

On Portraiture

ty hardaway



We exist in a time where we have reached a point of constant and overwhelming bombardment of imagery, music, and prose. Arts abound. Ads abound. Noise abound.

Not only is everyone a photographer, a musician, and a writer now, but just about everyone has the ability to self-publish their work in what approximates real time thanks to smart phones and social media. Many people spend huge chunks of their live human-interaction and entertainment opportunities interacting almost exclusively with photo-telecommunications devices creating additional content and perusing new content. At live events, many people spend the duration looking into screens--instead of the actual event--broadcasting for the web. Constant content with extremely short shelf lives, has turned every consumer into the A&R department; everyone can have five seconds of someone's attention somewhere.

Supply of new content has almost completely drowned the demand for new content, and there seems to be fewer places where filtering for quality occurs. Editors are scarce even though, oddly, everyone is an editor. And every snarky anonymous commenter sits atop a critic's throne of rose-petaled gold. The Fine Arts, the photographic arts in particular, have flat-lined into a regressed average of what seems to be just good enough for most people, by most people. Everything is documented for audiences real and imagined and for largely undefined purposes.

Some folks, training or experience notwithstanding, have even taken the leap into the "digital SLR" world and suddenly find his or herself with a hankering to open a studio or some sort of photography "business" since there's so much money raining upon the arts. We have all peeked into this body of awkward poses and terribly lighted work. And there seems to be no shortage of confident subjects willing to try anything in online model listings.

As I peruse my personal library, I see that there is a compelling history of--and importance to--portraiture. From Cartier-Bresson, Stieglitz, Steichen, Lange, and Arbus to the street photography of Sylvia Plachy, Gordon Parks, and Ricky Powell (NY), information about people conveyed through still photograph is in many ways the greatest legacy of photography. Forget landscape, fashion, celebrity, abstract, snapshot, or nude photography, well conceived and timely portraits of regular people doing regular people things seems to cast the longest wake. There is a certain beauty and grace to our everyday existence.

But in the teen years of this new century, as the ability to create and publish increases, the ability to discern has decreased. Who of us remain that can take rare moments to contemplate, study, and imagine? When was the last time anyone spent more than a moment getting inside a portrait? Maybe the photographic jungle is too dense. Maybe the ordinary and everyday doesn't inform as it did in the past. Maybe portraiture is dead.

Yet on a very basic human level, some of us still cannot help ourselves. Maybe a way to connect within and between us is to stop time, to study moments. Some still possess a drive, if not addiction, to make the still portrait. Not for commission or client, and often not for publication or distribution. Just...because that's what our hard wiring drives us to do. When I think about it, if I were forced to choose one artistic pursuit to ride into retirement, it would probably be a variation of portrait photography.

In order to slow time just a bit, I present some work by people I've interacted with over the years in various capacities. I know that these people photograph people because they have to; that they have few choices. They are curious and they have no interest in trying to impress you or sell you any product or service. They aren't shooting for commission or stock service. None are attempting to shock anyone or really draw much attention. They shoot friends, family, and strangers. At the most they'll receive a rare non-asinine comment on a blog or a "like" on Facebook or Tumblr or Flickr. Someone somewhere might get what they do. And that's just enough.

I have taken the liberty to present a few of my own portraits that I feel compliment the overall feel of those submitted by my colleagues. Take your time and take a look all around yourself and your world. This is where we are right now. Here's a glimpse of some lovely work.



RIP Henry by ty hardaway

Cassady Kissam

Northern California



"I've always thought about the fear among Native Americans of having their portraits taken. I think the belief was that a photograph could capture the soul. The resulting fear was that the soul couldn't be released; something called "Stealing The Shadow." I've always believed there may actually be some basic truth in that, but my interpretation is that once you let someone view that portrait then the soul is released. That, at its core, is what makes a good portrait, the ability to capture or portray a persons soul and spirit and share it with others."



Christine McGuinness

Berkeley, California

"You can't control your subject's mood/emotion. You can encourage it, but you never know whether it will show. So much of the portrait is left up to the connection between you and the person being photographed. It's sweeter to capture a good portrait because it's never a sure thing."

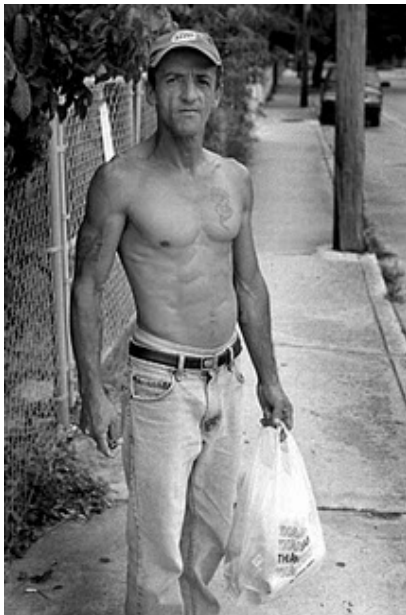


Dave Blair

South Florida

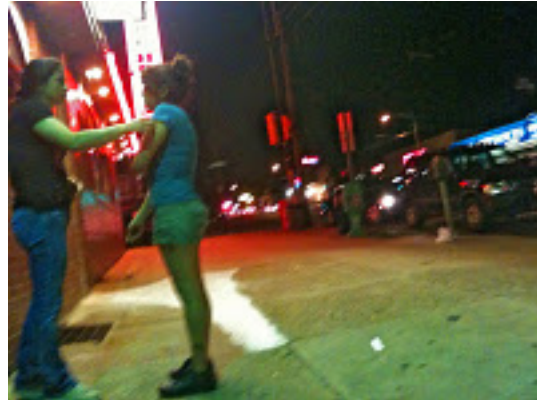


"I like to document real and fleeting moments. I, like many before me all the way back to those who first made images in caves, have been compelled to document. This instinct is strange and strong. I like taking pictures of people so I can freeze a moment in time and study it, understand what is going on, there is so much going on."



Johnny Meadows

New York City



"Shooting portraits, to me, involves capturing peoples' souls at moments when their guards are down, so that means it must be done without their knowledge. It's questionable whether or not my work is fair to them, but I feel as if I'm tapping into something deeper by doing so, and am always as moral and tasteful as I can possibly be with my work. Capturing real, live soul."



Lily Valle

Washington, District of Columbia

"I am interested in capturing an aspect or feature of a person - the something that makes me "like" them or find them interesting aesthetically. If I know the person, there's an extra challenge of capturing who they are to me."



Robin Madel

New York City

"I think people are the most interested in other people's stories and portraits tell those stories. The photos I shoot of people, especially in some odd or strange setting, always get the most hits when I post them."



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Los Angeles

"Possessing a record of encounters is extremely important. Memories are faulty and dripping with nostalgia. But breadcrumbs and Post-Its keep our memories somewhat honest. And the most important thing to remember—just take a look—is that everything is so beautiful."





We document people in little places in time. We document people with little pieces of time. We are compelled to make these vast bodies of work and we pledge to continue doing it until we get closer to "getting it right." In the photographic arts, images of people--portraiture--seem to be a sort of lifeblood. Clearly there are still those of us who want to thoughtfully or obsessively capture moments that tell stories about our planet mates.

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