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What It's Like to Stare a Hurricane Wave in the Face

By JORDAN G. TEICHER 09.16.15.



Clifford Ross didn't merely make photos of hurricane waves—he became a part of them. He would wade in the surf, allowing himself to be pummeled by the wave so he might create beautiful yet ominous images that reveal the merciless, churning power of the sea in a storm.

Ross' fascination with hurricanes started in 1996 when Hurricane Edouard raced toward the eastern seaboard. He drove to Georgica Beach in East Hampton, New York, where he'd spent time as a child, to photograph the powerful waves crashing ashore. The

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photographer admits he wasn't quite prepared for the waves; he shot from the shore, but feels the images didn't produce the "level of expressiveness" he wanted. Still, he was hooked by the experience of staring down the force of nature.

"When it's in turmoil, as it is during a storm, the ocean is dramatic, it's scary, and it's fascinating. It's just a riveting spectacle. And I became fascinated with creating prints that would show to the viewer the experience and the emotion I felt," he says.

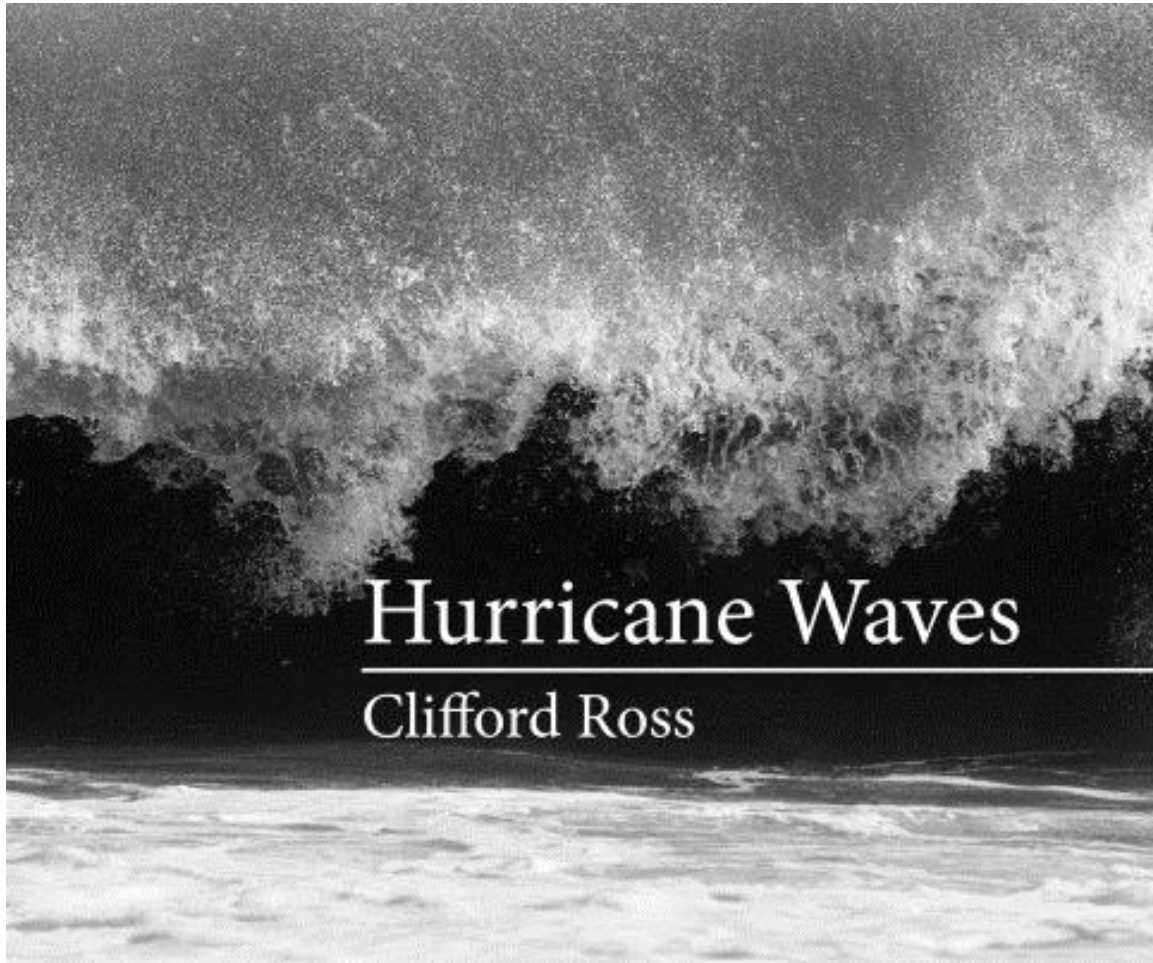


Over the years, Ross became expert at getting the shot while being beaten by waves. The photographer soon started wearing a wetsuit and life vest, and tethering himself to an assistant on shore. He made most of the images at Georgica Beach, but occasionally visited nearby beaches as well. Using proper gear and a tether let him get so close that the waves fill the frame and block the horizon, making his photos particularly ominous. Despite being sometimes neck-deep in water, Ross never enclosed his camera in a waterproof case. He preferred to swing his gear away from the wave at the last moment, cleaning up and drying off later if necessary. "I don't practice safe photography. I need to feel raw, like it's just me and the camera," he says.

Waves occasionally knocked him over, but Ross never particularly worried about the dangers he faced. Instead, he embraced them. "I've been out in seriously crazy weather.

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Probably a reasonable person would judge me foolish. But I'm so involved in what I'm doing, I don't have the time to judge myself foolish," he says.



Ross switched to a digital camera in 2008 and started taking thousands of shots in a season. He strove for photos that recreated "tactile power and the sculptural specificity" he experienced in the water. Ross shot on black and white to focus on the waves' form without the distraction of color. The images are alluring yet a bit sinister. All told, he spent 12 years on the project and published 84 images in a photo book released this month. Though it's been a few years since he's faced down a wave, the sea still beckons, and a powerful storm might lure him once again.