston and working with Minor,” he said. “I got involved in the Polaroid Collection, where we would trade prints to Polaroid for materials. I think we got the better part of the deal, but it’s a real honor to have work included in that collection that tours the world.”

The show of prints at Zane Bennett Contemporary Art features work in the rodeo and cloud series as well as a collection of self-portraits made over a period of more than four years beginning in the summer of 1997. That series — *The Therapist* — comprises photographs created during actual sessions with his therapist. The concept of turning the camera on oneself not only as a kind of record of the therapy process but for public viewing is a stunning sort of commitment and also was inspired by White, Woodman said.



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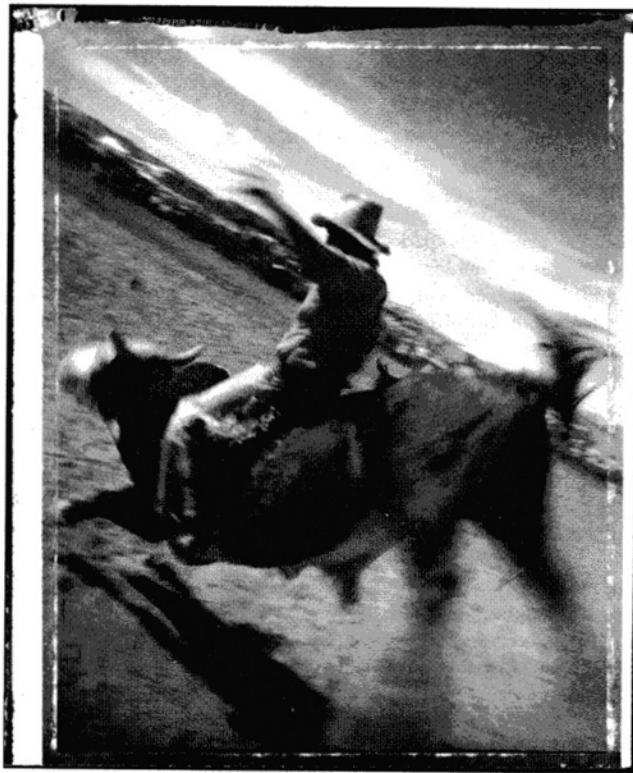
Woodman also has a longtime commercial photography business and taught photography from 1997 to 2002 at the University of New Mexico's Valencia campus. He is preparing images for two books, a biography of his wife, artist Judy Chicago, and a book about her *Dinner Party* project.

"I'm also working on a couple of new series," he said. "One is called *Daytimer*, for which I'm taking one photo a day. It's hard to do that. I'm trying to deal with the mundane. I began it on my 60th birthday last September, and I'll see if I can sustain it for a year. The other one is a series I've been working on for a few years, black-and-white landscapes called *The Selling of the West*."

At 2 p.m. June 24, Woodman and Chicago speak about *Holocaust Project: From Darkness Into Light*, an extensive eight-year collaboration in which the couple visited concentration camps and collected materials pertaining to the Holocaust. The event, which includes a half-hour film edited from original footage done for a KNME-TV *¡Colores!* segment, takes place at the office of Through the Flower, their nonprofit organization, 107 Becker Ave. in Belen. ◀

### details

- ▼ *Photography in Transition: Featuring 'The Rodeo and the West' series, work by Donald Woodman*
- ▼ Opening reception 5-7 p.m. Friday, June 9; exhibit through July 11
- ▼ Artist conversation 2 p.m. Sunday, June 11
- ▼ Zane Bennett Contemporary Art, 826 Canyon Road; 982-8111



*The Rodeo and the West* #33, 1988/2005, inkjet print  
from Polaroid Type 55 negative