

Obituaries

# Frank DiPerna, photographer of evocative landscape scenes and teacher, dies at 73



Frank DiPerna. (Manuel Claro)

By Louie Estrada

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There was little in Frank DiPerna's background growing up in the suburbs of Washington that would have led anyone to believe he would become a prominent artist whose painterly photographs would hang on the walls of galleries in the United States and Europe.

Yet the former high school football standout developed into a pivotal figure in Washington's fine arts community as a photographer, notably of large-format, American Southwest desert landscapes, and as a teacher.

He taught photography at what is now the Corcoran School of the Arts & Design, beginning in 1974, and two years later he launched its bachelor of fine arts program in photography. When the Corcoran School merged with George Washington University in 2014, he remained on the faculty until his health began to fail last year.

Mr. DiPerna, who lived in Purcellville, Va., was 73 when he died June 26 at a hospital in Falls Church, Va. His wife of 26 years, the artist Roberta Marovelli, said the cause was colon cancer.

Frank Paul DiPerna was born in Pittsburgh on Feb. 4, 1947. He was 5 when he moved with his family to the Washington area, where his father took a job as a printer at the Bureau of Engraving and his mother was a homemaker. He grew up in Falls Church, where he graduated from J.E.B. Stuart High School, now known as Justice High School.

He studied mechanical engineering at Virginia Tech and, after graduation in 1970, took a civilian job as an apprentice naval architect with the Coast Guard.

Much to his parents' chagrin, he quit his job to turn what was then a budding hobby — photography — into his full-time profession, although he wasn't sure at first how to go about it.

"He said he was making terrible pictures and decided to travel cross-country to make more photographs," Marovelli said.

Mr. DiPerna went to Aspen, Colo., to attend a workshop for photographic artists, working in the darkroom to help pay his tuition.

While camping near Aspen, he had a chance encounter with photographer Nathan Lyons, who invited Mr. DiPerna to the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, N.Y. Mr. DiPerna spent a year-and-a-half studying photography under Lyons before returning to the Washington area in the early 1970s. He taught photography at Northern Virginia Community College for five years and received a master's degree in photography from Goddard College in Plainfield, Vt., in 1977.

He also taught in Cortona, Italy, for the University of Georgia's study-abroad program, served as an artist-in-residence for the **Camargo Foundation** in Cassis, France, and was part of a Corcoran program in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Even as he taught, Mr. DiPerna amassed a vast photography portfolio, including portraits, industrial spaces and landscapes. He was best known for his photographs of desert scenes, highlighting layers of color and sun-baked texture, balancing the coolness of vast blue skies with the warmth of terra firma's natural pastel palette. His prints were often more than four feet wide.

Mr. DiPerna's photographs are part of collections at the National Gallery of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and a photography museum in Arles, France, among others.

In addition to his wife, Marovelli, survivors include a daughter, Olivia DiPerna, also of Purcellville, and a brother.

Reviewing an exhibition at the Kathleen Ewing Gallery in 2000, art critic Ferdinand Protzman wrote in *The Washington Post* that Mr. DiPerna's landscapes from Nova Scotia, Minnesota and North Dakota were "some of the most profoundly beautiful photographs of his career."

One of Mr. DiPerna's photographs at the exhibition, titled "The Cut, Southampton, New York," was a beach scene with a seagull, aquamarine sky and pounding surf.

"It is a masterpiece, the quintessence of DiPerna's uniquely American style of landscape photography," Protzman wrote. "The bursts of spray are frozen in space, forming a line of snowy lace that could have been created by a few quick dabs of a painter's brush."

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