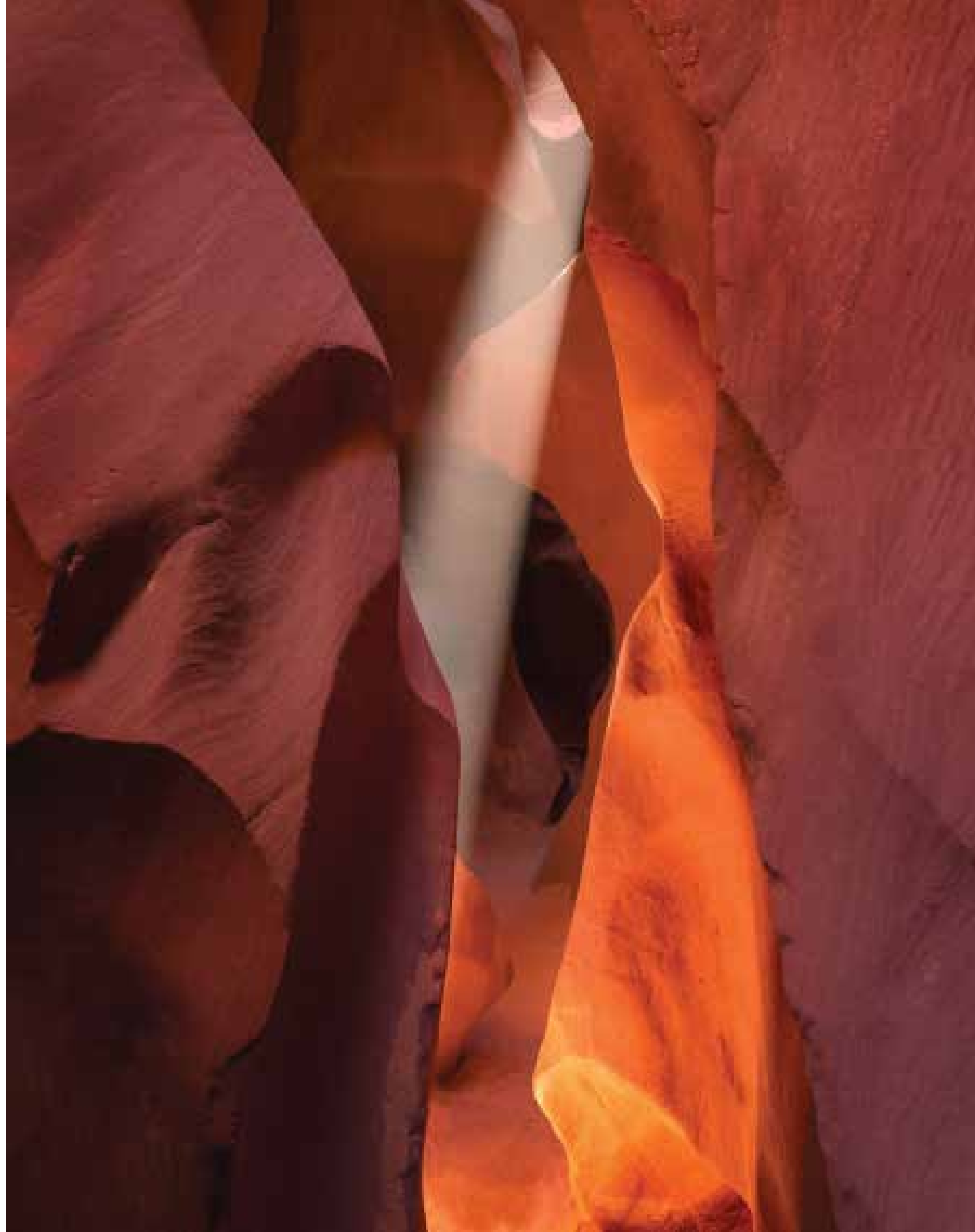


Antelope Canyon,
Arizona



An interview with
semiconductor engineer
turned photographer
Rex Naden

Seeing the World Through a New Lens

By David Israel
Photographs by Rex Naden

Just because you spend half your adult years pursuing one career with a good deal of success doesn't mean you can't shift gears and head off in a completely new direction midway through life. Rex Naden is living proof of this. In the following interview, we find out how he made the transition from successful semiconductor entrepreneur to professional photographer.

Q: As a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?

A: My dad had a college education, so I wanted to have a professional career—for example, as a doctor or engineer. I was in love with science and math. Growing up, I worked for my father in a factory, becoming an avid student of manufacturing processes. My interest in computer software and systems probably had roots in this experience. When my dad started his own refrigeration and heating business, I again worked for him; I was fascinated by the physics of fluids and motors and by the business aspects of running a company.

Q: What did you study in college and where did you study?

A: I studied electrical engineering in college. I continued to the PhD level, at Rice University in Houston.

Q: Did you take any photography courses in high school or college or study the art form in any way while you were pursuing your other studies?

A: I haven't taken formal photography courses. My mother was an artist—initially doing needlework, then painting. She was a big contributor to my artistic inclination. My grandfather and dad both were enthusiastic amateur photographers and encouraged me as well.

In grad school I lived around artists, who introduced me to the right side of the brain. We spent time visiting galleries, talking about art and making photographs. I took both black-and-white and color photos and made my own prints.

I read Ansel Adams' books, for both inspiration and instruction in the craft. I fell in love with Georgia O'Keeffe's work; it is still a major influence on me.

Q: What was your first job out of college?

A: I worked as a semiconductor researcher for Texas Instruments in Dallas. Initially I was involved with devices, then later moved into developing memory systems, computers and consumer devices such as calculators and electronic learning aids.

Q: What firm did you work for the longest in your first career?

A: I worked 14 years at VLSI Technology in San Jose, California. The company made semi-custom integrated circuits through the use of custom design software. After TI and VLSI, I started working at small start-up firms. These companies do things entirely differently than large companies—less formal, more fast-paced, more exciting and risky. I worked at several of these companies: some failures, some successes.

Q: At what point did you feel like you needed to make a change?

A: At age 62, I was running a small company north of San Francisco; our home was three hours south. I was either traveling or working all the time, and I reached the realization that I needed to spend more time making photographs. After working 35 years in the chip business, I was ready for something new.

Q: Was it scary, the idea of leaving an entire life/career behind?

A: Not really, because I was confident that I would find a niche in photography. Nine years after becoming a professional, I am slowly finding that niche.

Q: Were your loved ones supportive?

A: My wife, Barbara Naden, has been very supportive. Since she also has an interest in nature photography as well as video,



Death Valley, California



Top: Sierra Foothills, California; Bottom: Northern Arizona

“At age 62...I reached the realization that I needed to spend more time making photographs. After working 35 years in the chip business, I was ready for something new.”

we often travel and shoot together. Occasionally we collaborate on projects such as photo books and videos.

Q: What kind of work did you start doing first as a photographer?

A: Teaching photography, on the theory that the best way to learn something is to teach it! I engaged with master photographer Charles Cramer as his workshop teaching assistant, beginning at the Ansel Adams Gallery in Yosemite Valley. Later our collaboration expanded to include Silicon Valley workshops. We have taught about 50 workshops and have about 350 workshop “graduates.” I love the students’ energy and new ways of seeing things, so they actually teach me! I’ve kept in touch with these folks through the years, and I continue to benefit from these associations.

Q: How have you built your career as a photographer?

A: I served for three years as a director of the Center for Photographic Art in Carmel, California. This nonprofit organization, originally founded by Cole Weston and Ansel Adams, has continued to promote all forms of photography to a large audience. During this period I had the privilege to meet and work with a number of well-known photographers. I learned what it means to develop a significant body of work. And some of these people have helped my career through their critiques, advice and recommendations.

I work with galleries and art consultants to show and sell my images. Recently I’ve exhibited at the Center for Photographic Art in Carmel, the Ansel Adams Gallery in Yosemite Valley, Lumière Gallery in Atlanta,

and the Booth Western Art Museum near Atlanta. Commercially my work is used to decorate business spaces, with emphasis on wealth management, brokerage, high-tech and health care firms.

I co-teach astro-landscape photo workshops with a guru of night-sky photography, Rick Whitacre. I met Rick at one of the Ansel Adams workshops and learned a tremendous amount from him. Shooting at night can make an “overshot” location into something brand-new and exciting! Also, this kind of photography has a new set of challenges—very exciting to me.

Q: What are some of your favorite subjects to shoot?

A: I love pristine wilderness areas. I have a passion for finding and isolating simple and emotional compositions, along

with the right lighting and weather. In California I love the Pacific Coast, Death Valley, Yosemite and the Sierra Nevadas. The stunning red rock in the Southwest, the verdant Pacific Northwest and the dramatic landscapes of New Zealand also get my blood pumping. I’d love to shoot in Iceland and Norway too. And there is now shooting night-sky photographs. Our world is full of landscape opportunities.

Q: What advice do you have for others who feel the burning desire to shift gears mid-life?

A: Make sure you are either 100 percent confident you have found a winning business plan in your new field or you have become financially independent before starting your new career. ■