

# Celebrating the American West: Q&A with Fine Art Photographer Cheyenne L Rouse

Written by Elizabeth Liberatore

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Located on Marshall Way in Old Town Scottsdale sits an eye-catching yellow stucco building with a red barrel tile roof. Tucked in the building's quaint courtyard is an art gallery that will summon your inner cowboy or cowgirl as you take a visual journey through the Four Corners of the United States. Adorned with a feather bangle and necklace, owner and photographer, Cheyenne L Rouse, exudes a free-spirited ambiance about herself that is similar to her welcoming gallery. By taking Digital Fine Art Photography to new and exciting levels, Rouse opened Ancient Light Gallery and has captured the life of Western and Southwestern cultures by holding it still.



**AFM:** Where are you from and what brought you to Arizona?

**CLR:** I was born and raised in Miami, FL, I moved to San Diego in 1989 where I started my stock photography business with my specialty in adventure sports, health and fitness, then I moved to Park City, UT where I shot more extreme adventure sports and finally, I came to Arizona just last June to open Ancient Light Gallery. I had already spent a lot of time in Arizona taking photos but I avoided it because of the heat. After 12 years of living at 7,000 ft I realized that I would pick heat over snow any day.

**AFM:** When were you first introduced to photography?

**CLR:** My father got me my first camera at age 15 and after getting an A in photography class I thought, 'Gosh, I'm finally good at something.' After high school I stopped doing photography because I went into the clothing design business with my twin sister. However, it was not until after my trip out west I decided that I would try to make a living from my passion.

**AFM:** What did you do prior to becoming a photographer?

**CLR:** Well I have always been a photographer but making a living as an artist is not an easy path so I have done just about everything to pay the bills while I pursued my passion. I call myself Cheyenne 5.0 because I feel like I am on my fifth incarnation. I worked with my twin sister creating high-end kids clothes, had my stock photography business for 17 years, then got my real estate license, had a personal training business and then after a five year break from photography I felt the creative spark again in 2008 and picked my camera back up.

**AFM:** What sparked your interest in the West and Southwest?

**CLR:** Before I left Florida in '89, I met up with some friends in Albuquerque where we decided to take a little road trip. We went through New Mexico and Southern Utah and I was floored by what I saw, the landscape, colors and the wide-open spaces just captured my soul. After that trip I thought, 'I have to live out west and I am going to make a living with my camera.'

**AFM:** What inspires you the most?

**CLR:** So many spiritual and emotional experiences when I am on the road inspire me; my photographs are my journal of those experiences that will last me forever. I am also inspired by other artists who are passionate and true to their calling whatever that might be.

**AFM:** Are photographs considered works of art?

**CLR:** Some might say that photography is still on the fringes of the art world and there are different segments to that world. However, it just depends on whom you talk to because some will classify it as fine art where others say it is just a photograph. I take my work very seriously and to me each moment in time that I capture and create is a work of art. When I am on the road shooting photos it is a very sacred experience for me, time stands still and the sights and things that I see move me like nothing else can. And there is nothing more gratifying then to get to share it with patrons that come into my Gallery. I am told that my passion comes through my photographs.



**AFM:** What is your style of photography?

**CLR:** I process my Fine Art photographs using HDR, which is High Dynamic Range. Shooting for HDR allows me to capture every range of light in the photograph therefore allowing me bring out what is already present in the scene as far as depth, detail and highlights. I then print Giclees

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on canvas and the results are stunning. With this process being new and different there is still some push back against HDR but I look at it like it is another tool in my toolbox and we are so fortunate to live in a time where we as artists have so many wonderful tools available to us. I always keep my favorite Ansel Adams quote in mind; 'The negative is the score, the print is the performance, and as a photographer and artist, you have the opportunity to use a variety of tools at every step to create a print that achieves your vision' – wise words from the Master!

**AFM:** What goal do you want instilled in your photos?

**CLR:** I want my passion for the West and Southwest to shine through and I want to inspire people by what I see and feel to get out and explore this amazing world that we live in. So much of the nostalgic West & Southwest is disappearing and I feel like it is my mission to document it through my photographs and capture the essence of what makes the American West so unique. I love sharing the legend and lore of this area and am sure I had to be a cowboy in one my lives.

**AFM:** Is it hard doing this on your own?

**CLR:** Well yes and no, I do not have security like some other artists, so I have had to work just a little bit harder which is not a bad thing. I am like the lone wolf out there, I like to travel and shoot alone, which boggles people minds sometimes, but I get my best work done when I am solo. I love being a woman doing what I am doing because there is not a lot of [women] photographing such 'masculine' subject matter. I can see the looks on people's faces that walk into my Gallery and say; 'you photographed these things?' Throughout this process I did have to sacrifice relationships and give up a lot, but it has all been worth it. I am a very lucky girl to get to do what I do.

**AFM:** Why did you hang up your camera and call it quits?

**CLR:** There were a variety of reasons that I hung up my camera in 2003. 9-11 was a turning point for me as it was for so many and after chasing people up mountains for 17 years I was so not only burnt out but I was tired, not to mention the world was going digital, and I was still film based. I thought it was a good time to change directions and explore some other path in life even though I thought I would be shooting photos for the rest of my life. I thought I was done up until three years ago when I purchased a digital camera. I reluctantly took it on the road with me to see if I could 'make friends' with it and that is when I found a beautiful old red truck that changed everything for me [Dodge Bootlegger Truck photograph].

**AFM:** What launched your new photo series the Ghosts of the West? What does the series entail?

**CLR:** The Dodge Bootlegger Truck photo not only brought me back into the world of photography, but it slowly started my new photo series. My Ghosts of the West photo series is my way of bringing the West and Southwest back to life. The photos depict the legend and culture of the West and Southwest from Route 66, old trucks, wild horses, old cemeteries, trains, Native Americans and cowboys. If it has anything to do with the history of the West, you will find it in my "Ghosts of the West" photo series.

**AFM:** Do you have any other photo series that you are currently working on?

**CLR:** I have a new project that is an off shoot of the Ghosts of the West series, "Southwestern Spirituality", which will be my next book and Gallery exhibit. I am attracted to powerfully religious symbols like old churches, cemeteries and crosses throughout the Southwest and find them hauntingly beautiful. The inspiration for this next series was Ansel Adams Moonrise over Hernandez, New Mexico photo. I first saw it years ago and it captured my imagination.



**AFM:** What workshops do you teach?

**CLR:** I teach digital, one-on-one workshops in my gallery to show individuals how to use HDR on their photos in addition to teaching group workshops throughout Arizona. Just recently I was invited to teach a "Photographing the Old West" workshop at the Telluride Film Festival in Telluride, CO. The festival this year focuses on women in photography, which is a good thing! I am really excited and honored to be able to attend and teach at this event.

**AFM:** What are some future goals you have for yourself and your photography?

**CLR:** I would like to get my work into more galleries throughout the West and Southwest. I do have work showcased in Casa de Artistas, which is a gallery on Main Street in Old Town Scottsdale. I would like to write more books, articles for magazine and teach more workshops. I would also like to have more commercial designers look at my work since I think it would fit in nicely for commercial applications such as restaurants and hotels.

**AFM:** Fascinated by a photograph of a wild horse in her gallery, Cheyenne unveiled the story behind the photo.

**CLR:** The Bureau of Land Management is at a furious pace to round up these beautiful icons of the West and place them in holding pens. I met an amazing women who runs the Monero Mustang Sanctuary in New Mexico; she is the caretaker of 5000 acres of land where these horses are free to roam. She adopts the horses with the little money she gets through donations so they can gallop freely around the high desert. I am not much of a horse girl, but these wild horses are an enduring symbol of freedom and I find them so beautiful with their wild manes and free spirit. I am all about freedom: creative, financial and spiritual. Photographing wild horses is my way of bringing light to their plight.

**AFM:** What can we expect from you in the upcoming future?

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**CLR:** I do not want to give too much away, but expect rusty and dusty old, car doors to be spotted around the gallery in the near future.

**AFM:** What advice would you give to someone who wishes to pursue his or her passion in life?

**CLR:** If I have a rough week I stand in my gallery and look at what I have achieved and sometimes think, 'how did I do that?' It has been a rollercoaster, but I feel like I am doing what I am supposed to be doing on this Earth. You have to decide to go for it and want it more than anything. I tell people that this isn't a dress rehearsal; you might as well do exactly what you want to do with your life.

To learn more about the adventure enthusiast, Cheyenne L Rouse, and her photography that Celebrates the American West visit her gallery website [www.ancientlightphotos.com](http://www.ancientlightphotos.com) or to learn about her workshops visit her blog: [www.cheyennerouse.com](http://www.cheyennerouse.com).