

EYES IN THE SKY

Dedicated photographers go to great lengths for the perfect shot, but some go to great heights. Louis van Wyk talks to three pros who have made the world of aerial photography their own, including one who is regarded as the international pioneer in the field.



"Look up, what do you see? All of you and all of me. Fluorescent and starry. Some of them, they surprise."

Sometimes what you see when you look up may surprise you, as REM so eloquently depict in the opening line of their classic 1996 track, E-Bow the Letter. However, sometimes, the biggest surprises come when you look down – especially when you're a few thousand feet above the ground.

And that is exactly what three photographers interviewed by *D-Photo* discovered as they headed into the skies, finger poised expectantly on the shutter button, to catch a more expansive glimpse of the world around them.

THE ARTIST AND THE ACTIVIST

When Parisian Yann Arthus-Bertrand first took a camera with him in a hot-air balloon he sought a better understanding of the Kenyan habitat of a pride of lions he was studying. He had no inkling that this would lead to him becoming the world's most recognised figure in aerial photography, as well as a leading environmental activist.

Arthus-Bertrand is the creator of *Earth from Above*, an exhibition of over 100 aerial photographs that has been seen around the world, and was on display in Auckland's Aotea Square late last year.

Arthus-Bertrand started work on the *Earth from Above* project in 1994, after he founded *Altitude*, the world's first aerial photography agency, in 1991.

The *Earth from Above* images have also been collected in several books and in calendars, while hundreds of the images have been incorporated into Google Earth.

To capture the *Earth from Above* images Arthus-Bertrand and his team have spent more than 4000 hours flying over 150 countries – most recently Madagascar, India, Nigeria, Spain, Dubai, and Argentina.

Naturally, this travel is offset through *Action Carbone*, an organisation Arthus-Bertrand developed with the French Agency of the Environment and Energy Management that funds renewable energies, energy efficiency or reforestation projects.

"With *Earth from Above*, I simply want people to see the earth as it is today, as faithfully as possible. What motivates me is the impact a photograph can make within the

framework of environmental preservation," says Arthus-Bertrand, who is also the Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Environment Programme.

In an interview from Paris, Arthus-Bertrand says: "The impact of mankind on the planet is just incredible – there will be seven billion of us by the end of this year. Global warming is here, the climate is changing completely, the balance is very fragile."

But there is no time for wallowing in pessimism, he says, as serious action is required – and spurring the world into action remains the urgent motivation behind his aerial photography and filming work.

Even though Arthus-Bertrand now devotes much of his time to *GoodPlanet*, the foundation he founded to raise awareness of environmental issues, and on film and television work, he remains a photographer at heart. He switched to digital photography in 2006 and claims it has changed his life completely.

"I used to go through lots of film and used to have a lot of wasted, out-of-focus images. With digital I can see the pictures straight away – it is much less expensive. Out-of-focus pictures are now almost impossible."

With digital it is now easier to be good photographer, but therefore also more difficult to make a living as a photographer, he says.

"We are all now capable of taking good pictures. You need talent to 'see' – not to press the button."

DEDICATION AND DETERMINATION AT 10,000 FEET

Arthus-Bertrand's great fervour for his art and environmental activism is paralleled in the dedication and determination of Auckland-based photographer Michael Provost.

However, Provost pours his passion into preserving the heritage of old 'warbirds' – the ever-diminishing pool of World War II-era aircraft that occasionally still grace our skies.

Provost is arguably New Zealand's foremost air-to-air photographer and specialises in capturing vintage war planes as they are meant to be seen – in all their glory in full flight.

He honed his aerial photography skills in the Royal New Zealand Air Force and his interest >

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Yann Arthus-Bertrand

in air-to-air photography of vintage aircraft was spurred through visits to the bi-annual Warbirds over Wanaka Airshow with the encouragement of the show's founder, Sir Tim Wallis.

He has made this niche his own over the past 20 years, but warns it is not for the faint-hearted. The best vantage point of one vintage warplane in full flight is from another. Capturing the best images often involves crawling around the inside the old aircraft – 10,000 feet above the ground – in freezing temperatures, while aiming at the subject a mere 10 feet away.

They're not pressurised (so forget the air conditioned comfort of Air New Zealand) and in addition, Provost tends to shoot al fresco – generally through an open canopy, open window or old gun turret.

“Often a canopy or window contains inclusions that show up on the image. An open

canopy also makes side by side shots easier.”

In addition, crawling through the fuselage to a rear gun turret enables Provost to capture close-up, head-on shots of his subject. But this requires careful co-ordination between both aircraft, which are often only a few feet apart.

“You want to be very close to your target to avoid using a telephoto lens. So the skills of both pilots are very important.”

Therefore, vintage machines are ideally suited as the base aircraft, as their speed and performance match that of the target.

“Modern jets would be too fast while helicopters would struggle to keep up with a Spitfire, for instance,” says Provost.

The drawback is that conditions are often not very comfortable – to say the least.

“You definitely have to contend with cramped conditions and freezing temperatures.”

These conditions also prescribe which equipment is best used, which is why he prefers to shoot on film. According to Provost, digital cameras are more prone to freeze up in very cold conditions – especially if they get moisture in them.

Film cameras tend to also be heavier and more durable, which means better stability while working in a bumpy plane. Indeed, Provost's camera of choice, a Pentax 67 medium format camera, is a formidable piece of equipment – complete with a large wooden grip on the left hand side to ensure a steady grasp.

Taking pictures of propeller-driven aircraft

requires a slower shutter speed as well, and Provost prefers the better manual control analogue equipment offers.

“If your shutter speed is too fast, the propellers appear to stand still. But with a slower speed you have to overcome the image blurring as both your subject and you are in motion.”

Nevertheless, these days Provost shoots with both film and digital equipment, often using both on the same shoot.

“Although the cameras are generally quite reliable, it is always good to have a backup.”

Much preparation goes into an air-to-air sortie, says Provost – every part of the flight

has to be planned down to the last detail. In addition, Provost pays special attention to the backdrop to his shots, to capture a precise piece of history.

“I avoid anything that would date the image. I also select terrain that matches the landscape of the region the particular aircraft come from. This all adds to the authenticity of the image.”

The airmanship Provost developed during his 20-year career as a photographer in the RNZAF is crucial in his aerial photography work.

“If you are comfortable in the environment inside the aircraft, that's half the battle. It means you can do what you need to do, >



© Yann Arthus-Bertrand

Nets used for drying algae, Wando Archipelago, South Korea (34°19' N - 127°05' E)



© Michael Provost

even at minus 20 degrees and while pulling a few Gs."

Even though Provost still prefers using film for shooting, his production process is fully digital. He scans his negatives with an Epson V700 scanner, then touches-up images using Photoshop and uses a large-format Canon Lucia printer.

"Digital production is a gift. You now have total image control. I've always done my own production, but now I can work on improving very small areas of an image, without being in a toxic environment.

"It also gives you the ability to do larger work – you can pump up mural-sized images without losing resolution."

But alas, air-to-air photography of old warbirds is not a full time job, therefore Provost also runs an aerial photography agency, Airpix, and offers air-to-air photography of modern aircraft.

THE SHADOW HUNTERS

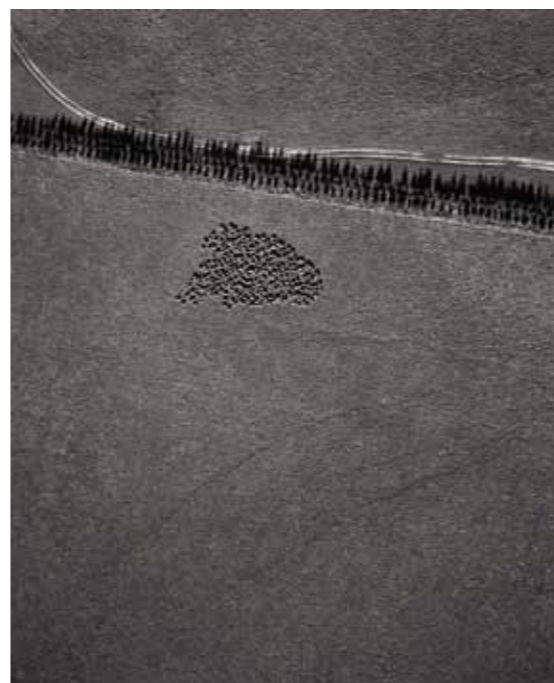
Jackie Ranken meanwhile has taken a completely different angle to her aerial photography – literally.

The Queenstown-based Australian discovered a very unique perspective of landscapes, from the passenger seat of an old biplane, while upside down, in a loop and looking down at the ground.

"I noticed patterns, formations and long shadows that pushed my buttons," she explains.

It all started in 2002 when Ranken, already a successful commercial photographer in Goulburn, New South Wales, was commissioned by the local council to produce some photographs of the local landscape for a series of billboards.

She asked her father, an acrobatic pilot with a collection of old bi-planes to take



© Jackie Ranken



© Jackie Ranken

her up in one of his aircraft to scout for images to capture.

During a loop, she realised that being upside down and right over the top of the landscape afforded a captivatingly abstract view of the landscape.

Ranken enlisted her father, fortunately also an amateur photographer, to help pursue her dream of capturing this unique view of the landscape around her home town.

"Dad called us the shadow hunters – and the bi-plane became my flying tripod as we flew around finding interesting things."

It was an ideal platform for which to capture the images, says Ranken, as the passenger sits in the open in front of the pilot. "You're upside down and looking over the top of the plane, so you're at the right angle to see the images you're looking for."

However, snapping the best shots while dangling from an aircraft at the zenith of an acrobatic loop is not as easy as it sounds. "You only have about a split second to get your shot," explains Ranken.

And it's not for those with a sensitive disposition or sufferers of motion sickness. "On some shoots we did 30 loops. I spent most of my childhood in my dad's airplanes, so the stomach was not a problem."

The sheer thrill involved in capturing her images aside, the work delivered a double reward for Ranken.

The project allowed her to spend precious moments in the air with her father, and the end result was a collection of images

compiled into a book – *Aerial Abstracts. Landscape art photography*, for which she won the Australian Institute of Professional Photographers Landscape Photographer of the Year award in 2002.

Ranken has also exhibited the work – first in Goulburn where the images both confounded and mesmerised the locals.

"People liked looking at the images because they're like a visual riddle. Some features were distinguishable, but some were deliberately indiscernible as I wanted to create abstract images."

Like the work of Yann Arthus-Bertrand, Ranken could not escape evidence of the impact of human activity on the environment in her aerial images.

"The effect of drainage and the way Australia captures water into little dams for farming were clearly visible. And there was very little growth, apart from a few single, lone trees."

Although the *Aerial Abstracts* collection was shot on film using a Mamiya 7 medium format camera, Ranken is now a digital convert using a Canon EOS-1DS.

She believes today's digital technology would have delivered as great results – with the benefit of less laborious processing processes. As she now lives in Queenstown and her father – and his aircraft – remain in Australia, Ranken says: "I now live away from my flying tripod."

She still enjoys the landscapes offered by Central Otago but appreciates them from nearer the ground.

GEAR LIST

Yann Arthus-Bertrand

yannarthusbertrand.org

Canon EOS-1DS

Canon L series lenses - 14 to 500 mm

Fujichrome Velvia 50 ASA film

Michael Provost

airpix.co.nz

Nikon D300

Pentax 67

Epson V700 scanner

Canon Lucia printer

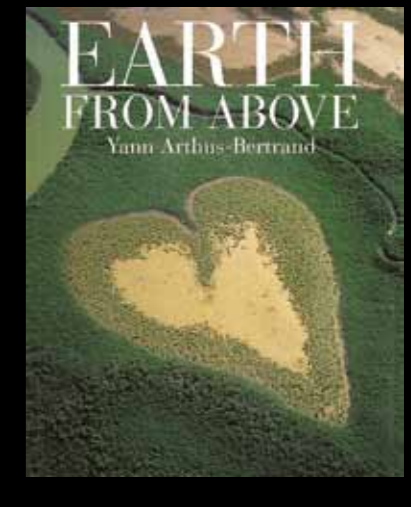
Jackie Ranken

jackieranken.co.nz

Canon EOS-1DS

Mamiya 7

If you want to know how Earth from Above is made, make sure to check out the D-Photo website. In an exclusive feature from Paris, Yann Arthus-Bertrand describes the tricky logistics involved in high altitude, multi-country work and the techniques and equipment he uses.



"I still take abstract aerial photographs – but from my own height. Sometimes I look straight down and find a pattern or shape that fascinates me and take a picture." **D**