UPDATED EDITION!

INCLUDES NEW INTERVIEWS, MORE INSPIRATION, TIPS AND ADVICE –

Portrait Photography

LensCulture's essential guide to making and sharing remarkable photographic portraits

© Maxine Helfman

What is it about portrait photography that makes it so special for both photographers and our audience?

Why do some portraits make themselves a permanent home in our visual memory? And what makes the difference between a decent ordinary portrait and an extraordinary one?

In this guide, we attempt to find some answers! Through conversations, advice and tips from some of the best portrait photographers today and other experts around the world, our aim is to unravel some of the mystery around portraiture.

© Harris Mizrahi

Within these pages, we've curated fantastic interviews, stunning photo essays and lists of helpful resources to arm you with information and inspiration. Our hope is that this guide will help expand and challenge your own portrait-making, now and in the future.

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"A portrait! What could be more simple and more complex, more obvious and more profound?”

— CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, 1859

01. MAKE REMARKABLE PORTRAITS

© Kensington Leverne

Go on, get out there and make remarkable portraits.

If you've downloaded this guide, you know that creating portraits isn't as simple as it sounds. Portraiture is a tricky beast. When we're starting out, knowing and understanding the traditional rules of portraiture —soft directional light, an engaging expression and posture—can help us immensely. But it doesn't always result in an image that moves our audience. Breaking the rules and experimenting can do the same, or not!

Conscious or unintended, or just plain lucky, sometimes we manage to imbue that indescribable element into our process and it results in a remarkable image. With time, practice and reflection, the frequency of remarkable work only increases. Some photographers succeed with such consistency that we can only assume they've worked out a few things about portrait-making worth sharing—so we asked them!

In this chapter, read interviews with recognized portrait photographers to discover their tried and tested personal approaches to creating compelling portraits. Dive in and take some tips for yourself, there are plenty to find.

THE SECRET SAUCE:

What makes a good portrait?

"Such a loaded question! For me, a good portrait does one of two things–it either makes you curious about the subject or makes you feel like you were present. A good portrait is also honest and makes you feel connected to the subject, even when you don't want to be. I could go on and on here."

SAMANTHA COOPER
Senior Photo Editor WIRED
LensCulture Portrait Awards 2020 Juror

"I think a good portrait empowers the subject, and is ultimately a collaboration between the subject and the photographer. Trying to impose too much on the subject often creates a forced-looking image that the viewer can't relate to. Making a connection and allowing the subject to present themselves to the camera is often all you need for a good portrait."

JENNIFER MURRAY
Executive Director, Filter Photo
LensCulture Portrait Awards 2019 Juror

THE SECRET SAUCE:

What makes a good portrait?

"Just as the definition for photography is in transition today, the idea of what makes a good portrait is changing. There is no set rule to define portraiture anymore. It does not matter if the work is analog or digital, handmade or computer-generated. What is important is originality, mastery of one's medium and being able to connect the viewer with the subject."

DEBORAH KLOCHKO
Executive Director and Chief Curator, Museum of Photographic Arts
LensCulture Portrait Awards 2019 Juror

"I look for authenticity, engagement, a tender and compassionate point of view, and sensuality. I think it's about a sense of presence, where you feel like the subject is not only looking at the photographer, but looking at you. It's about some sort of deep looking—a presence rather than self-consciousness. Sometimes it's about quality of light, or mood. If a portrait has a narrative, I'm usually drawn to it. I don't necessarily mind if something is staged, but when things start to feel too artificial, I think it's a crutch."

RICHARD RENALDI
Portrait Photographer
LensCulture Portrait Awards 2019 Juror

INTERVIEW WITH PHOTOGRAPHER
CALEB STEIN

Hard work from the heart

Caleb Stein's monochrome collection of portraits is an "ode" to the small town of Poughkeepsie, that finds its resolution in the Edenic summer atmosphere of the local swimming spot. In this interview, Stein shares his process, inspiration and intention for his work.

Questions by Sophie Wright
Answers by Caleb Stein

S– Can you tell me a bit about your beginnings in photography? Whose photography were you first struck by when starting out?

C– When I was in high school, I took a darkroom printing class with a wonderful teacher named Andrew Stole. In between test prints he'd pull me aside and show me photobooks. He showed me work by Lisette Model, Leon Levinstein, William Klein, and Ray Metzker. I was completely blown away. I photographed all the time, I stayed after school to work in the darkroom, and I looked at every photobook I could get my hands on. I was completely hooked from the beginning. That obsessiveness and sense of wonder is something I've tried to hold onto, and it's one way I stay committed to, and engaged with, long-term projects.

COVER IMAGE: The Watering Hole. Poughkeepsie, NY. 2018 © Caleb Stein

Dominoes players. Cherry Street. Poughkeepsie, NY. 2018 © Caleb Stein

S– **Tell me a bit about the beginnings of the project and your initial encounter with the place during the first summer you spent there. What kept you coming back?**

C– I started photographing in Poughkeepsie during my first week at Vassar [a liberal arts college in New York], in 2013, to try making sense of my new home. But things didn't come together until 2016, when I started walking along Main Street for miles every day after classes. I wanted to see how my idealized notions of Americana compared with what I saw in this particular small town. My initial conceptions were complicated by photographing.

Rebecca, Main Street, Poughkeepsie, NY, 2017 © Caleb Stein

S– **Can you tell me a little about your relationships with the people you photographed, many of whom seem to have led a difficult life. What was it like to encounter the area and its community with the distance of an outsider? How did you negotiate that?**

C– All my photographs are the product of a personal connection, and many of the people I photograph become friends. For *Down by the Hudson*, I walked the same three-mile strip of Main Street almost every day for years. That familiarity with a place changes things. I started to anticipate its rhythms. I don't plan what I'm going to photograph beforehand, I just respond to what's in front of me. Even when I'm making a portrait, it starts with a conversation that flows naturally into a photograph. It's not a mechanized thing, and it's often a collaboration. I think I bridged that initial distance as an outsider by taking my time and being present. I think most people respond to a well-meaning smile, and many saw the photographing as a compliment—a way of celebrating their personalities.

Junk Yard on the Outskirts of Poughkeepsie, NY, 2018 © Caleb Stein

C– I'm interested in collaboration, and that type of collaboration changes from image to image. Since all of my photographs are the product of some sort of relationship —meaning that there's a conversation leading up to an image—I'm responding to the person and the space and to myself, and they're doing the same thing. In this sense it's a back and forth. Often people communicate things through their eyes or their body language and I'm interested in that radical vulnerability, and dignity, that can come from this type of exchange.

Emily and Belinda, The Watering Hole, Poughkeepsie, NY, 2018 © Caleb Stein

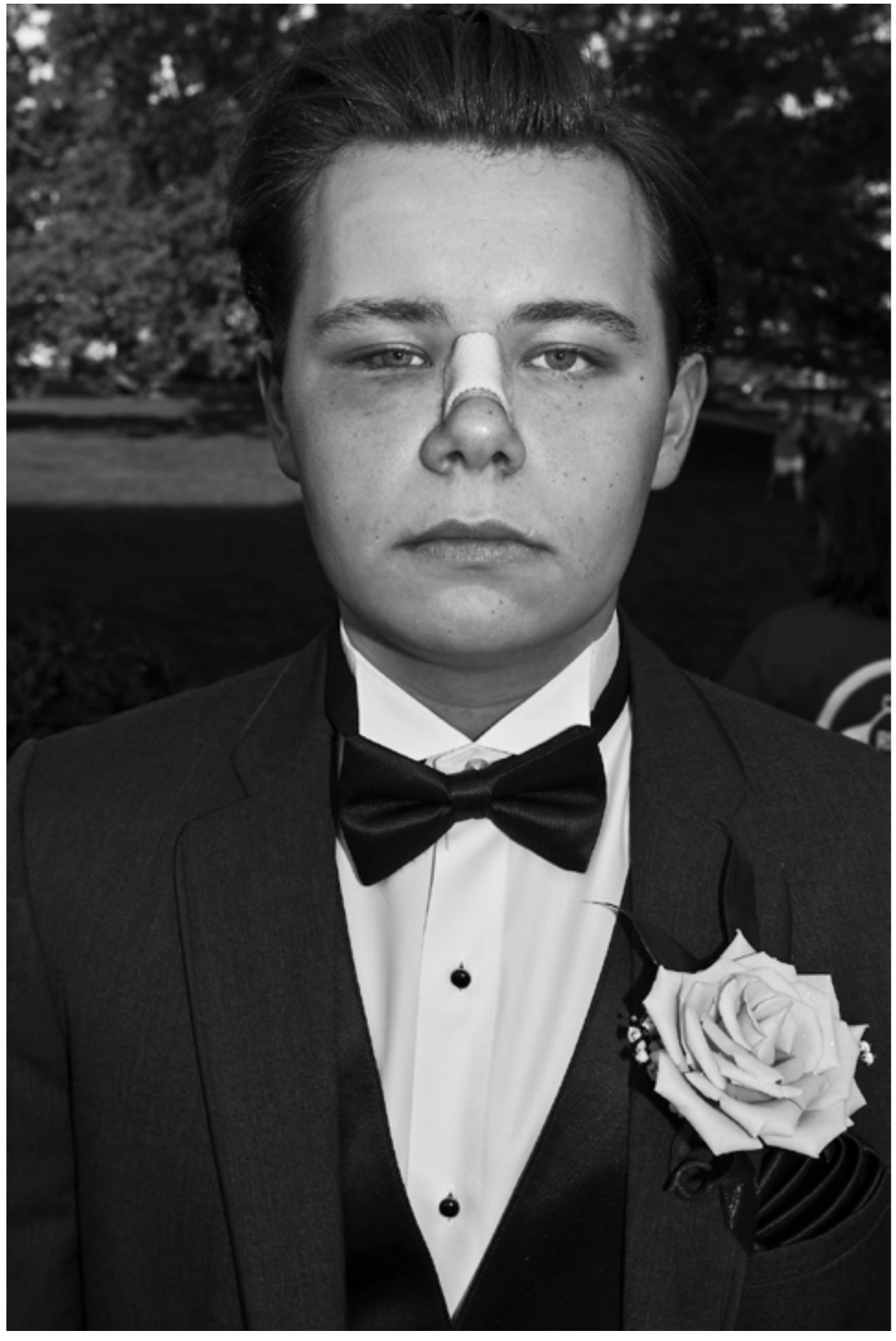
S– **When I look at the images taken later on at the watering hole, aside from the more joyful atmosphere, I see a new layer of intimacy—perhaps something to do with the photos you took in the water. Tell me a bit about what struck you at this new location, and what it brought you that you didn't have before.**

C– Early on at university, my girlfriend—now wife—brought me to this small clearing on the outskirts of town by a drive-in movie theater. It took me almost four years to actually start photographing there. I think I was waiting for the right mindset and the right camera for what I had in mind. I was on the swim team as a kid, and always loved swimming, so I wanted to be able to float right up next to people, to have the camera hover just above the water, so that we were swimming together.

I was drawn to the watering hole because it was shared by such a wide range of people. The 2016 elections were extremely close in Dutchess County, then there was this beautiful, Edenic place where different people came together, let their guard down, and tried to cool off. In this tense political moment, there was something about this that drew me in. The more time I spent at the watering hole, the more I wanted to depict its softer, gentler aspects. This approach extended to how I photographed the town in general.

S– **How much time do you spend with your subject? Is it a fleeting moment kind of thing, or do you stick with the shoot for some time?**

C– Sometime it's a matter of minutes, other times it's years. For example, 'Prom Boy' was made in about five minutes. A group of high school students came to my university library to take their pre-prom photos. My friend told me that it was happening and I just had this visceral sense that I shouldn't miss it—I practically parked the car on the college lawn. I saw this young man who struck me as so proud and wounded at the same time. I approached him, asked him what happened, and if I could make a photograph of him. He was quiet but there was a candor and an intimacy that happened quite quickly. In other cases, the photographs and the interactions leading up to them are much longer. I've been photographing my wife, the video artist Andrea Orejarena, since we first met at Vassar in 2014. And for our ongoing collaboration 'Long Time No See', I've been photographing the same group of teenagers for almost two years.



Prom Boy, Raymond Avenue, Poughkeepsie, NY, 2016 © Caleb Stein

S– What are you looking for when you look at your contact sheets later?

C– It's difficult to say until I see it. I'm interested in gracefulness and vulnerability, in intimacy and mystery. I'm interested in photographs that have a strange relationship to memory—because they seem like they could've been made 100 years ago or tomorrow. I'm not interested in something that's too on-the-nose. There should be space for people to make up their own stories, but hopefully people also see the love that was put into the work, because it all comes from, has to come from, a place of love.

S– You were working with Magnum photographer Bruce Gilden at the time you were taking these photographs. Was there anything in particular you learned from him that guided you through the project?

C– Halfway through college I started interning for Bruce Gilden, eventually becoming his studio assistant. He became my mentor. He always said to me: "There are no geniuses in photography, there are only some people who work hard who have heart." Bruce also helped me realize that things take time and that the best photographs come from the heart, not from any sort of intellectual or formal polemics.

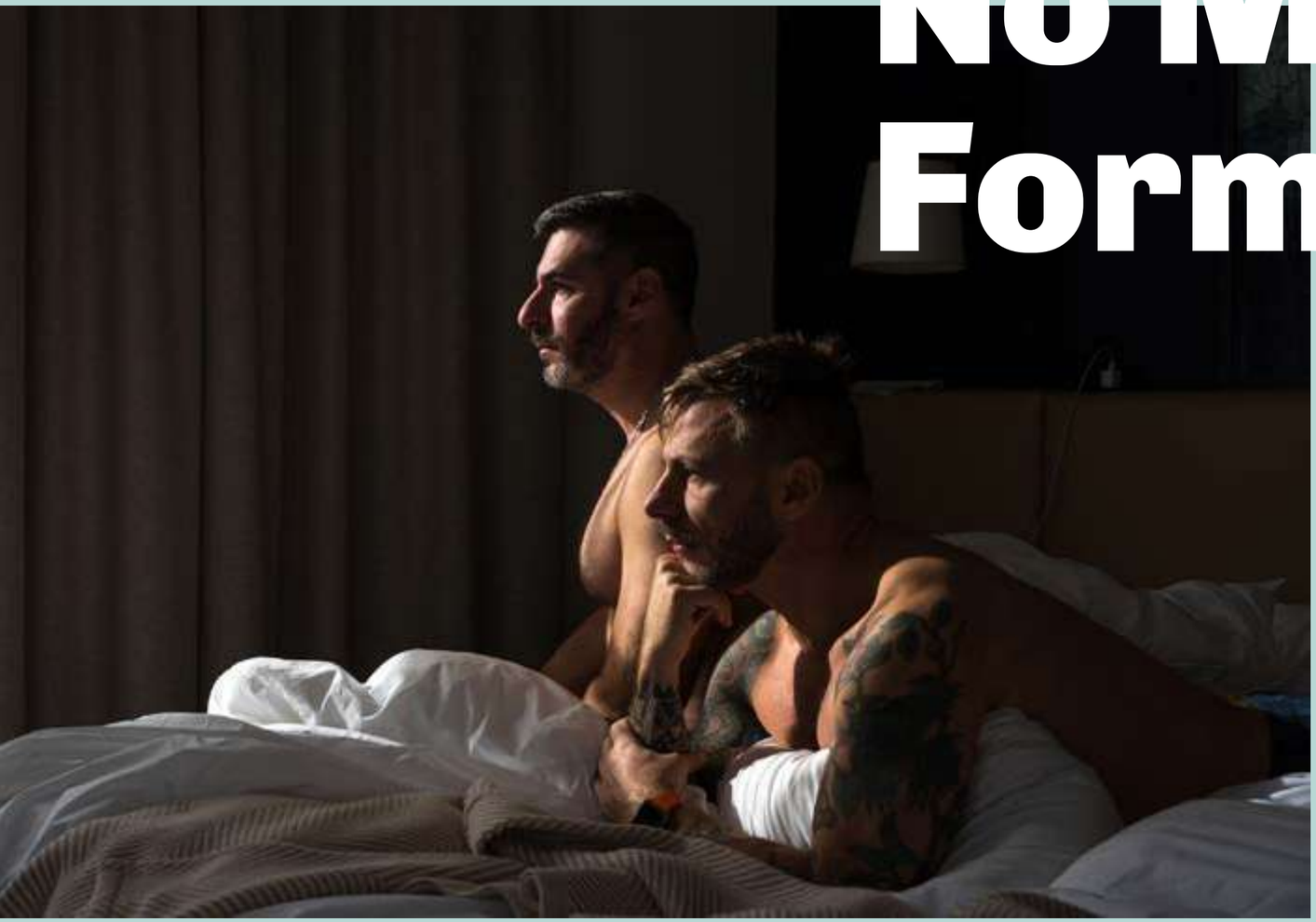
Jack and Oden Mathew, The Watering Hole, Poughkeepsie, NY, 2018 © Caleb Stein

S– Did anything else influence you while you were making this work, photographic or non-photographic?

C– I draw inspiration from a lot of different places. There's a strand of non-fiction writing that really interests me—Janet Malcolm, John Berger, Joan Didion, Amitava Kumar (who kindly wrote a text for this project), Teju Cole, Ben Lerner, Jonathan Franzen—that type of thing. I like their perspective and the way they volley back and forth between documenting and reflecting. It's the type of writing that makes me see. Besides photobooks, I try to look at as much art as I can. This may seem a little crazy, but I just finished looking through all the thousands of items in Tate Modern's online collection. It was inspiring to see all that art in one continuous flow. I started to see connections I don't think I could've made otherwise.

—Excerpt from an interview with Sophie Wright

There's No Magic Formula



INTERVIEW WITH PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHER, RICHARD RENALDI

In this interview, Richard Renaldi speaks about discovering large format photography, what inspires his numerous portrait series, and why portraiture remains such a pervasive force in our photographic world.

Questions by Cat Lachowskyj
Answers by Richard Renaldi

Cover image on the left: Portland, ME, 2018. From the series *Hotel Room Portraits* © Richard Renaldi
Cover image on the right: Jared and Seth; New York, NY, 2013. From the series *Touching Strangers* © Richard Renaldi

C– **I want to speak a bit about how you started working with portrait photography. I think there are a lot of misconceptions surrounding the genre—people write it off as an easier method to tackle. Because portraiture is so historical and all around us, dabbling in and focusing on that genre actually takes a lot of guts. What first drew you to portraiture?**

R– It's interesting you say that, because I hear it a lot. And, as you said, it is quite the contrary. When I teach photography, people have a lot of anxiety about photographing strangers and approaching portraiture. I think portraiture is a lot more complicated than we give it credit for—especially street portraiture. I've always been attracted to the genre because I like people—I like to look at them, observe them—and the camera is an extension of the eye that legitimizes that stare.

I worked as a photo researcher at Magnum in the 90s, so I saw a lot of photos in a reportage style, and I think that inherently gave me the desire to slow things down and engage with my subjects. When I started using an 8x10 view camera, that really allowed me to reinvent my process and start from scratch. I could really dig into what it meant to make a portrait of a stranger on the street.

C– Why is the relationship between photographer and subject in portrait photography so important? How do you personally approach that dynamic?

R– It depends on what I'm looking for in each project. When I was casting for *Touching Strangers*, I was thinking about cataloguing different types of Americans. But when I was shooting *Manhattan Sunday*, I was thinking about approaching people who were putting on that drag of glamor, so to speak. They were presenting this sort of ideal self to the world for night life, so I was looking for people who were self-possessed.

Aaron and Ava; Cincinatti, OH, 2014. From the series *Touching Strangers* © Richard Renaldi

C– How did the idea for *Touching Strangers* come about? Was it an experiment you were thinking about for some time?

R– Definitely. I wanted to engage with ideas about groups on the street, and touch on that unseen adhesive tissue linking us all together. I wanted to physically merge people into one frame. When I was thinking about how to do it, I was shooting people on communal benches at Greyhound bus stations for the project *See America by Bus*. I started encountering that same scenario, where I wanted to photograph two or more people—strangers—in the same frame. The extra challenge of coordinating this interaction really appealed to me.

C– **You mentioned discovering a view camera, and how that changed the way you approached the medium. How so?**

R– I love working with a view camera because it slows things down. It's cumbersome, and becomes a conversation piece in and of itself. People are a little mystified by it, and their curiosity in it becomes an icebreaker. It's a formal portrait experience, but the whole process of it is a little more casual. People can just relax because of the time involved, and they have some time to shake out their giggles and be more present.

C– **As a teacher of photography, are there certain things you find yourself telling people over and over again when it comes to approaching the medium? What's a lesson you find yourself returning to with each student?**

R– A lot of people think that there's some sort of magic formula, but no such formula exists. People just want you to tell them what to do, but you've got to go out there and do it yourself. The only way you're going to get comfortable is if you do it on your own. People want to know how to approach strangers. They want to know what to say, how to do it, and what you need to do to make them relax. For a lot of young photographers, it's really anxiety-inducing to approach somebody. Try not to be thwarted by that experience. It only gets easier with practice, and thinking about what you can do to relax yourself first. That's a big one.

Left: 08:23. From the series *Manhattan Sunday* © Richard Renaldi
Right: 06:41. From the series *Manhattan Sunday* © Richard Renaldi

Left: Dawn, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006. From the series *See America by Bus* © Richard Renaldi.
Right: Kerry and Jason, Evansville, IN, 2007. From the series *See America by Bus* © Richard Renaldi

C– You've got a substantial Instagram following, which allows you to share your dynamic work with a wide audience. How do you see Instagram playing a role in the career of photographers today. Is it necessary?

R– I'd like us all to move away from it, to be honest. I don't think it's necessary. Social media is a double-edged sword. I've definitely gained things from it, but screen time is changing us, and its effects are profound. I don't even think we're fully aware of what's going on. I have a growing concern about it. I think it's changed the industry and made photography too accessible, so that it's harder to make a career out of it. But I also think it's made great photography that much more obvious. It's brought more people into the medium, so that's amazing. But based on what we've learned in the last couple of years, especially regarding the nefarious uses of the Facebook corporation, I think there are legitimate concerns. Instagram fame, as they say, is not terribly deep.

C– And what do you want people to take away from your work, no matter what platform they encounter it on, whether Instagram or an exhibition, or in one of your books?

R– I want to leave that up to the audience. I just hope I somehow move them to feel something. Art is very interpretive, and it should remain that way. Of course if you create something with a certain intent, and people come away with something completely different, you might have to rethink what you're doing. But *Touching Strangers* was so broadly interpreted, and people projected their own ideas onto the pictures—their ideals and fantasies about what was happening in that work. I'm not overly conceptual. I like to work on themes and projects where I think there are stories I'm telling and feelings I'm exploring, and I like to leave those interpretations more open.

C– **I think it's also important to ask why you think portraiture continues to be such a pervasive genre in photography. It's been there since the very beginning—it's one of the first things we did with the medium, and it's probably one of the last things we will do with it.**

R– Exactly. It's because of humanity and our interest in ourselves—our interest in the human figure. We're interested in what we do, where we are, how we feel, how we dress. We're interested in the surface of ourselves, and we're also interested in the interior life of ourselves. There's interest in human psychology. All of these things are within the human shell, and our shell is very dominant when we're alive, sitting in front of a camera.

—Excerpt from interview with Cat Lachowskyj

Ekeabon and Andrew; Venice, CA, 2013. From the series *Touching Strangers* © Richard Renaldi

Nakisha. Image by © Tamara Dean - from the Taylor Wessing Photographic Prize 2016.
Tamara Dean is represented by Martin Browne Contemporary

"There is something undeniably magnetic about photo portraiture that defies easy explanation. I often wonder whose identity is revealed to me in a portrait that speaks to me. Is it really the sitter, or is it something internal to me, that maps onto my memory in a powerful way? Maybe a fragment—a mere moment in time— is, after all, the best way to find connection with another person."

PHILLIP PRODGER
Head of Photographs, National Portrait Gallery

TODD HIDO'S ADVICE FOR PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHERS

Charge The Air

Renowned American photographer Todd Hido has made a career out of creating imagery that sticks with you. In this generous interview, he offers valuable insights for photographers wishing to make compelling portraits.

Questions by Jim Casper
Answers by Todd Hido

J– In your opinion, what are some of the qualities that make some photographic portraits stand out and apart from ordinary photos of people? Can you offer some examples of great photo portraits that hold power for you?

T– Richard Avedon's portrait of Marilyn Monroe. For me, it's the epitome of an unguarded portrait. It was apparently taken at a moment when she didn't realize she was supposed to be "on," and it shows what I gather is the exact opposite of what it was she was trying to portray, most likely your typical flirty persona. But what it actually shows is a person who seems to be lost within herself and looking very much inward.

Now, of course nobody knows what Marilyn was feeling at that moment, and we all know that photography is the best truth-teller and the best liar all at the same time. And things magically appear different when they're photographed, as Mr. Gary Winogrand used to say. So that leaves us with what I believe is the most important part of photography: that we, the viewers, fill the photograph with meaning and bring our own issues and concerns with us.

Cover Image top: From "Intimate Distance: Twenty-Five Years of Photographs, A Chronological Album" © Todd Hido Cover image right: Selections from a Survey: Khrystyna's World, 2015. Courtesy of Alex Daniëls Reflex Amsterdam and Todd Hido © Todd Hido. Cover bottom image: Selections from a Survey: Khrystyna's World, 2015. Courtesy of Alex Daniëls Reflex Amsterdam and Todd Hido © Todd Hido. Image this page: © Todd Hido.

J– **As a teacher, what advice do you give your students when it comes to preparing for, and making, successful portraits?**

T– To be kind is most important. After that, be prepared with a plan for how you're going to make the picture. An example in my case would be, every time I photograph somebody, I always scout out the spot I'm going to photograph them in and try to anticipate what the light is going to be like and modify it if needed.

Sometimes there is value in communicating well with the person you are working with. I have also found, however, that not giving specific direction yields something that seems to be very believable and less scripted, which ultimately makes for a better photograph. I always avoid things that couldn't have possibly happened, because I want a sense of reality to permeate my work, whether I have completely constructed the image or not.

© Todd Hido

© Todd Hido

T– One other thing that is very important is what the person will wear in the photograph. Wardrobe is obviously a very important component in photographs. You could go with whatever it is they're wearing if you're bound to reality, but if you're not, it's very good to have the person bring several different things to wear, because having the right clothing makes a tremendous difference. I usually opt for dark solids because it highlights their face in the resulting portrait.

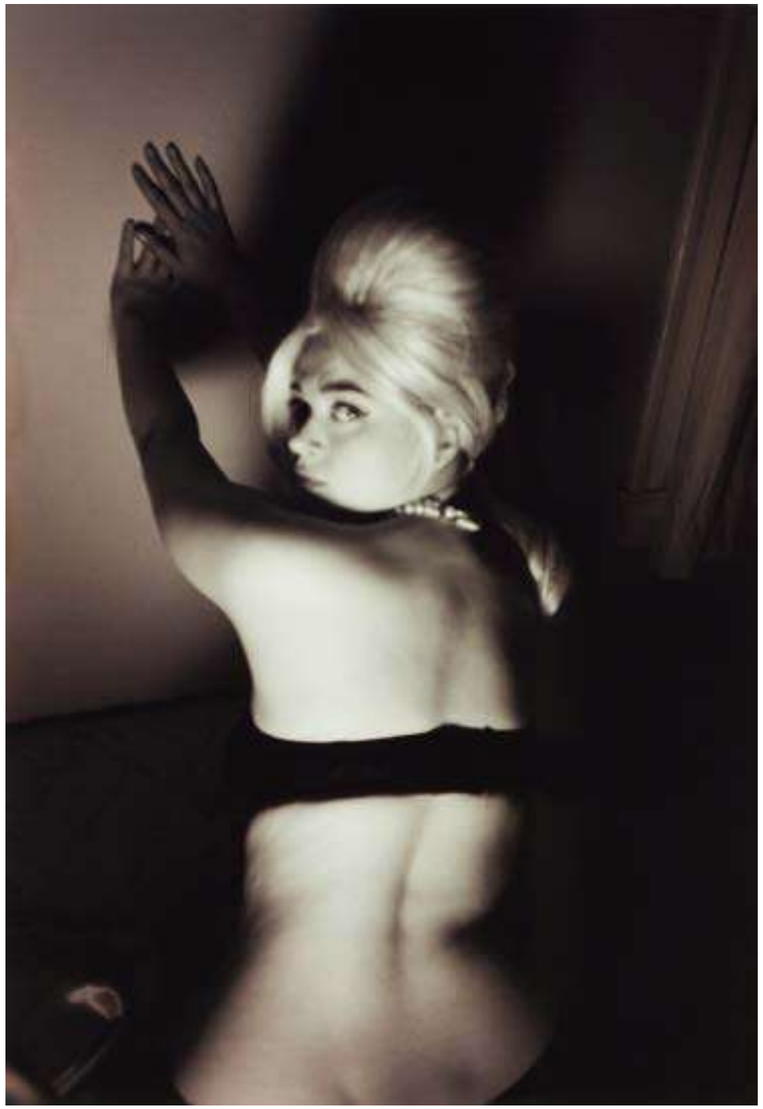
J– **When you are working with models for your own photography work, do you consider those images to be portraits, or self-portraits, or some other kind of art altogether?**

T– I would consider the work I do with models to be a partial hybrid between who they actually are and what persona myself and the subject jointly decide we want to create. Very often, the kind of work I do lends itself the opportunity to explore memories of people we used to know or projections of people we might want to be.

J– **Much of your artwork seems infused with psychological power and mysterious implications. The exterior of a home at night could in some ways be considered to be a portrait of those people who inhabit it. Can you talk about how a photographer can infuse his or her images with emotions and a heightened sense of being in a charged moment?**

T– That is a complicated question to answer because for every person it would be different. As an artist, I have always felt that my task is not to create meaning, but to charge the air so that meaning can occur. In all my pictures of people or places, I see something of myself. It is no mystery that we can only effectively photograph what we are truly interested in or—maybe more importantly—what we are grappling with, often unconsciously. Otherwise, the photographs are merely about an idea or concept, and that stuff eventually falls flat for me. There must be something more—some emotional hook for it to really work.

—Excerpt from a conversation with LensCulture's editor-in-chief, Jim Casper



Selections from a Survey: Khrystyna's World, 2015. Courtesy of Alex Daniëls Reflex Amsterdam and Todd Hido © Todd Hido

"I like people of flesh and blood. And I look for the moment that it appears that someone is present with their appearance and absent in their mind. It fits my personality that I like people as they are: without a fuss and with all their struggles. I think that a good portrait has the personality of the maker in it."

Koos Breukel
Portrait Photographer

Taryn Simon, Amsterdam 2008 © Koos Breukel

INTERVIEW WITH MAXINE HELFMAN

Creative instinct, discomfort, and discovery

Maxine Helfman has various series of compelling portrait work, all of which are inspired by Flemish paintings. What at first appear to be simple images become layers of complexity, rooted in empathy and vulnerability.

Questions by Collier Brown
Answers by Maxine Helfman

C– **Before we get into the images, maybe you could tell us a little about yourself—where you grew up and what got you into photography.**

M– I grew up in the 60s in Miami. My parents divorced when I was 7. Divorce at that time was not civil or well-accepted in society, so I was a bit of an outcast. I pretty much drifted with no direction until I discovered my creativity in my mid-thirties. Through a job, I talked my way into store display, then into styling props and sets for photo shoots. I eventually taught myself to shoot, which led to commercial still life. I branched out into fashion and portraiture. In 2012, I decided to begin making personal work.

Cover image left: BIRMINGHAM © Maxine Helfman
Cover Image right: EXIT 219B © Maxine Helfman

C– Your photographs suggest isolation on a larger scale too. Racial diversity and adversity, especially, feature powerfully in your work. How did that come to be a focal point for you?

M– I grew up during the civil rights movement. My mother embraced those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. I have a deep respect for the courage it took them to fight for their rights. When I look at images from that time, I am still deeply disturbed by the brutality with which peaceful, hard-working people were treated. Sadly, we are watching history repeat itself. Through my work, I connect current events with the past to create conversation. Art allows us to have that voice.

HISTORICAL CORRECTION © Maxine Helfman

C– You've said you get inspiration from paintings. Are there particular painters you return to?

M– Certain painters inspire me: Michaël Borremans, Radu Belcin, Lucian Freud, and Egon Schiele to name a few. I'm attracted to the awkwardness they depict. I like the challenge of transcending traditional photography to achieve some of the more unnatural qualities, in terms of gesture and expression, that painters have the freedom to explore.

UNTITLED © Maxine Helfman

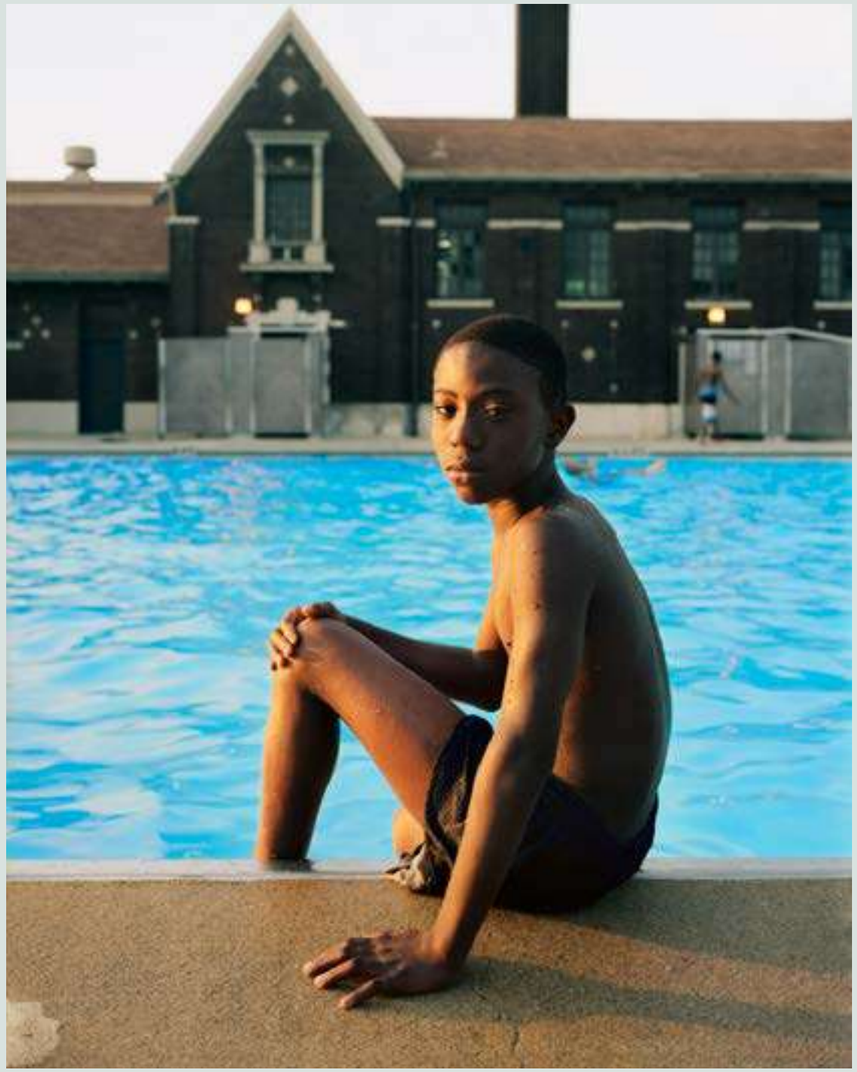
C– **That really speaks to the atmosphere you create in your work.**

M– That is what I am attracted to. I like things that feel uncomfortable, the moments and feelings that we all try to avoid looking at: vulnerability, loneliness, fear, melancholy. That's where I find beauty, and I don't want to disguise it by making the image feel comfortable. I also prefer images to be timeless, without distinct locations or props. I think it keeps the story uncluttered.

C– **It sounds like you trust your intuition a great deal when it comes to making photographs. Any final thoughts on that balance between instinct and technique?**

M– I discovered my talent late and have a deep sense of gratitude to have found this passion. When you absorb yourself deeply in something, it becomes your way of life; it becomes essential. Being self-taught, mine is a process of instinct rather than intellect. I totally let go. I don't try to control the outcome. It is truly about the discovery.

–Excerpt from an interview with Collier Brown.



© Paul D'Amato

"Portraiture is difficult. Interacting closely with someone, especially if that person is someone you don't know, can be a nerve-wracking and confrontational experience, on both sides of the lens. As the photographer, you have to be a quick reader of people, and be able to pick up on small details that individuate the subject: the way they gesticulate, and so on. It's all about chemistry, whether it be good or bad. Interesting things can come out of both kinds."

SIOBHAN BOHNACKER
Senior Photo Editor, The New Yorker

02. SHARE REMARKABLE PORTRAITS

© Mauro De Bettio

Sometimes it’s tempting to keep our best portrait work close to our chest, waiting for the right time to share, or the right moment to come.

In this chapter, we encourage you to share your work with the world, with your peers and mentors, and with your online community. Why? Because sharing is the best way to build relationships within the photography community. Sharing allows you to access different perspectives, which can both give you new ideas or cement your own. Sharing can open doors for growth and for exposure. And sharing can result in a boost in confidence or an injection of motivation to keep going, keep creating, and keep learning.

When looking at the volume of images shared today, it can be overwhelming to try and work out where your own work fits. Our aim with this chapter is to highlight ways in which you can navigate sharing your portraits in a manner that works for you.

Submit your work

PORTRAIT-SPECIFIC PHOTOGRAPHY AWARDS AROUND THE WORLD

JANUARY

LensCulture Portrait Awards

World Press Photo Awards
- Portrait Category

Photographer of the Year (POY)
- Portrait Category

Sony World Photography Awards
-Professional Portrait Category

Portrait of Humanity

FEBRUARY

Head On Photo Awards
- Portrait Category

MARCH

iPhone Photography Awards
- Portrait Category

APRIL

Kuala Lumpur International Portraiture PhotoAwards

MAY

Martin Kantor Portrait Prize

* Must be of a prominent Australian

Portrait of Britain

* Subject must live in England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland

JUNE

Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize

OCTOBER

Travel Photographer of the Year Awards - Faces, People and Cultures category

THE SECRET SAUCE:

What makes a strong submission?

"Be thoughtful in your editing process. It is better to have less work that is carefully selected and works together, than a variety of different projects. I am looking forward to viewing works that challenge our ideas around portraiture."

DEBORAH KLOCHKO
Executive Director and Chief Curator, Museum of Photographic Arts
LensCulture Portrait Awards 2019 Juror

"When you are presenting your work, you have to be your own toughest editor. Don't add more just to show that you have done more. A good sequence is like music—one photo should take you to the next and the next. Sometimes these links are chromatic, sometimes geometric. But don't be overly rational about it. Fundamentally, it should be a sensation and a feeling that guides you."

ALESIA GLAVIANO
Senior Photo Editor, Vogue Italia
LensCulture Portrait Awards 2016 Juror

THE SECRET SAUCE:

What makes a strong submission?

"Put your best pictures up front—don't try to tell a nuanced narrative or sequence here. It's more about making a good first impression with killer photographs."

DENISE WOLFE
Senior Editor, Aperture

"Start with a very strong photo—one that grabs the viewer's attention and forces him or her to stop and study the image, to read the caption, to want to see and learn more. You need to hook the viewer right away!"

JIM CASPER
Editor-in-Chief, LensCulture
LensCulture Portrait Awards 2019 Juror

THE SECRET SAUCE:

What makes a strong submission?

"Be clear and direct with how you describe the work to the jurors. There are different contexts where you can be more playful with language and style of writing, but from my point of view, an online submission is perhaps the context where clarity of communication in terms of intent and concept are most useful."

KAREN MCQUAID
Curator, The Photographer's Gallery
LensCulture Portrait Awards 2019 Juror

"The number of photographers out there is equal to the number of valid approaches to portraiture, so, you should submit something that represents your point of view, your aesthetic. Let life happen in front of you, follow what's there, and the work will come."

ELINOR CARUCCI
Photographer

INTERVIEW WITH LUCY CONTICELLO,
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY AT M MAGAZINE

The Editorial Portrait

Portrait of British designer Tom Dixon photographed in his studio in London September. 22, 2017. © Jack Davison for M magazine

A striking portrait is composed of many ingredients. In this interview, Lucy Conticello reflects on the role of the photo editor and shares her words of wisdom on creating the conditions for a successful shoot.

Questions by Sophie Wright
Answers by Lucy Conticello

S– How would you describe your role in relation to the photographers you work with? What are the most enjoying and fulfilling aspect of being a photo editor?

L– I see myself as a facilitator, a problem solver and a visual story shaper. I try to inspire photographers to do their very best and brainstorm as much as possible on all of the visual ideas related to the subject they shoot. Seeing a photographer's visual language evolve is certainly the most fulfilling aspect of my job. Knowing that I can contribute, even a little bit, towards that development is very rewarding. I am always very moved by beautiful work, be it in the challenging category of what I call 'single-image stories' or longer multi-day reportage. When successful, these photographs remain with me forever and turn into 'old friends.' That's how I relate to many works of art I've been moved by.

What is an ideal story for you?

I'm a devoted fan of multi-faceted, long-term investigative ones: stories about shady real estate off-the-radar moguls, crooked family-run city mayors, grieving veterans, an investigation about sustainable fishing, a window onto an architect's life and work. The most truly exciting shoots are those paired with the writing of a journalist I admire and whose story will be, in my opinion, original or unexpectedly insightful. I obviously get a kick out of assigning photographers whom I grew up admiring, but am careful to approach them with the right subject.

Portrait of Belgian comedian actor Benoit Poelvoorde shot in the streets around place Vendome in Paris June 5, 2018
© Maciek Pozoga for M magazine

S– Portraiture is an incredibly important and common component of the stories that a magazine tells. What are the main challenges of getting the job done well on such a regular basis?

L– Portraiture is a central part to our magazine: we usually have one to two stories each week that call for a portrait. Portraiture is most often dependent on access and actual time spent with any given subject, so my job is to advocate for the photographer when I negotiate duration and location. If I do my job well, the photographer will then have time to build trust with their subject, and create a space where the portrait can be its best. Of course there are plenty of narcissists and self-important people out there, so there's a real 'people' skill to getting this right, as well as substantial advance prep. I try to do as much research as possible on the person before I commission, as it gives me an idea on how to handle them. I read articles and look at pictures and video footage to have a feel for the person and their body language.

Portrait of Noémie Lvovsky, French film director, screenwriter and actress photographed in her house in Paris in May 2017 © Ilyes Griyeb for M magazine

S– What, for you, makes a striking portrait? And what makes a cover image stand out from the rest?

L– One that is capable of creating an emotion in the viewer, well composed, beautifully lit, visually uncluttered, and with a lingering sense of being suspended, somewhat unresolved. As with all other genres in photography, the most important factor is the photographer's style, their signature and their ability to revisit an old format in a completely new way. We do our best to put the photographer in the situation of being able to 'mimic' their personal sensitivity and signature within the subject and time constraints of an assignment.

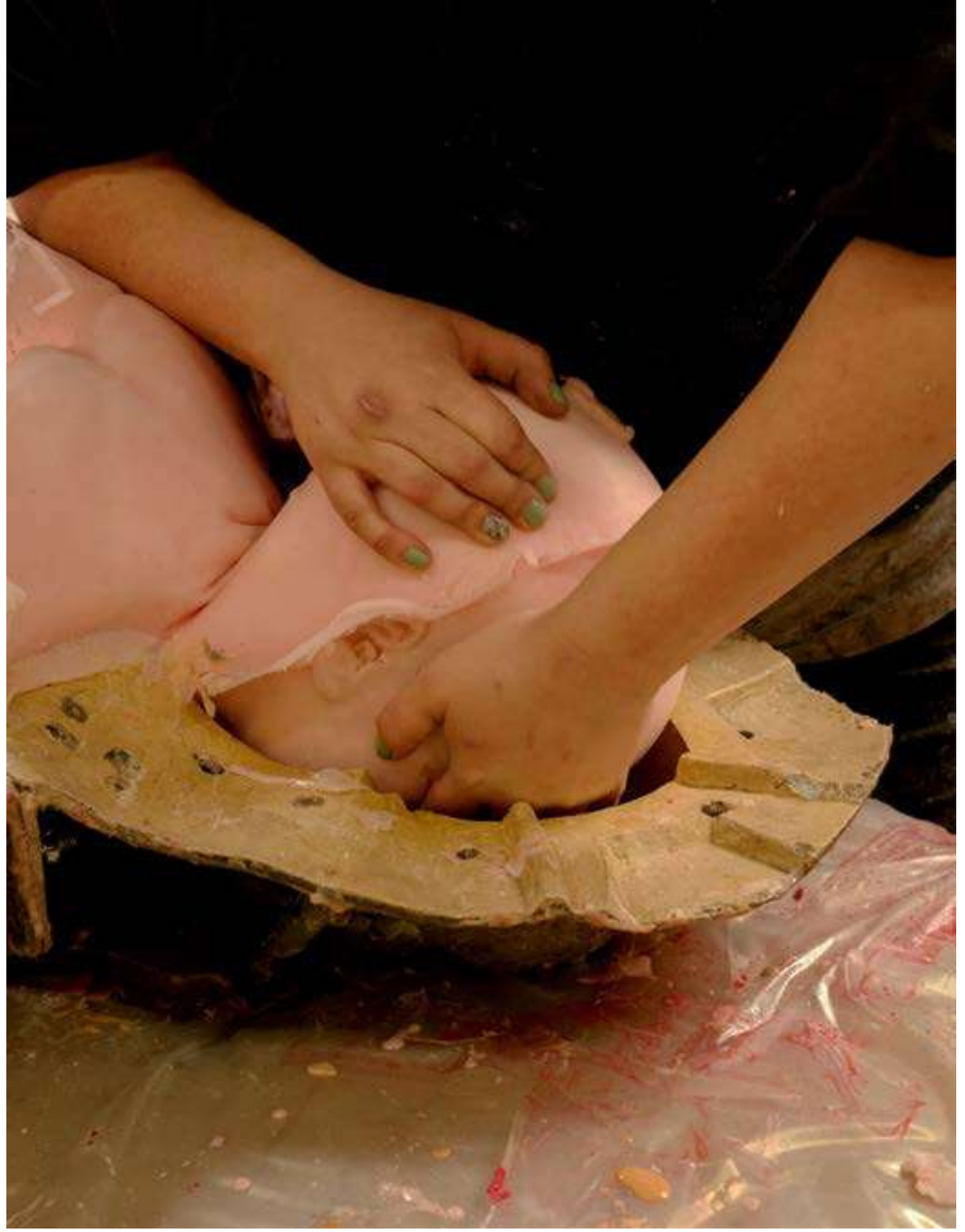
S– Portraiture is an age-old genre, so in some sense there are enduring tenets of the craft. What catches your eye among the flood of images that are on offer? What keeps it relevant?

L– A portrait session is a meeting of two minds. Its success hinges on the connection they either succeed or fail to establish, and on a 'power struggle' for who will manage who.

Portrait of Maggie Nelson shot in Los Angeles on December 13 2017 © Angie Smith for M magazine

└ Today, the photographer's subject—whether an actor, musician, politician, lawyer or anonymous bystander—is certainly very aware of the importance of self-representation in the social sphere. Although their portrait will be printed in a weekly with a one-day shelf life, it will also be widely distributed and shared on social media platforms, open to the critique of their colleagues, bosses and family friends. But this does not make them good photography semiologists or critics of the photographer's work.

Straight portraits, emotional portraits, psychological portraits, humanizing portraits, self-aggrandizing portraits, graphically-composed portraits, portraits of people pouting or looking ostensibly bored and inquisitive and enigmatic portraits have all been tried. What I find most effective are portraits that foreground simple compositions, uncontrived body language and minimal post-production. Sometimes bold angles and graphic lines, an unexpected body position, or a tiny, barely-detectable but telling and confusing detail will make the shot. But, above all, the portrait needs to elicit a reaction in me, be it joy, awe, unease or revulsion.



Reportage inside Dapper Cadaver a special effects company specializing in horror props for film and tv series in Los Angeles, December 2017 © Molly Matalon for M magazine

A young couple walks in the Mea Shearim neighborhood in northern Jerusalem. The young woman wears the 'frumka', an integral veil, and several layers of clothing. Her husband walks several meters in front of her, as the community demands. May 2016. The picture was part of a reportage about sexual education amongst ultra-orthodox jewish community
© Federica Valabrega for M magazine

S– What advice would you give to photographers making work in this crowded photography landscape?

L– Really work to develop your own style, be an unforgiving editor of your work, and only show work that you are proud of. Seek out opinions and really listen to the feedback you get. Only keep work you could live with as a print on your wall. Think of assignments as an opportunity to build on your portfolio. Be an 'ideas' person: develop your ideas and calibrate them to the specific client, study the magazine you're pitching to by being specific about the types of stories they run and why your pitch would be a good fit for their magazine. Don't apply the same framing and lighting to all your your subjects indistinctly, but try to come up with different visual solutions and angles based on the specificity of the subject in front of you, and their temperament. Think hard about who the person you are photographing is and know how to make them feel at ease with you. Push yourself, care about your work, and take the time to get better at it.

–Excerpt from an interview with Sophie Wright

INTERVIEW WITH DEBORAH KLOCHKO,
MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS

Portrait Photography in Major Art Museums

Installation shot of Erica Deeman's series "Brown". © Stacy Keck Photography

In this expansive interview, we speak with Deborah Klochko at the Museum of Photographic Arts about the pervasive importance of photographic portraits for the museum audience.

Questions by Cat Lachowskyj
Answers by Deborah Klochko

C– **As someone who works with such a range of genres, why do you think portraiture stands out as a category of particular strength in photography?**

D– First of all, portraiture engages everyone. People respond to looking at portraits—they feel a connection. There's really no barrier to looking at a portrait. If you're looking at a landscape, you might have to think about where it is and why it was photographed. But a portrait is something we're very comfortable with, and a lot of us grew up with them in our family collections. Also, we're incredibly curious. That's why the work of photographers like Annie Leibovitz is so appealing—because we love to learn about other people. We've always been interested in portraiture, even before photography was invented.

C– **What do you think constitutes a strong portrait? Are there things that you find yourself continuously drawn to?**

D– I have the joy and privilege of looking at a lot of work because of what I do, so what really catches my eye is someone who is breaking down the barriers of what we think a portrait is supposed to be—something that is not quite the norm, and that looks at things a bit more passionately or a bit differently.

I must say, a portrait doesn't necessarily have to be the face of a person. It can be whatever tells us about the individual we're looking at. It's not about whether it's in color or black and white, or if it's large scale or if it's made using a pinhole camera. It's none of those things. Just break away from the trends and look at things a bit differently. Also, a portrait doesn't necessarily have to be beautiful. It may be harsh, but as long as there's a reason for this harshness, that can be something that pulls my eye towards it.

C– **That being said, is there something you often see in portraiture that you don't particularly like?**

D– For me, it happens a lot with self-portraiture, where the photographer claims that they are revealing a lot about themselves. It often doesn't resonate as much. Portraiture doesn't have to be overcomplicated. When we think of the work of Mike Disfarmer, for example, who photographed his community, there's beauty in the simplicity of his work. It's rich and opens a window into another world, even with just a plain background.

Portraiture is very exciting—it's not just one thing. And that's what I really love about it. This comes from my interest in the early days of photography, when the medium was fast enough to start capturing portraits. I think we aren't as detail-based these days. Again, we think we're very visual and astute, but I would say that most people don't really spend time with details. If you start looking at the past—the clothing, the poses—and understand what's behind all of it, that contributes to the rich story of the image and makes the work exciting.

Installation shot of Erica Deeman's series "Silhouettes". In the centre of the exhibition, a vitrine full of historical portraiture reveals the themes and history that Deeman explores in this work. © Stacy Keck Photography

C– **What's something you've learned from your audience? How have you continued to adapt your approach to make sure the audience gets the most from your exhibitions?**

D– One of the major things we learned is that, whenever possible, our audience likes to hear from the artist themselves. So we started a series called "The Artist Speaks", and our first one was a collaboration with photographer Erica Deeman. We showed her series "Silhouettes" and "Brown" at the museum, and we created a full body video of her talking about the work with Spanish subtitles. Because we're so close to the border, we make sure all of our texts are in both Spanish and English. Deeman is of Jamaican heritage, so "Silhouettes" is a collection of contemporary silhouette portraits of women of color, and Brown consists of portraits of men of color. There are a whole range of issues that this work deals with, and the projects also touch on the history of photography, so it was important for her to speak to our audience about it.

C– **How did you link the images to their historical references?**

D– We included a display case with pre-photographic silhouettes, hand-painted miniatures and early cabinet cards of people of color, so that visitors had a reference for what Deeman explores in her work. People really engage with this kind of approach, and it's a way that you can look at art while also talking about current issues, like the representation of race. It's a powerful way of using photography.

C– **In that same vein, why do you think it's important for audiences to continue engaging with portraiture specifically? Why does it continue to remain so important in the field of photography, and also in our understanding of each other?**

D– I think you've hit on it with that last point: it's important for us to understand each other. For example, think about the work of Fazal Sheikh, who photographs widows and orphan girls in India. That work tells us a powerful story. You can write that story in words, but I do believe—despite the cliché—that a picture is worth a thousand words. And I think that's why it's important to be engaged with portraiture, and to engage other people with it as well. It's important to give viewers the tools to really understand and read an image, because a good portrait has a rich story to tell, and you want to make sure that people really do take the time to understand. There's a lot to be learned.

—Excerpt of an interview with Cat Lachowskyj

THOUGHTS FROM KAREN MCQUAID,
CURATOR AT THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY

Show your work in progress

Installation view. The Photographers' Gallery, FreshFacedandWildEyed, 2012 © Kate Elliott

Karen McQuaid, a long-time curator at London's leading public institution dedicated to photography, offers insight about portraiture at The Photographers' Gallery, and advice for photographers looking to share their work.

Questions by Coralie Kraft
Answers by Karen McQuaid

C– **What is the history of portraiture like at The Photographers' Gallery?**

K– Interestingly, as the gallery approaches it's fiftieth birthday, we are re-engaging with our own exhibition history in a variety of ways. We've shown some artists and photographers over the years whose work has had a huge impact on the thinking about portraiture in wider culture and art, such as Andy Warhol in 1971; Rineke Dijkstra in 1997; Sally Mann in 2010 and Zanele Muholi in 2015, to name a few. All of these artists have very different relationships to portraiture, the act of photography and their wider practice.

C– How does TPG approach the genre of portraiture, and what do they look for from portrait photographers?

K– One of the most ambitious public art projects we've ever undertaken was a portrait commission called *The World In London*. In 2012, The Photographers' Gallery commissioned 204 photographers, both established and emerging, to take portraits of 204 individual Londoners who were born in countries competing in the Olympics. It was a celebration of London's cultural diversity, and indeed of portraiture itself. The range of photographic approaches was really satisfying.

In terms of an approach to portraiture specifically, we are led by the individual projects and the artists we work with. I'd say in terms of installation and format, we also look for new and interesting ways that people are making and showing portraits. Viviane Sassen's *Anelemma* (2014) installation had two large rolling projection scrolls full of her figurative fashion images, mixing light, reflection and sound.

K– Eva and Franco Mattes, who have work in our current *All I know Is What's on The Internet* exhibition, stretch the edges of what constitutes a portrait at all. They are exhibiting stock avatars in place of individuals to protect their anonymity.

C– How does your audiences respond to portraiture? Is it more captivating than other work?

K– I can't really get behind the idea that one sub-category of art or photography is more 'captivating' than the other. Of course there is something in the fact that figurative or facial representation, in any visual art form, provides an easy way to draw people in. But that in itself is not enough. The content and the context must also challenge and fit. Cuny Janssen comes to mind—we showed her portraits of children and young people from conflict regions back in 2005. Her work always combines portraits with environmental or landscape shots from the same regions.

K– Portraiture is completely central to what she does, but there is extra strength when she intermixes it with other genres. Bettina Von Zwehl showed *Alina* in 2004—portraits taken of young women all listening to a composition by Avro Part. The sitters, mostly music students, were left in the darkened soundproof room with the piece of music, and the artist captured the image via flash without warning. The resulting portraits were very much about the idea of absorption and captivation, and the audiences really added to that charged exchange in the exhibition space.

C– **As a curator at The Photographers' Gallery, you have a unique perspective on competitions. Is there anything you wish you could communicate to the photographers about how to create a compelling submission?**

K– It is very different to encounter work through a submission site than through the intimate space of a photobook, a gallery or a bespoke digital presentation. You don't need to be overly descriptive; just be sure that judges who want to know more about the project and your intention for the work can get that information via your text.

C– **In your opinion, what steps have the most impact on a photographer's career? Should all photographers aim to sign to a gallery or publish a photobook? Are competitions and portfolio reviews critical for exposure?**

K– Sadly, there is no one answer to any question that starts with "Should all photographers...?" Getting your work seen is crucial, that's a given. However, sometimes I feel a real imbalance between a photographer's focus on promotion and circulation and their focus on the work itself. The strongest impact on your career that you can make is concentrating on making the best work/project/book or exhibition you can. That has to come before everything else. I urge photographers to be choosy about which prizes and portfolio reviews they enter—don't feel pressure to overspend and attend them all.

K– You should budget annually for these sorts of opportunities, much as you would for a studio or equipment—it is an investment in your work. Select one or two key awards or reviews, and don't do more than you can afford. As a reviewer I try to ensure that the competitions or reviews that I take part in are good value for photographers. I also say that the younger festivals are often the ones where the contact time between photographers and reviewers is more relaxed and generous.

C– **You've been a frequent portfolio reviewer around the world. What are a few pieces of advice you find yourself offering most frequently to aspiring or emerging photographers who are looking to break through in their careers?**

I would say be open to sharing work in progress in a portfolio review session. It is often much more beneficial than sharing work that you feel is already very finished. If you have made every decision about the work, reviews can be a bit of a wasted opportunity.

Installation view. The Photographers' Gallery, Lorenzo Vitturi: *Dalston Anatomy*, 2014 © Kate Elliott

Installation view. The Photographers' Gallery, Rosangela Renno: Rio-Montevideo, 2015 © Kate Elliott

K– I would urge photographers to consider reviews as a stage for presenting work before publishing and exhibiting—not everything has to be tied up. That way you can actually consider feedback and have some space in the project to respond.

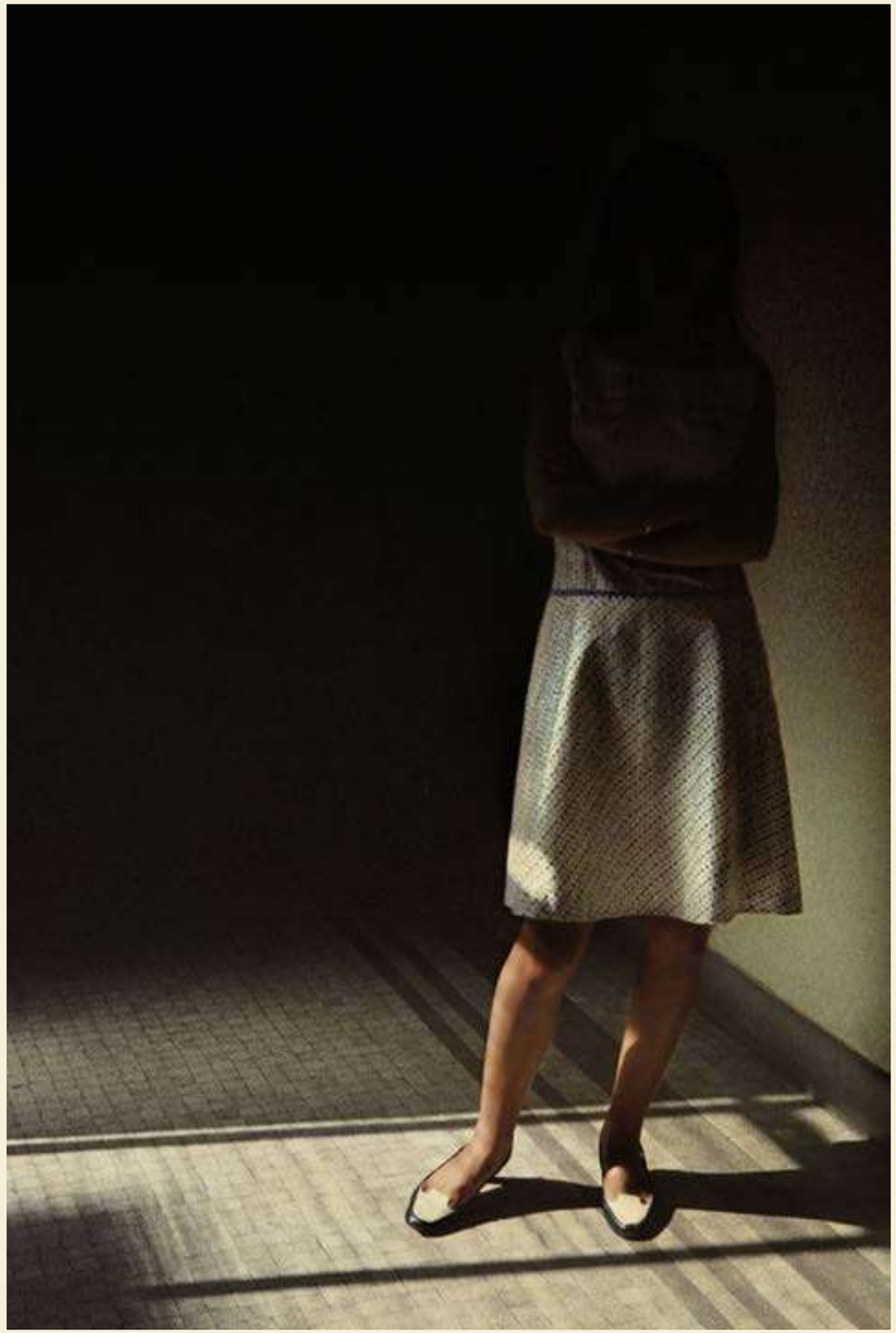
Also, be sure to think about a few key questions that you want answered about the project before you head into any review session—perhaps in relation to sequencing, format, production, accompanying text, etc. It's good to have a few concrete questions ready and waiting in case the conversation doesn't flow naturally.

Furthermore, when you are at these meetings, it is so important that you spend as much time sharing work and ideas with other photographers as well as with the "experts." Keep an open mind. Really valuable collaborations and connections can come from all directions at these events—not just from across the review table.

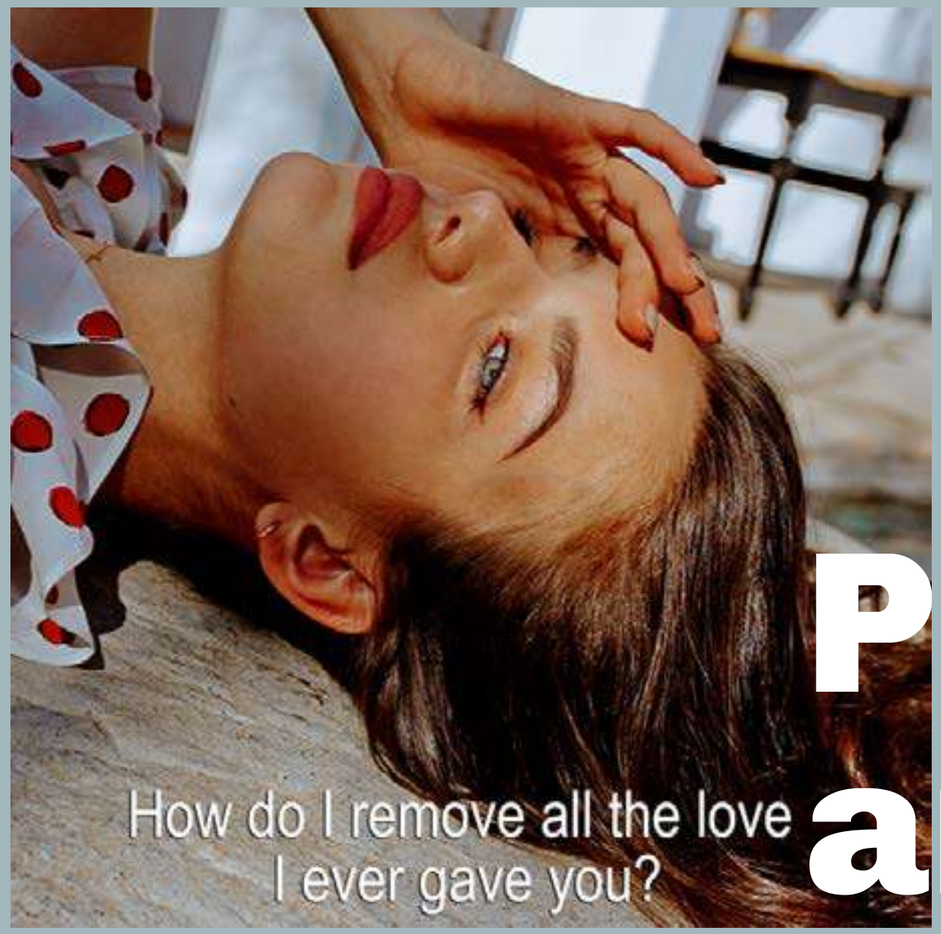
–Excerpt of an interview by Coralie Kraft

“Winning this prize and being selected by Phillip Prodger, Head of Photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, not only made us happy and gave us international recognition, but it also encouraged us to continue innovating, thinking and doing, going beyond established models and boundaries.”

ALBARRÁN CABRERA
LensCulture Portrait Awards 2017 - Juror’s Pick



© Albarrán Cabrera



INTERVIEW WITH PHOTOGRAPHER
SARAH BAHBAH

Photography as an expression of indulgence

Merging cinematic portraits with achingly-honest subtitle text, Sarah Bahbah's photography explores emotive narratives of love, sex, and relationships from a woman's perspective. In this interview, she reveals the inspiration behind her instantly recognizable images, and how sharing them online has contributed to her career.

Questions by Alana Holmberg
Answers by Sarah Bahbah

A_ The themes in your work are simultaneously complex and familiar. What inspires these topics?

S_ The themes I work with are inspired from a real place, and learned on the back of living. I have learned to completely immerse myself in whatever situation I am experiencing, be it good or bad. I take on the experience of great highs knowing very well that with them come deep lows. I can't romanticize logic, and subjectivity helps me create.

It sounds tragic and romantic, but I feel more inspired when I am wholeheartedly experiencing everything this world has to offer. I delve heart-first into these offerings from the universe, because it is a part of my process towards liberation. As a form of control, the patriarchy has conditioned women to find shame in their indulgences. I express my indulgences through my work as a way of reclaiming my female identity. This is what stimulates my conceptualization.

Cover image © Sarah Bahbah from her series *Love You Me Neither*

© Sarah Bahbah from her series *I could not protect her*

A– Why do you think your work has resonated so well with your audience, particularly on Instagram?

S– I think my art resonates because I produce work that is accessible and extremely relatable. My work is based on engaging honestly with the self, emotions and relationships, and a lot of people find my expression of these themes comforting and empowering. In some way, Instagram is like a shared visual diary or dream board, so aspirational ways of being can be posted as encouragement.

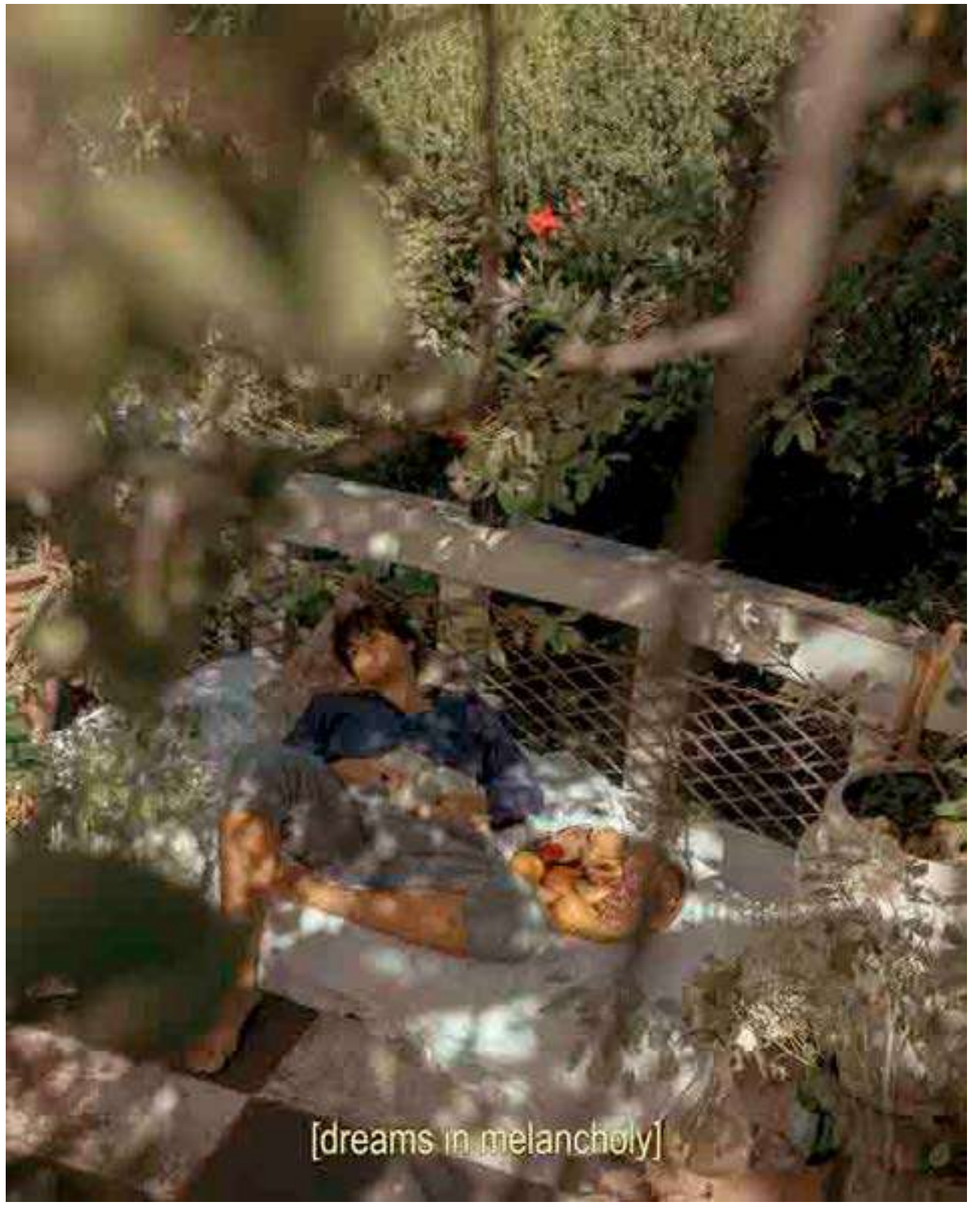
A– I feel your aesthetic is like a photographic version of a graphic novel, or a series of film stills. Sometimes the expressions and close-ups remind me of Roy Lichtenstein illustrations. How did you arrive at combining text and images in this way?

S– My style of photography has definitely been inspired by cinema. I am really drawn to foreign films because of the way I experience my interaction with them. While the beauty of foreign films are kept at bay because of cultural incompetence, the translated subtitles are an active attempt at understanding them. In my tumblr days, I was always captivated with screenshots and snippets of foreign films, and I found myself interpreting the subtitled images with my own narrations. That's when the idea occurred to me—how unique it would be to create a story that appears as film, but was in fact, a series of cinematic photographic stills. Paring subtitles with still images has been a powerful to personalize my work while still keeping the themes approachable and interactive.

© Sarah Bahbah from her series *I Love You Me Neither*

A– What role does your Instagram account have in your career? Can you describe how your efforts or experiences on that platform translate into your client work and your artistic practice, or vice versa?

S– Instagram is what helped launch my career as a recognized artist. My first series *Sex and Takeout* received so much love on Instagram, and since then my audience and attention have kept growing. For this reason, I am still really active on Instagram, and I do frame my work to fit into the Instagram format, but I do this so I can stay connected and personable with my audience. The platform itself does not inform my practice or art.



© Sarah Bahbah from her series *Dear Love*

A_ Instagram provides an unmediated connection between the photographer and their audience. How have you found the experience of having such a large community that is invested in your work, right there on your phone? Has anything surprised you? Are there parts of that accessibility that you find challenging?

S_ My relationship with Instagram is double-edged. On one side, I feel truly blessed to have an international community of people invested in my work and supportive of me. It has been a really incredible process to open up like this, and to be received so well. But on the other side, I am quite a guarded and introverted person. I am someone who regenerates by taking time out for themselves and turning inwards. What has been really challenging for me is being constantly present and "live." I am still learning to find the balance between these two seemingly contradictory worlds.

–Excerpt of an interview with Alana Holmberg

© Donato Dicamillo

Feedback & reviews

THE KEY TO GROWTH, CONNECTIONS AND FINDING YOUR VOICE

© Mirjana Vrbaski

Hearing or reading another person's perspective on your work can be one of the best ways to further your photography, refine your approach, have your work seen, and connect with others in the industry.

Portfolio Reviews

Many photography-related events and festivals offer 20-minute portfolio review sessions for photographers to show their work to influential experts in the industry and gain valuable feedback. This is an excellent way to make in-person connections with people who can help you in your career.

Tip: Over prepare. Research the reviewers and determine which are the best fits for your work. Know a few questions you want to ask each reviewer. Present your portfolio professionally, in a manner that is easy to carry, open and show without hassle.

LensCulture Submission Reviews

Did you know that by entering a series or five or more single images in any of our awards, you can get a written review of your submitted work by an industry professional for a small additional cost? This is a unique opportunity for you to receive critical and constructive feedback on your photography from top photo editors, curators, publishers, gallerists, educators, critics, and consultants.

"I definitely needed a review like this. It's exactly what I was looking for: a real critical, clever, and incredibly accurate review. You've enlightened me about my weak points, but instead of feeling hurt, it gave me the will and the acknowledgment to work on them and improve." Giulia Parisi

Connect with Your Community

Reach out to other photographers and arrange a time to specifically look at each other's work in person or online. Many other photographers are going through similar challenges to you. Sharing feedback and experiences with others can help you (and them!) move past creative blocks.

Tip: Not all feedback is helpful. Reach out to people you respect and trust to provide honest and constructive criticism. Be willing to show work in progress.

Professional Development Workshops

Keep an eye out for interesting workshops taking place near you. Some of the world's best photographers offer tailored week-long or weekend education experiences for small groups that include reviews of participant work.

Tip: Do your research. Not all photographers make good teachers. Check reviews and talk with others who have participated before.

Mentoring

Many of the world's leading photographers mentor other photographers, whether that be through a formal, paid arrangement or a free exchange of feedback and ideas. Don't be afraid to email and ask.

Tip: Respect others' time. Be clear about what your are asking. Would you like a one-off review of your work, or an ongoing relationship? Online or in person? What are your goals for a mentorship?

© Polly Braden

"Since the LensCulture Portrait Awards, one of the photographs from my book 'Great Interactions: Life with Learning Disabilities and Autism', published by Dewi Lewis, won silver at the Royal Photographic Society.

After the LensCulture competition, the Guardian weekend magazine ran an 11-page spread on the work, and also included two dedicated photo galleries for the series. Additionally, David Campany and I published a book called 'Adventures in the Lea Valley'; that series was also published by the Guardian. I am now working with the arts organization MultiStory on a book and exhibition called 'Fit to Plead'. It's about people with learning disabilities and autism, specifically their journeys through the criminal justice system."

POLLY BRADEN
LensCulture Portrait Awards 2016 - Jurors' Pick

Robbie Williams © Nadav Kander. Courtesy Flowers Gallery.

Get out of your head

INTERVIEW WITH NADAV KANDER

Nadav Kander shoots covers of some of the world's most important individuals. Though his style seems so clear and well-defined today, this apparent certainty only came with time, a journey he shares in this excerpt of an interview with LensCulture.

Cover image: Yibin I (Bathers, Sichuan Province. From the series "Yangtze, The Long River" © Nadav Kander. Courtesy Flowers Gallery.

Nadav Kander never received a university degree and attended no formal, aesthetic schooling. Rather, his autonomous pedagogy occurred at the beloved (and now long-gone) Zwemmer's, a bookshop on Charing Cross Road in London. Spending any spare money he had, he gradually built a library of inspiration that he continues to reference today.

"All the work I've ever seen that has sunk deep into me sits on my shoulders like a rolodex. I see something through my camera, or think about something, or start to print, and these images pop into my head: Edward Weston. Francis Bacon. Joel Sternfeld. Diane Arbus. Cindy Sherman. Hiroshi Sugimoto. Jeff Wall. Thomas Demand. John Deakin. Jan Saudek. Bill Brandt. Bill Henson.

When this happens, I have to reckon with these figures and contend with their work. Do I move towards or away from a particular image, a certain influence?"

Kander recognizes that outside forces must be dealt with thoughtfully. Negotiating with truly dominant figures is one thing, but Kander suggests there is a more pernicious and increasingly unavoidable problem: the influence we feel from the images that are surrounding us every day, the constant visual bombardment we are receiving on a minute-to-minute basis.

“People don’t look deeply enough anymore because there’s too much to look at. Everyone is flipping, flipping, flipping. I don’t think we can absorb work of this level at such fantastic speeds.

“I don’t feel good when I see a whole bunch of work. I feel like I’m swimming in a dirty ocean. I need to be more mindful of what I’m doing and what is authentic to me. I do what I can to slow down. I carefully choose which galleries to visit. I remind myself that I don’t have to see everything. I try to stay true to myself.”

This adherence to mindfulness, and consideration in terms of how to spend one’s time, extends beyond what images Kander looks at. It also applies to the pace at which he makes his work.

Eddie Redmayne (Forest), 2016 © Nadav Kander. Courtesy Flowers Gallery.

Audrey with toes and wrist bent, 2011. From the series “Bodies. 6 Women, 1 Man” © Nadav Kander. Courtesy Flowers Gallery.

“When I give myself time, I create the space to ask myself questions: am I being too clever? Am I being too influenced by those around me—from market forces to gallery trends to the artists I’ve mentioned? I’m very conscious if something is taking me away. When I get taken away, something is lost. It’s as if I don’t like myself, as if I don’t feel good about myself because I’ve allowed myself to be weakened by external forces. It means I haven’t found that charge in the work.”

To combat this compromised feeling that Kander describes, he arrives at his studio at 4 am each morning. There, he feels he can do all the things that keep him centered.

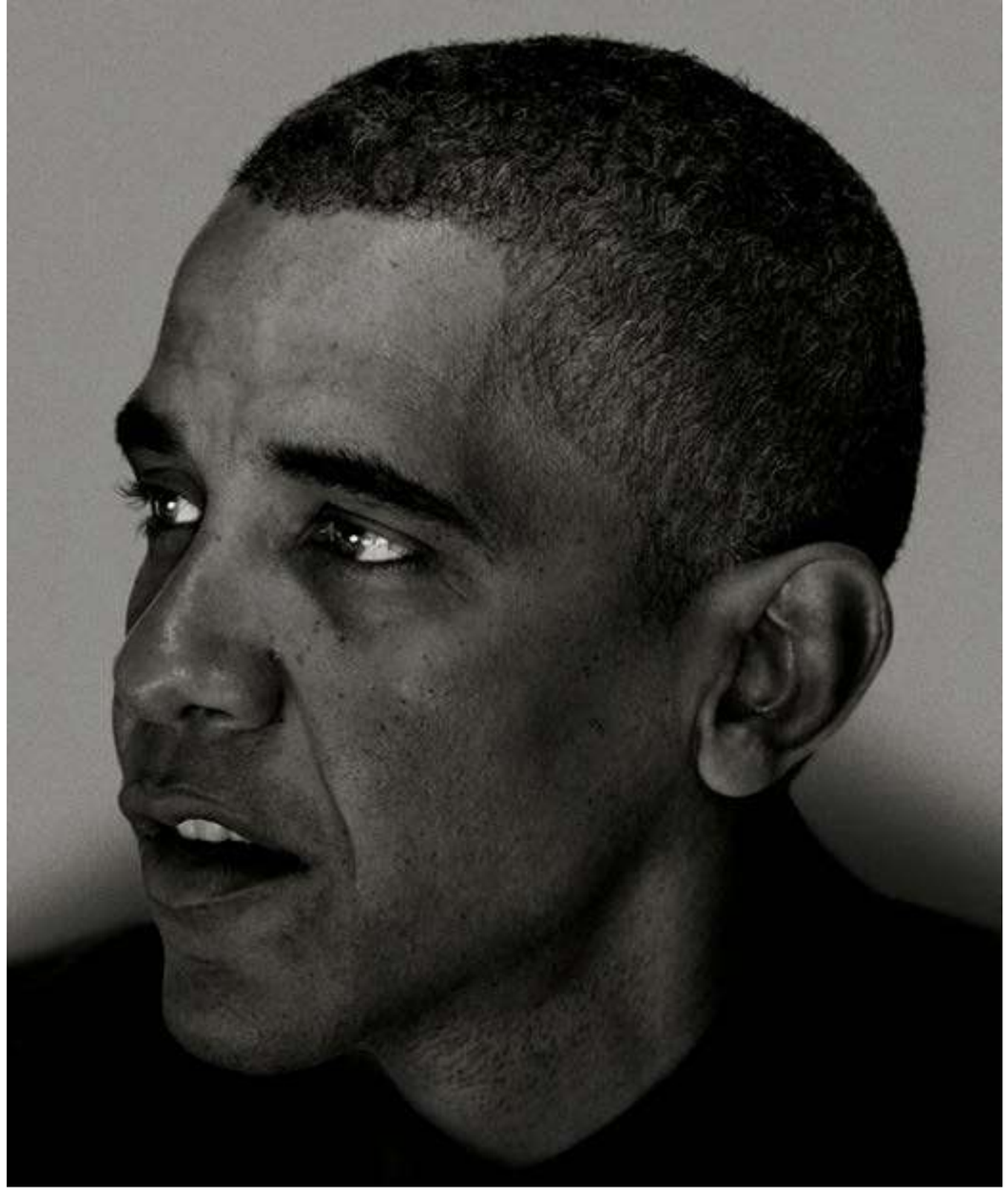
“I look at the work, I edit it, I think. These are the times that I can really center myself and be quiet. If I have three solid hours to focus, that’s usually enough to get back on track.”

With this image in mind, it's hard to imagine another, significant part of his life coexisting: at the eye of a hurricane known as a magazine photo shoot. Surprisingly, though, Kander considers these two environments not in tension or conflict, but in harmony.

"Making my own work, when it is really my own, is such an insular and lonely time. In contrast, I love working with people, collaborating with assistants, engaging with my subject, working under pressure. The two balance beautifully.

"I believe there's no difference in the end result. In every case, I'm looking for my viewer to be really excited by the image I have made. For the person and the picture to meet... We have wide tastes in what we look at—so why should we limit ourselves in the work we make?"

To maintain the energy for one's personal journey towards authentic self-expression, Kander's drive is one of the key ingredients. In fact, he doubts that people get discovered. Rather, those who fight to have their work seen are the ones that succeed.



Barack Obama I, 2009 © Nadav Kander. Courtesy Flowers Gallery.

Changxing Island III, Shanghai. From the series “Yangtze, The Long River” © Nadav Kander. Courtesy Flowers Gallery.

“Today, it’s really hard to be seen among the unbelievable amount of popular imagery that is being shown these days. There are so many more opportunities than there once were, but it’s never been harder to be seen with coherence and impact.”

When Kander was starting out, the challenges were different. If photographers succeeded in being shown, it wasn’t with the speed that images are being seen today, as a magazine spread or being profiled in a newspaper was a much slower vehicle than appearing on someone’s phone.

“That’s why I always tell young artists: print out your work. Don’t just look on a screen all the time. Make your images tactile, move them around. Your work will become much more human as a result.”

—Excerpt from a feature by Alexander Strecker

"I think above all, a photographer interested in a career in portraiture should be doing as much personal work as possible to fully develop their visual language. Feedback and exposure are also important, but having a clear photographic voice and an understanding of why you are shooting and what draws you to your subjects is even more essential."

JENNIFER PASTORE
Director of Photography, Wall Street Journal

© Vasantha Yogananthan

© Owen Harvey

© Claudio Rasano

03. INSPIRATION

Many photography projects grow from a spark of an initial idea, ignited from a personal experience, conversations in the zeitgeist, the work of another artist, or something else from the myriad of human experiences we encounter every day.

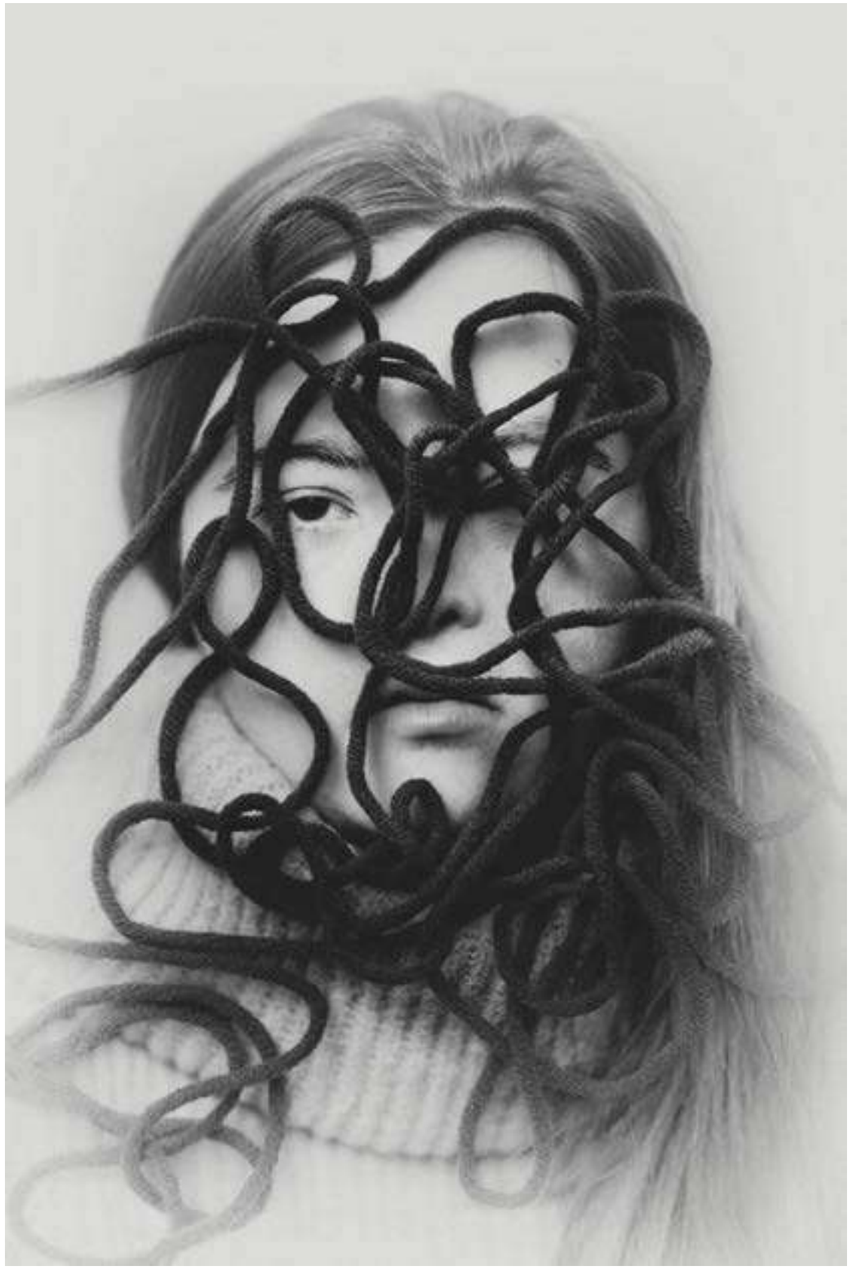
When you're stuck for an idea, or unsure how to visually approach a new idea, it can be helpful to dive into the work of others for inspiration.

In this chapter we've built a list of thought-provoking and varied resources to stir the portrait photographer within. Pour over stunning features on prize-winning projects from previous Portrait Awards, then make your way through our curated list of notable and interesting books, films and projects related to portraiture.

Project Spotlight

Chosen [not] to be

MARINKA MASSÉUS

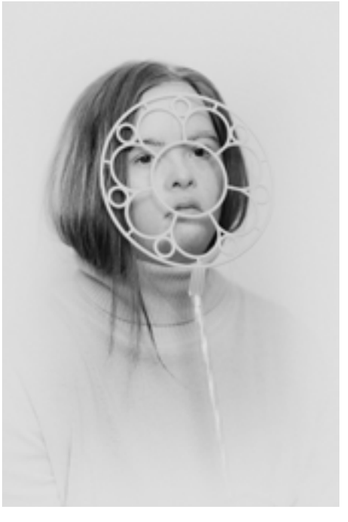


The first shoot was with the lovely Juliette. We met in my studio in Amsterdam for a whole afternoon and she stole my heart. Her sunny disposition, her dedication, patience, perseverance, and above all, her ability to give love in its purest form. I went home floating on clouds.

All images from *Chosen [not] to be* © Marinka Masséus.

Feeling ever so grateful, I realized that this experience had been lacking in my life. I had never met a person with Down Syndrome before and aside for insufficient and largely misleading peripheral information I've gained across my life, I had no knowledge of them. If it was true for me, I assumed it was probably true for many. That was the moment I decided to expand my project.

The young women I worked with shared a deep dedication and a strong will to succeed. To prove themselves. It must be exhausting and beyond frustrating to be underestimated all the time. To be judged solely by the slant of your eyes. Their wish to make people see beyond their preconceived notions is very palpable and that, in part, explains their intense dedication to contribute to this project. With this series I reflect on their reality—the barriers they face, society's refusal to see their capabilities, the invisibility of their true selves—and strived to visually translate their experiences.



All images from *Chosen [not] to be* © Marinka Masséus.

© Marinka Masséus

This series is part of the Radical Beauty project, an international photography project which aims to give people with Down Syndrome their rightful place in the visual arts, in addition to their rightful place in society.

— MARINKA MASSÉUS
1st Place Series - LensCulture Portrait Awards 2019

Project Spotlight

Portraits and Windows

SOOMIN HAM

I was astonished by the tiny black and white photographs that my grandfather made in the 1930s. His photos sat before me, faded and worn, but the images were alive with a fragile beauty of expression and gesture. The people in them displayed grace and dignity, revealing little of the harsh life they had experienced under Japanese colonial rule. Except for a few photos of my grandmother, the portraits were of people I didn't recognize. The candid images were haunting. In my imagination, I began to create small visual poems, woven fabric of memory and dreams.

COVER IMAGE: Song of 'Schoolboy.' © Soomin Ham IMAGE LEFT: Song of 'Scent in the Wind' © Soomin Ham

I altered the images to create new narratives as composites, where the past and present coexist and resonate. I merged my grandfather's images and my own, using fragments from the old photos, and recontextualized these with a new vision. The result is images as small stories that transcend the people, place and time originally portrayed. Photography, as a window to place, time and memory, has enabled me to reconnect to my grandfather and to collaborate with him in creating a new poetic narrative. He was not a professional photographer, but he had an artist's sensibility. I would never have known that if I had not found the box of photos after he was gone.

— SOOMIN HAM
2nd Place Series - LensCulture Portrait Awards 2019

'Scent in the Wind' © Soomin Ham

Project Spotlight

Down by the River

CHARLIE DE KEERSMAECKER

After thousands of miles and weeks of wandering around in the US photographing for his project Young Americans, Charlie de Keersmaecker started a new project with almost the opposite approach.

ALL IMAGES FROM *Down by the River* by © Charlie de Keersmaecker.
COVER IMAGE: Jill and Anin. IMAGE LEFT: Ademan 01. TOP LEFT: Maya 01. TOP RIGHT: Jill

He went back to his very roots by taking pictures on the boat and river on which he spent his summer holidays as a kid. This ongoing projects is a celebration of youth and endless summers.

— CHARLIE DE KEERSMAECKER
Jurors' Pick - LensCulture Portrait Awards 2019

LEFT IMAGE: Marga. MIDDLE: Maya 02. RIGHT: Jari and Emily Jeanne © Charlie de Keersmaecker.

Project Spotlight

Vera Nadezhda Lubov

EKATERINA ZERSHCHIKOVA

In this ongoing project, I am photographing people from Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union who live in Berlin but feel a strong connection to their native cultures.

COVER IMAGE LEFT: Nadezhda. RIGHT: Irina.
IMAGE ON THE LEFT: Bride. TOP LEFT: Sergej. TOP RIGHT: Mother and Daughter

As a native Russian myself, I was fascinated to re-encounter a way of life I had somehow left behind. It felt like returning to my roots, yet, at the same time, being a distant observer. Vera, Nadezhda, and Lubov are not just three female Russian names, they are the result of my search for clues to the things that bring and keep people together.

— EKATERINA ZERSHCHIKOVA
Jurors' Pick - LensCulture Portrait Awards 2019

Two Sisters © Ekaterina Zershchikova

Book recommendations

AUGUST SANDER: PERSECUTED/ PERSECUTORS, PEOPLE OF THE 20TH CENTURY (2018)

Featuring images, contact prints, letters and more, this new book shows specific chapters of *People of the 20th Century*, August Sander's life work that paints a photographic portrait of German society under the Weimar Republic.

DAWOUD BEY ON PHOTOGRAPHING PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES (2019)

In this practical book, Dawoud Bey offers his insight on creating meaningful and beautiful portraits that capture the subject and speak to something more universal.

DEANA LAWSON: APERTURE MONOGRAPH (2018)

Embracing the black body as the central feature in her work, portrait photographer Deana Lawson upholds domestic scenarios as magical environments, emboldening her subjects to be comfortable in their own skin as they pose in front of her camera.

DIANE ARBUS: AN APERTURE MONOGRAPH (2012)

Universally acknowledged as a photobook classic, "Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph" is a timeless masterpiece with editions in five languages, and remains the foundation of her international reputation.

FAZAL SHEIKH, LADLI (2007)

An award-winning book published by Steidl focusing on the situation of young women living in India.

HELLEN VAN MEENE - PORTRAITS (2004)

An intimate collaboration between the photographer and her models that explores the uncertain nature of adolescent identities and the complicated act of capturing them on film.

JO METSON SCOTT - THE GREY LINE (2013)

A reflection on war told through portraits and interviews with US and UK soldiers who have spoken out against the Iraq War.

Book recommendations

MARY ELLEN MARK ON THE PORTRAIT AND THE MOMENT (APERTURE, 2015)

Learn about Mary Ellen Mark's creative process for portraiture, covering issues such as gaining trust, taking pictures that are controlled but unforced, and compelling composition.

MIKE DISFARMER, THE HEBER SPRINGS PORTRAITS, 1939-1946

A fascinating collection of studio portraits of the townspeople of Heber Springs, Arkansas.

NAN GOLDIN: THE BALLAD OF SEXUAL DEPENDENCY (2014)

An emotive and confronting visual diary chronicling the struggles for intimacy and understanding among the friends and lovers of Nan Goldin. First published in 1983, this monumental work remains relevant today.

NIALL MCDIARMID - TOWN TO TOWN (2017)

This book features more than 50 portraits from the photographer's journey through 200 villages in Britain in his singular, colourful style. Town to Town brings together a unique portrait of Britain in a time of huge social change for the country.

PIETER HUGO, THERE'S A PLACE IN HELL FOR ME & MY FRIENDS (2012)

A series of close-up portraits of the artist and his friends, all of whom call South Africa home.

READ THIS IF YOU WANT TO TAKE GREAT PHOTOGRAPHS OF PEOPLE (2015)

This practical book features technical tips as well as starting points for those new to the genre. Readers are given practical insights into the ideas and techniques of a wide range of historical and contemporary photographers.

Book recommendations

SENTA SIMONE - RAYON VERT (2019)

Rayon Vert—which translates to 'The Green Ray'—relates to a number of things: the title of Éric Rohmer's 1986 film, Jules Verne's novel of the same title, and the optical phenomenon. In Senta Simon's latest work, all three are reflected in the project's approach to portraiture.

ZANELE MUHOLI: SOMNYAMA NGONYAMA, HAIL THE DARK LIONESS (2018)

This monograph by Aperture features over ninety of Muholi's evocative self-portraits, each image drafted from material props in Muholi's immediate environment.

WILLIAM EGGLESTON PORTRAITS (2016)

This book features Eggleston's masterful portraits, including the artist's first color photograph. There are many other familiar and beloved images as well as some previously unseen photographs from his long and productive career.

Film recommendations

ABSTRACT: THE ART OF DESIGN: EP 7 PLATON (2017)

Part of a Netflix Original Series, this episode follows portrait photographer Platon, giving an insight into his unique studio shooting and printing process.

ANNIE LEIBOVITZ: LIFE THROUGH A LENS (2007)

An American Masters documentary about celebrated portrait photographer Annie Leibovitz, through the eyes of subjects including Whoopi Goldberg, Kiera Knightly, Mick Jagger and more.

CHEVOLUTION (2008)

A documentary about the famous portrait Cuban photographer Alberto Diaz made of Che Guevara, one of the most recognizable snapshots in photography.

CONTACT: RINEKE DIJKSTRA (2004)

A collection of 35 films about contemporary photography. Episode 34 is about Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra, who's large colour photographs imbue her chosen subjects with a complex, ambivalent set of messages.

GUEST OF CINDY SHERMAN (2008)

Cindy Sherman talks about being the master of disguise through her photographic role-playing, and delivers an intimate look at her artistic methods.

FACES PLACES (2017)

A documentary directed by photographer/muralist JR and filmmaker Agnés Varda about their heart-warming journey through rural France creating portraits of the people they come across.

Film recommendations

FUR: AN IMAGINARY PORTRAIT OF DIANE ARBUS (2006)

A fictional take on Patricia Bosworth's book about legendary portrait photographer Diane Arbus, directed by Steven Shainberg.

NAN GOLDIN - I REMEMBER YOUR FACE (2014)

Documentary filmmaker Sabine Lidl observes photographer Nan Goldin through interactions with the friends who became her subjects.

RICHARD AVEDON, ON DARKNESS AND LIGHT (1995)

Helen Whitney's documentary film about an artist who revolutionized the very concept of fashion photography.

THE WOODMANS (2010)

A peek into the life of Francesca Woodman, a young photographer known for her self-portraits and photos of other women.

WHAT REMAINS: THE LIFE AND WORK OF SALLY MANN (2006)

One of America's more remarkable photographers uncovers the details of her life and creative process as she begins working on a photo series on death and decay.

Portrait Projects

ALYS TOMLINSON
EX-VOTO

ANASTASIA TAYLOR-LIND
Stay

ANYA MIROSHNICHENKO
Ana loves you

ALICE MANN
Drummies

ALMA HASAR
Cosmic Surgery

ATONG ATEM
Self-Portraits

BHARAT SIKKA
The Sapper

BIEKE DEPOORTER
Night Walks With Agata

CLAUDIO RASANO
South Africa Everyone Live
In The Same Place Like Before

CLEMENTINE SCHNEIDERMANN
It's called ffasiwn

COLLIER SCHORR
Jens F

DANA LIXENBERG
Imperial Courts (2003 - 2015)

DELPHINE BLAST
Cholitas, the revenge
of a generation

EDGAR MARTINS
I need you more than you need me

EMILY BURL
Marilyn

ERICA NYHOLM
We are Temporary Reality

GREG TURNER
Here Among The Flowers

HUMANS OF NEW YORK

HARUKA SAKAGUCH
The Original New Yorkers

HENDRIK KERSTENS
Paula: Silent Conversations

Portrait Projects

HODA ASHFAR
Under Western Eyes

INGVAR KENNE
Citizen & New Citizen (from 2012)

JONO ROTMAN
Mongrelism

JR
Inside Out

KATERINA KALOUDI
Genogram

KREMER JOHNSON
Craigslist Encounters

LISE SAFARTI
She

LI KEJUN
The Good Earth

MASSIMO GIOVANNINI
HENKO Variable Light

MEDINA DUGGER
Chroma: An Ode to J.D. Okhai Ojeikere

NYDIA BLAS
The Girls Who Spun Gold

OLIVIA ARTHUR
Jeddah Diary

PIETER HUGO
1994

PIXY YIJUN LIAO
Experimental Relationship

RAPHAELA ROSELLA
You Didn't Take Away My Future, You Gave Me A New One

VASANTHA YOGANANTHAN
A Myth of Two Souls: Hand Painted Photographs

© Medina Dugger

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