

Portrait photography is a big field. No one photographer can hope to be an expert in all of the different areas of specialization, but the more important issue might be that each area of specialization rewards a different kind of personality. Skill sets are also very different according to specialization. Wedding photography requires a different kind of diplomacy than editorial photography, if only because the client is also the subject. Celebrity and corporate photography require careful lighting and pre-production planning, while photojournalists have to be able to drop into any situation and be prepared to improvise.

The following interviews present a broad overview of the careers of six photographers in very different areas of specialization.

STANDING OUT

This off-beat wedding photograph by Karen Cunningham demonstrates her unique philosophy and approach; characteristics that all top photographers—in their separate ways—exhibit.



chapter 8 | INTERVIEWS

Art Kane



April 9, 1925: Born in New York City

1943: Wins scholarship in Art of Military Camouflage right after high school.

1944: Deployed with 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion, also known as the Ghost Army unit (23rd Special Troops), which also included future fashion designer Bill Blass and abstract painter Ellsworth Kelly.

1950: Graduates Cooper Union with honors.

1953–56: Studies with Brodovitch at The New School.

1950–52: Editorial designer at Esquire.

1952–57: Art Director, Seventeen magazine—the youngest ever appointed.

1957–59: Art Director, Irving Serwer advertising.

1959: Starts shooting full time.

1960: Opens his first studio in Carnegie Hall building.

1962: Exchanges portraits with the yet-to-be-infamous Andy Warhol, an illustrator he had often hired.

1963: First use of extreme wide-angle lens in fashion—Diana Vreeland at Vogue is initially horrified.

1967: Writes and directs a film, “A Time To Play,” for US Pavilion at Expo.

Until 1990: Shoots wide variety of campaigns worldwide.

February 22, 1995: Dies.

THE PORTRAIT AS CONCEPT

Before there was Annie Leibovitz, Mark Seliger, or Chris Buck there was Art Kane. While Arnold Newman might rightly be considered the originator of the conceptual portrait, Art Kane was the brash innovator who brought it into the modern era.

One of photography’s greatest roles is as a mirror that both reflects, and creates, the society of its time. Art Kane didn’t simply document the popular culture that surrounded him; he was one of its primary inventors. From 1960 to the mid-1980s, it was virtually impossible to pick up a magazine without seeing Art Kane’s photo credit. His contribution to editorial photography is inestimable.

Jonathan Kane is Art Kane’s son and a magazine photo editor, musician, and photographer in his own right.

MJ: I was in junior high when I first became aware of your father’s work; I really don’t know that much about him, aside from seeing his work all over the place when I was growing up. He might have been the first photographer I became aware of from just seeing his photo credit everywhere. I do know that he was an art director before he became a photographer.

JK: That’s right; in fact he was quite a celebrated art director at the time. He was the youngest art director of a major American magazine at the time (*Seventeen*), he’s in the hall of fame at the Art Directors Club, his signature is still on their wall, and he had a wall full of awards for art direction before he became a photographer. [*Art Kane would win 38 awards from the New York Art Directors Club over the course of his career.*]

While he was working as an art director he went back to his alma mater, Cooper Union, to study photography with Alexey Brodovitch. Many

of his most famous photographs were shot for that class.

MJ: It is interesting to consider his photographic career in light of his background as an art director. It was probably a very natural transition for him to work conceptually, because that’s what art directors do. They come up with visual concepts to illustrate ideas. Working as an art director probably trained him to become the photographer he was. On a completely different topic ... In my research I came across a cryptic reference to the fact that your father served in the U.S. Army during WW II as part of a top-secret “Ghost Army.” What was that about?

JK: (Laughing) That was Art Kane’s first big adventure and a funny story. During his basic training the Army put out a call for “creative types” to take part in a top-secret project. My Dad volunteered for the assignment and it turned out that they wanted artists to come up with concepts to deceive the Germans on the landing site for the invasion of France. Two of the other people that they recruited happened to be the fashion designer Bill Blass and the painter Ellsworth Kelly. The team experimented with different ways to create a fake army in northern England in order to confuse the German reconnaissance planes. They tried making tanks and trucks out of plywood, but it was too expensive and heavy. Then, being New York kids who had all grown up watching the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, they hit upon the idea of balloons. So they created hundreds of inflatable tanks and artillery pieces that could be easily transported and assembled anywhere. That was the Ghost Army.

MJ: I know that story! That was one of the primary reasons the Germans moved most of their tanks to the Pas de Calais and left Normandy under-defended. Amazing. One of my favorite photographs of your father’s is the portrait of Sonny and Cher. They seem to be both swimming and flying. They are



happy and in love. For me it completely encompasses who they were in American culture at that time.

JK: Absolutely, and you know Art Kane was a vicious editor of his own work. All of his shoots were done on transparency film and he threw away anything that wasn’t up to his standards. On most of his shoots, there are only ten or fifteen select frames that are still around.

The Sonny and Cher session is one of the few where almost the entire shoot still exists. Most of the photos are really typical; late afternoon light, them on the back of a motorcycle looking all lovey-dovey. The photos are okay, and I’m sure the magazine would have been happy, but that wasn’t enough for him, so in his typical way he pushes the envelope and says, “Let’s try something different,” and they all jump in the pool.

MJ: But he had to have planned for it. He had to have an underwater housing for the camera.

JK: Oh yeah, he had a scuba tank and weight belt so he could stand on the bottom of the pool. But I agree with you. That’s one of those Art Kane photos where all the elements came together, fashion, celebrity, lifestyle, rock stars, the conceptual thing; it’s all there in that picture.

MJ: One thing that is interesting to me is that your dad was a rock star photographer when that meant being a rock star yourself. He and David Bailey probably personify what we think of photographers of that era, but as I did my research I realized that he was older than the people he was shooting.

JK: That’s true, he was in his forties when he was shooting rock stars, but he was also an example of the modern way that we extend youth culture into middle age. It’s common now to see men and women in their forties and fifties who still dress and act young, but it was pretty unusual then.

MJ: Yeah, I always think of your father as “forever hip.”

JK: He was, but what’s interesting is how he used the wisdom and experience of his age to bring credibility to the youth culture that he saw as valid and vital. He really helped shape it into what we know today.

MJ: So tell me a story: Probably the most famous Art Kane photograph is his portrait of the rock band, The Who. How did that happen?

JK: Most people think The Who commissioned that photograph, because it was used for the album cover and as the poster for the movie, *The Kids Are Alright*. It was actually shot ten years earlier. It was originally commissioned by *LIFE* magazine and licensed later for the album and movie poster.

LIFE asked my father to shoot a cover story on “The New Rock,” and the story included a bunch of musicians: Janis Joplin, The Cream, Jefferson Airplane, and a few others.

My dad researched extensively for every shoot. When he knew he was going to shoot someone, he listened to every album, looked at fan

“The interior of a camera is like outer space.”

Art Kane

“It starts with concepts. I consider myself a conceptual photographer. I want to communicate the unseen elements in a personality.”

Art Kane

SONNY AND CHER, MCCALLS MAGAZINE, 1966

This shot required many takes because the water distorted Sonny and Cher’s features.

“I need an assignment, I love an assignment. I love discipline. Discipline creates freedom.”

Art Kane

THE WHO, LIFE MAGAZINE, 1968

In the history of rock photography there are few images more iconic and influential than Kane’s portrait of The Who.

magazines, he’d learn everything he could. In the case of the Who, he noticed that they wore Union Jacks in their clothing, Peter Townshend and Roger Daltrey had jackets and shirts made from Union Jacks. They were clearly branding themselves as a British rock band.

So he took that a step further and had a huge flag made from several smaller Union Jacks. He shot some of the band in the flag on a plain white backdrop at his studio in Carnegie Hall. It was good, but not great. Then he remembered a photography by Cartier-Bresson of a vagrant asleep in Trafalgar Square, so he decided to reference that. He had a location scouted—Carl Schurz Park, up near Columbia University—that

had the right elements and looked a lot like the location in Trafalgar Square. They all jumped in a cab, he wrapped them up in the flag and told them to pretend to be asleep. Most people think it was shot in London, but it was right here in New York

MJ: You mentioned The Jefferson Airplane shoot as well and that was an unusual photograph for the time. There’s a lot of production value there, a set was built, and I guess he flew out West to shoot them; it’s in the desert...

JK: Actually, no, I went on that shoot when I was a kid. That was shot in Long Island City in

Queens, NY. Those white cliffs you see in the background are piles of gypsum. It was shot next to a factory that made sheetrock.

You’re right, though; it was done at enormous expense. They had to have those Plexiglas cubes made, and that was not cheap. But Art Kane was a very persuasive guy and was probably considered the king of editorial photography at the time. The Airplane was also at the height of their popularity. I think everyone involved was pretty sure that the photograph would end up as the cover, so he got his way and the magazine paid to have the set built.

Part of what my dad knew about Jefferson Airplane was that they were considered an “Acid Rock” band. The cubes were meant to reference the sugar cubes that people used as a way to take LSD and as a reference to the “Windowpane” acid that was around at the time.

MJ: I would never have guessed that was shot in Queens, and the white powdery hills beyond do look like mountains of drugs. All available light?

JK: Yes, most of my dad’s work was shot with available light. The photo of Jim Morrison in the closet of Morrison’s hotel room at the Chateau Marmont, there’s a little lighting in that one.

MJ: That was the same assignment?

JK: Yes.

MJ: That’s remarkable—of the photographs we’ve talked about, three of them are from that assignment. That’s an amazing batting average.

JK: Yes, there were two big shoots on musicians and youth culture, one for *McCall’s* in 1966 and the other for *LIFE* magazine in 1968. Most of the iconic music photographs—Dylan, Cream, Janis Joplin, The Rolling Stones, Frank Zappa—they all came from those two assignments.

MJ: You have a unique perspective on this: you’re not only your father’s son, but you are also a photographer and photo editor. If it’s possible, can you take a step back and assess your father’s career objectively?

JK: His contribution to the way we think of editorial photography today was profound. We’ve talked exclusively about his portraits because that’s the focus of your book, but of

“Part of being a photographer involves being a detective, images come out of investigation.”

Art Kane

“Performance shots are a waste of time. They look like everyone else’s.”

Art Kane



JIM MORRISON AT THE CHATEAU MARMONT, LIFE MAGAZINE, 1968

Given our modern perspective on technology, it might be natural to assume that having the image of a woman who appears to be Marilyn Monroe on the TV screen was pre-planned and set up, however this photo was shot before VCRs and DVD players were commonplace. Kane’s work is a great example of a photographer who made luck part of his plan.

course he was also doing a ton of fashion work and other assignments.

I think that Helmut Newton, Guy Bourdain, Avedon, Hiro, and Art Kane personify what we think of when we think of fashion photography from the 1960s through the 80s. He was also an innovator in the area of photo-illustration, combining images through layering that predates Photoshop by decades. I sometimes think he doesn’t get enough recognition for that work, which was incredibly forward. No one else was doing anything like it.

The amazing thing is that his work hasn’t lost an iota of its power—it’s still as fresh as the day he created it.

Richard Renaldi

TIMELESS STRANGERS



1968: Born in Chicago

1986–1990: Received BFA in photography from New York University

2002–2011: Solo exhibitions of his photographs throughout the United States, including the Gallery at Hermès and Yossi Milo Gallery in New York, and at Jackson Fine Art in Atlanta. His work has been exhibited in numerous group shows, including Strangers: The First ICP [International Center of Photography] Triennial of Photography and Video (2003).

2006: First monograph, Figure and Ground, published by the Aperture Foundation

2009: Second monograph, Fall River Boys, released by Charles Lane Press

www.renaldi.com



Many photographers take photographs in order to engage with the world. There is nothing passive about being a photographer; they stroll the sidewalks, observing and looking, but for what? They often don't know, until their eyes fall upon something they don't understand or someone they want to know.

But why is it necessary to make a photograph? This is like asking why it is necessary for a composer to hear their work performed. The photographic act sharpens their observational skills and makes the exchange concrete. It changes the experience from voyeurism without consequence to active participation with real stakes at risk. When it all goes well, the reward is seldom what they expect and better than they could have hoped for.

Richard Renaldi drives the rural routes of America and wanders the city streets, taking photographs of strangers with his 8 x 10 camera over his shoulder. He takes photographs of people he doesn't know without fully understanding why but trusting in the photographic act to peel back the veneer of the stranger to reveal the person, and the people we are, underneath.

MJ: Part of the reason I wanted to talk to you is because I think what you do is one of the hardest things any photographer can do, which is to photograph an ordinary person, a stranger, and make the photograph in such a way that it engages another stranger (the viewer). What makes you want to do this?

RR: I'm just drawn to certain people. I use the camera as a social extension; it's a way of engaging with people. When I studied photography and then worked in the field, I saw that a lot of attention was given to fashion and celebrity photography and I was never interested in that. I was drawn to real people and I wanted to make my art about real people.

The type of work that I do...leaves the viewer with questions about the subject's story. There is no narrative in still photography because it's just one still frame, but I think there is an implied narrative, or a narrative that the viewer creates.

MJ: One thing that I find interesting is how specific the people in your photos are: they're each unique, they're not archetypes.

RR: That's true, but when I'm out there, driving around or walking the streets with my camera, I'm doing my own casting. There are people I'm drawn to that I want to photograph, people that I might ordinarily stare at, or even flirt with. That's almost a subtext of portraiture, because there's often a level of flirtation.

I like people with character and there are certain places where you find that and others where you don't. I'm interested in rural and urban America, but not in suburban America. But, having said that, I think that you can find interesting subject matter anywhere.

MJ: Tell me about the 8 x 10 camera.

RR: My partner Seth had an 8 x 10 camera that he was no longer using, so I took it out to Madison Avenue just to try it out. I liked the way it slowed the shooting process down. I just fell in love with the amazing level of detail I got out of the negative, and the enlargements just took everything to a whole other level.

MJ: You're still printing analog?

RR: Yes, I don't print myself anymore, but all my prints are still done with an enlarger and using chemical processes.

MJ: I think sometimes that that's one of the problems I often find with digital, especially with younger, student photographers. Every tool we use creates a distinctive tool mark on the finished product. Traditionally, photographers have chosen to use certain tools because there's a unique character to the tool/camera that we find suits the work. Sometimes I worry that we've lost, or are in danger of losing, the individual personalities of what a Leica or an RZ 67 is, or the particular fingerprint of a certain film or paper. When everyone is using the same tools, then everything can start to look the same.

RR: That's true, but that means you just have to try harder to distinguish yourself within that.

In terms of the specifics to the 8 x 10, I don't think it's the camera, but I do think that when the camera is on a tripod there's a different dynamic between the photographer and the subject. There's a different gravity, and an implication of greater importance because it takes more time compared to a snapshot with a small camera that takes $\frac{1}{60}$ second. There's a different level of engagement, but you can still get it with a small camera. I also carry a digital SLR with me when I shoot and what I get from it is different, but I'm still interested in those photographs.

MJ: Shooting 8 x 10 color neg is really expensive (with processing, almost \$20 per exposure). How many frames do you typically shoot of a subject?

RR: One or two, that's it. You learn to be very decisive. But you do have that big beautiful ground glass to preview your image. Still, there are other things that are left to fate, like the gesture of the subject.

MJ: Tell me about the "Touching Strangers" project.

RR: When I was shooting some of the bus traveler portraits that are in the Figure and Ground book, there were a couple of occasions where the portraits were of a group of subjects who didn't know each other. Instead of asking one person if I could take their portrait, I had to ask a group. I found it challenging to have to orchestrate that and I was interested in how the dynamics of the portrait were changed when two strangers were posed together.

My idea in "Touching Strangers" was to ask two or more people, who don't know each other,

▷ **MIKE, LAUGHLIN, NV, 2004**

Renaldi photographs are simple and direct, which makes them accessible to a wide audience. However, the photographs are full of subtleties that reveal the photographer's careful attention. Note the placement of the foot on the white line, how the subject's face is framed by the mountains beyond, and the way his hat interacts with the horizon line.

◁ **JAIME, DENVER, CO, 2005**

In his bus traveler series, Richard traveled across America photographing at Greyhound stations throughout the country. The photographs reflect a unique cross-section of American society and made use of the fact that his subjects had nowhere to go, and nothing to do besides killing time by posing for his lens as they made their own journeys.



to be in a portrait together and ask them to touch each other. They started out very tentative, but as the work progressed I've become more involved; I've learned how far I can push people and the photographs have gotten more intimate. It creates these (I think) honest moments of bringing people together to perform this moment of contact for me and my camera.

MJ: So, it's almost a performance piece that you are orchestrating?

RR: Yes, and the pictures reveal these levels of discomfort, or comfort, depending on who the

people are. I was, to a certain extent, inspired by how we are fraying apart in our culture because of technology and online social networking.

It takes a certain leap of faith on the part of my subjects to consent to do this and it also forces the viewer to ask the question, "What would my reaction be if someone asked me to do it?"

It's also interesting because, without the background information of how I get people to pose together, the photographs create a fiction about the relationships between the people. There's an implied relationship. I hope the work challenges a number of social taboos.



MJ: Do you get nervous?

RR: Oh, I get very nervous, it's like asking someone on a date. It can a few minutes to build up my courage. When I'm out shooting the first person of the day it's hard, but then it gets easier.

MJ: I'm always terrified approaching strangers. It's easier for me when I'm on an assignment; then I can be pretty fearless, because I can

explain who I'm shooting for and what the story is about. One of the first assignments I give my freshman students is to go out and shoot 25 portraits of strangers and you can just watch the blood drain from their faces. They hate that assignment.

RR: That's a great assignment, but I can see why they would hate it.

MJ: How do you approach people?

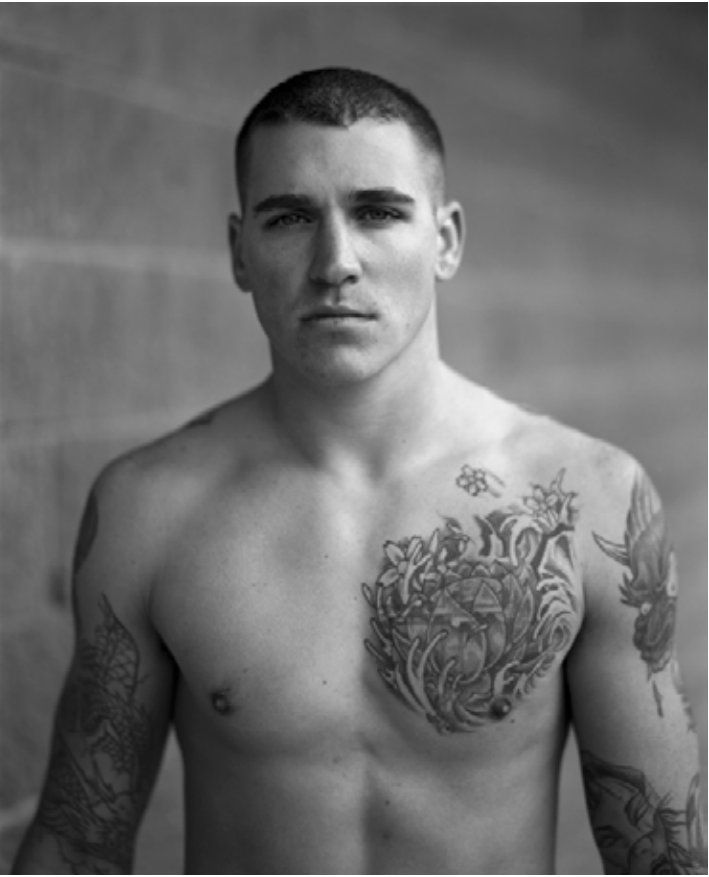
RR: I'm pretty straightforward, I just walk up and introduce myself, tell them what I'm doing. I get everyone's name and address so I can send them a print later. I'm very direct, and I think that's a lot of why the photographs look the way they look and why people react the way they do in my photographs.

◀ **CHEIKH, ALIOUN, GRACY, TERRY, PAPE, NEW YORK, NY, 2007**

In his "Touching Strangers" series, Renaldi organizes group portraits of people who didn't know each other prior to Renaldi's introduction. The result is an emotional moment that is simultaneously fictive and authentic.

▷ **CRAIG, FALL RIVER, MA, 2006**

In his latest book Richard photographed young men in the community of Fall River, Massachusetts, a town where dwindling employment opportunities are challenging their traditional rites of passage into manhood.



MJ: How were you able to create a career as a fine artist?

RR: I've always been a project-based photographer, and I always have four or five projects I'm working on at the same time. I did a project on Madison Avenue that came to the attention of Christopher Phillips (Curator at the International Center of Photography, and NYU faculty member), and some of that work was included in the ICP Triennial in 2003. From that I got a show at Debs & Company and another at Yossi Milo Gallery (both prestigious private galleries in New York City's Chelsea art district).

MJ: Are you able to make a living as an artist?

RR: It has peaks and valleys, but yes, and I do get the occasional commission. I just did a pretty huge ad campaign for Microsoft that I shot in

2007 and 2008, where I traveled to 17 different countries.

MJ: Did you shoot that on 8 x 10 as well?

RR: Yeah, it was pretty amazing experience. They let me shoot exactly the way I normally shoot, but it was strange because I was shooting with a huge crew. Normally I work alone, but on the Microsoft job I'd be shooting and then turn around and suddenly be aware that there were 18 people standing behind me.

MJ: Did that affect you?

RR: Surprisingly, not really.

MJ: How did you start Charles Lane Press?

RR: I got my feet wet in publishing when I published my first book, Figure and Ground, with Aperture in 2003 and I found that I loved the process of putting together a book. I had been shooting in Fall River, Massachusetts, since 2000, and by 2008 I felt like I had enough work for another book. I approached Aperture again, but the timing wasn't right for them. I wanted to go ahead and do it, so I just took the money from the Microsoft job and created Charles Lane Press with Seth.

Fall River Boys was our first book, the first Charles Lane Press imprint. Then we published a book by another photographer, Alison Davies. Next year we'll be publishing two more books by other photographers.

It's a way of giving back to the community for us, and I love photography books, so it just seemed like a natural progression for me. The photographers we publish aren't in the mainstream. I think we're trying to publish work that wouldn't get out there otherwise.

MJ: Isn't that kind of similar to why you make the portraits you make?

RR: It is, and it goes back to your first question about why I make the pictures I make. It's because we live in a culture that celebrates youth, beauty, and surface, but that's not the reality for most of America. Most of this country, once you get out of the cities, is pretty poor. That's what the "Fall River Boys" project is about; it's about coming of age in an area where there are pretty limited economic opportunities.

MJ: Those are the guys we hire to fight our wars.

RR: That's right, I feel like the people I photograph are people whose stories aren't told, and those stories need to be told.

Emily Shur



1976: Born in New York, NY

1998: BFA, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. Group exhibitions (selected): Sasha Wolf Gallery, NYC; National Portrait Gallery, London; Directors Guild of America, Los Angeles. Lectures: Art Center College of Design, Pasadena; Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles; School of Visual Arts, NYC

1998–2001: Freelance photo editor working at various magazines

2001–2005: Working as a photographer in New York for magazines such as *Entertainment Weekly*, *Interview*, *GQ*

2005: Relocated to Los Angeles

2005–present: Living in Los Angeles, currently shooting for magazines, record labels, and multiple advertising clients including *Esquire*, *Fortune*, *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly*

www.emilyshur.com

TONY CURTIS

This portrait of a Hollywood legend is lit simply, using just enough fill from the photographer's lights to keep the existing sunlight from obscuring his eyes with the shadow from his hat brim.

CELEBRITY PHOTOGRAPHER

Emily Shur is living the dream of many young photographers, working for the top magazines, photographing celebrities, and doing great work. She's exactly where she wanted be, but it wasn't easy to get there, and it isn't easy to stay there.

MJ: So tell me your story; you got out of school and then what?

ES: I did an internship at *SPIN* magazine when I was a student. When I graduated I worked in various photo departments for a few years at

different magazines, mainly *Rolling Stone*. Then I went to *Newsweek* as a freelance photo-editor, which was great because I was only there a few days a week and that allowed me to start doing my own shoots.

MJ: You're actually unusual because you never assisted for anyone. That's great, but doesn't it put you in the position of having to make it all up from scratch as you go along?

ES: Well, yes. I learned a lot from being a photo-editor. That job really helped me to decide what I wanted to do and what I didn't want to do. But ... I feel like everything I know about being on set, lighting, and all the technical stuff I really just

taught myself by trial and error or trying to emulate images that I admired.

MJ: Tell me about your early shoots. You worked a lot for *Interview* early on ...

ES: Yes, *Interview* was great because, even though they didn't pay anything, they really did make every attempt to help as much as possible with production and put together a great-looking shoot. Working with great stylists, hair, and make-up people taught me a lot about how to elevate my images and it got my foot in the door shooting entertainers and celebrities. The celebrity world is a tough nut to crack, but once you've shot a few, people are less hesitant to hire you.

MJ: How does your office work now? Do you have a team of stylists and assistants that you work with regularly?

ES: It's pretty low key for me and I like it that way. I work out of my house. I have freelance

stylists, digital techs, and assistants that I like and I work with regularly. My first assistant has been working with me for a couple of years now. I have two or three digital techs I work with.

MJ: What about stylists? When you shoot female celebrities, especially, I would think that pulling clothes and arranging for hair and make-up would be a big deal.

ES: I have people I like, but there is a little dance that goes on because celebrities often insist on using their own people for hair and make-up. I'm fine with that; there are other battles I'd rather win, and I want the subject to feel comfortable on set.

In terms of wardrobe, often the magazine will assign someone or I'll suggest someone I like, then we (stylist, photo editor, art director, and photographer) will all discuss the direction of the shoot and the stylist will pull clothes based on that. When the wardrobe arrives, the stylist and I go through the racks together and edit things

before the celebrity shows up so we can suggest our favorites first. There are times when that doesn't work and we'll all have to compromise to find clothing that works for everyone. At that point, we have to go to the other racks.

MJ: Is there always a publicist on the set? Is it a problem working with them?

ES: Most of the time a publicist is present, but sometimes the celebrity will just show up with an iced coffee in their hand and be like, "I'm here, what do you want me to do?"

I'm fine either way. I get on well with the publicists and we all understand what we're there to do. I don't want to make a picture that pushes too far or asks someone to do something they're not comfortable doing. I think the subjects respect that.

MJ: But not all celebrity photographers will do that. I like Martin Schoeller's work a lot but it's not all flattering.

▷ AMY POEHLER

For her series of portraits of Amy Poehler, Emily posed the actress as various movie icons. Emily's use of research combined with her knowledge of lighting and styling cues enabled her to exploit some of the most iconographic images from popular culture to her advantage.

▷ AMBER TAMBLYN

Pose, wardrobe, and a lighting setup that is a skillful mix of available light with flash make the actress look beautiful, ethereal, and timeless.



ES: That’s true, and you happened to pick one of the photographers I most admire. I think the fact that he gets people to pose for photos that may not be typical celebrity portraits is a sign of how much respect they have for him and the integrity of his work.

MJ: But there is an aspect of one hand washing the other right? ... Are your photographs helping to establish the celebrity’s brand and identity?

ES: For sure, but often that’s when it’s the most interesting because that’s when it’s the most collaborative. Those are the people who understand photography; they want to do something interesting. They have an affinity for photography and respect it for the art form that it is. They’re not just trying to get it over with. And even if it’s just a woman who’s really beautiful, who knows how to pose and knows her best angles, well, that’s helpful too. I try to appreciate the whole spectrum of how the collaboration can go. It doesn’t help them, or me, to have bad pictures out in the world.

MJ: Amy Poehler seems like she went completely over and above the call of duty for what she was willing to do for the photos.

ES: She was amazing, and that is one of my all-time favorite shoots as well as one of the lowest budget shoots I’ve ever done. It was so minimal. We did that totally bare bones, everyone was working for free ... She was the opposite of high-maintenance and a joy to work with. She made that shoot.

MJ: So there is a give and take between what they want, and what you want, because as photographers we want to make great pictures—but I’m sure there are a lot of starlets out there who just want to look hot.

ES: Absolutely, and you know, sometimes that’s just what the shoot is. As I’m sure you know, the actual photography is often the smallest part of the whole process. Most of it is reading people and really listening to them. I’ll meet someone and know immediately, “Wow, this is going to be a fun day,” or I’ll know, “This is what they’re willing to give me. They just want to look hot, so I am going to make the best picture I can of them looking hot.”



You have to know when you can push and when you can’t. I can tell when someone is adventurous and when they aren’t. Not everyone can do this kind of photography. There are definitely compromises that you have to make, but I love to photograph people who love to be photographed. I’ve always wanted to take pictures of people who were performers. I’m such a huge fan of television and movies. I love entertainers and I really do respect what they do.

MJ: Yeah, there is a part of the process that is about being a fan and being interested in the subject ... If you build your career around what you love, it’s always enjoyable and an adventure.

ES: Exactly, I was an only child and both of my parents worked, so I watched a lot of TV as a kid, and I still go to the movies all the time ... It’s easy to write off celebrity photography as superficial but it’s not when it’s done well, by people who do it well. It’s really creative, and you get to work with some of the best people in their field. It’s a real privilege.

MJ: Tell me about working with Michael Cera. Your photographs seem to reinforce his on-screen persona—how deliberate is that?

ES: Actually, in person he’s exactly the same, very soft spoken, and quiet. I’ve photographed him a few times and like him a lot. He’s one of the people who understands the process and he’s always eager to collaborate.

MJ: Tell me about research and pre-production. Do you research people you don’t know?

ES: Absolutely, I do a lot of Internet searches and I’ll watch interviews they’ve done, but the most useful thing is to look at other portraits of them. It gives me a sense of what they’re up for and how animated they are. If they don’t seem very animated, then I know I’ll have to build the shoot around lighting and other technical aspects instead of counting on getting a “moment.”

MJ: Let’s talk a bit about the technical stuff. You were shooting 4 x 5 for a long time. How are you doing your shoots now? How did the digital switch change things?

◁ **MICHAEL CERA**

Emily has done several photo sessions with Michael Cera. Unlike many other stars, who demand star treatment, Cera is easy to work with. This photo was shot on a street near Emily’s home as they walked through the neighborhood looking for locations.

▷ **THE AIRBORNE TOXIC EVENT**

Emily’s portraits of musicians always seem to respect the drummer as much as the lead singer. The palette of this photograph is all earth tones, which makes the very few white objects pop in contrast.



ES: I kept shooting film until recently, and I still shoot film for all my personal work. For my celebrity and music work I had to give in and start shooting digitally. When the budget allows I work with a digital tech and a medium-format Hasselblad camera with a Phase One back.

MJ: You rent the digital camera?

ES: Yes, it all comes as a package with the digital technician: the camera, the on-site computer. They do everything, the color calibration, the file processing. It took me a while to make the switch, and at this point in the industry having a great digital technician has really become as integral to the whole shoot process as having a great first assistant.... When the budget is tight I shoot with a Canon 5D Mark II I and use Capture One software to do the color correction and process the files myself.

MJ: Tell me about shooting musicians and bands.

ES: Music photography is probably the hardest thing I do. They’re not actors so they sometimes

aren’t interested in performing for the camera, and their image is usually something they’ve cultivated pretty carefully. Once in a while, I get to do something conceptual, but most of the time it’s about helping a band achieve the image they’ve set for themselves.

MJ: Ah-ha! Yes, of course, actors make a living by pretending to be someone they’re not, while musicians are all about the authenticity of their persona ... I always think it must be like shooting the board of a Fortune 500 company. You might want to put the short guy in the front because he’s short, but suddenly you realize that he’s just an accountant and you’ve offended the CEO because you stuck him in the back. It seems like you have to be really sensitive to the internal politics of the band. I notice that in all of your band photographs they’re democratic, you’ve found a way to give everyone equal stature.

ES: With band shoots I just try to keep it loose while structuring the composition of the photo, so the people are just visual elements in the frame. Sometimes, someone will step in and let me know how they like to be positioned, either

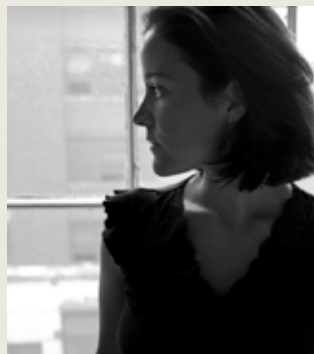
emphasizing a certain member or insisting that no one gets emphasized. That’s fine; my job is to make a good picture within the parameters of what they need.

MJ: What do you think is the biggest misconception about what you do?

ES: People think that because you’re photographing glamorous people you must be living a glamorous life. They don’t think about the red-eye flights, waking up at 4 in the morning, getting to the set hours before talent to set up, etc. It’s really hard work. You sweat and get dirty.

You can’t do it for the glamor or the money. There isn’t much glamor and there are other areas of photography where you can make a lot more money. You have to do it because you love it.

Kristen Ashburn



1973: Born in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania

1997: BFA, Tisch School of the Art, New York University

2003 and 2005: World Press Awards

2003 and 2006: National Press Photographer Awards

2003: Marty Forscher Fellowship for Humanistic Photography

2004: Canon Female Journalist of the Year award

2004: Featured speaker TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Talks

2006: Getty Foundation Grant

2007: Pictures of the Year award

2007: Emmy Nomination for "Bloodline: AIDS and Family" multimedia project

www.kristenashburn.com

PHOTOJOURNALIST

Photojournalism may be the most difficult career in photography, both financially and psychically. Even in the heyday of the great picture magazines, the path of the photojournalist was never easy. But at least David Douglas Duncan and his contemporaries could be assured that their photographs, etched on Tri-X by light filtering through the haze of battle, would be seen by the public. The photojournalists of today are no less brave, the stories no less important, but it is increasingly difficult for stories to get the exposure they deserve.

Kristen Ashburn is a true believer in photography's ability to move the viewer and inspire social change. In a person with less passion, energy, and drive it would be easy to dismiss this as naive idealism, but Kristen has built a reputation as one of the world's foremost photojournalists by skillfully balancing her lofty ideals with pragmatic activism and dogged hard work.

It is the privilege of the photojournalist to witness the beautiful, tragic, and moving moments that shape our time. With the privilege of witness comes the responsibility to testify, to use the photographs descriptive power to supply evidence beyond fact. Kristen's photographs are testimonies written with light, inflected with the photographer's compassion and intelligence.

MJ: Let's start from when I met you in the darkrooms at NYU. You were printing photographs of the Romanian orphans which, in itself, was an amazing project for someone in their junior year. Tell me about that work first.

KA: I was a young photographer trying to figure out what I wanted to do and I had always admired the work of photojournalists. The act of documenting our collective history felt important to me, and that feeling lead me to want to be a photojournalist. It seemed like a noble path.

While in college I saw the pictures and footage, like everyone else, of what was happening in Romanian orphanages after the '89 revolution. A family friend, Monica McDaid, who was a schoolteacher in England, had also seen the news about the orphan crisis. She organized a bunch of truck drivers who volunteered to drive supplies to Romania. Once they got there they found horrific conditions: Children kept four to a cot, open sewage, rat infestation, no electricity, it was beyond imagination, really. The news stories didn't prepare her for what they would see. That was the start of her relief effort and her organization called The Romanian Challenge Appeal.

I signed on as an aid worker for her the summer after my freshman year. It was my first real international travel. My role was to work with the children first, photographer second. I had to shoot clandestinely because, by that time, Romania was aware of the negative press and didn't want anyone, including aid organizations, to document what they were seeing. Over the years I kept going back during my summer and winter breaks to volunteer and I kept shooting. I was acutely aware of my role and how involved I was as a volunteer, but I kept my objective distance as a photographer. I would only photograph once the job was done, during the in-between moments.

Toward the end of my work with the organization, during my senior year at NYU, I organized an art and photography auction to raised money for the Romanian Challenge Appeal. It was then that I used my photography not only to raise awareness but also to raise funds. After working so closely with the children, it was impossible to sit back and not try to do more to help. In a way, this set a pattern for how I approached other projects I've worked on. I've crossed the line into activism on a few occasions.



MJ: You worked for the fashion photographer Steven Klein after school.

KA: Actually, I first worked as a printer at a great lab, MV Labs, in New York City. It was later that I met Steven through the lab. When Steven needed a studio manager, he asked me to come work for him.

MJ: Working for such a high-level fashion photographer seems like an odd detour. Did that influence or change your work?

KA: Not visually, but to see a highly functioning photographer work was amazing. His level of commitment was incredible to witness and his energy and constant production was prolific.

It was during those years working with Steven that I was able to think about and research my next move. I was making money and saving it so that I could eventually quit my job and pursue my own photography.

I began to follow articles dealing with the AIDS pandemic in the *Times* and the *Village Voice*. The *Voice* had just won a Pulitzer for their work on the topic. The story was so large and so reaching that I couldn't understand why more wasn't being done to cover it. I decided that would be my next story. I wasn't sure where it would lead me, but I was willing to take the leap. If I was going to spend my time and money to work independently, I wanted to make sure the story was something I could completely commit myself to.

MJ: And that trip launched the "Bloodline: AIDS and Family" project? You funded it all yourself?

KA: At first, but then grant money and resale of the work funded trips. My first trip I spent almost six weeks between Botswana and Zimbabwe. When I returned to the States I contacted Robert Pledge, of Contact Press Images, who I had met while working at MV Labs. I showed him the



< FROM THE ROMANIAN ORPHANAGE SERIES

The term "photojournalism" implies the objectivity and necessary skepticism required of a journalist, but all photographs are edited versions of truth. The simplicity of Kristen's work forces the viewer to examine his or her own humanity and empathy without calling undue attention to the photographer's role in how the information has been filtered or interpreted.

△ AFRICAN AIDS PANDEMIC

The heartbreaking situation in Africa is well publicized now, in no small part because of Kristen's work—proof that one determined person can make a difference.



FAME IN THE AFTERLIFE

In Kristin's portraits of living Shaheeds, her subjects are always masked to conceal their identity. She was only able to photograph their faces after they had died. This is appropriate since the goal of a Shaheed is not to achieve fame in life but in their death.

work and asked him to help edit it. He agreed and once he saw the work he agreed to help get it published. He's very generous to young photographers that way.

It was really through his guidance that I was able to make the leap into the professional photography world. He sold the story to magazines and encouraged me to apply for grants and awards. That was the year I won the first of my World Press Awards. All thanks to Robert's encouragement.

MJ: One of my favorite projects of yours is on the suicide bombers in Palestine. How did that project come about?

KA: I think I was working on a project on Israeli settlers at first. This led me to better understand the Intifada and what was really happening in the West Bank and Gaza. I began spending more time in Gaza, which was a very tricky area to work in because the Israeli government had locked down the area. I had a friend who I trusted with contacts there, he connected me to a reliable fixer he had used in the past. *[A fixer*

is a local contact hired by photojournalists to help translate, travel in dangerous areas, and negotiate with the local authorities and population.]

I kept seeing all these posters and billboards memorializing Shaheeds (martyrs) on almost every street corner. I wanted to understand the culture of what these Shaheeds meant to their community. I started by going to the families of the Shaheeds and interviewing them. I just did portraits and interviews to gain a broader perspective of what these peoples' deaths and actions meant to their families and friends. From there I was able to gain access to men and women who were training for suicide missions.

It was an unnerving experience. I was taken to places.... secret places. My guides took great lengths to make sure I wouldn't know the true identity of the subjects. It was fascinating, and risky. After talking to them for a while, hearing their voices, I became a little more relaxed. There was this strange mixture of fear and comfort. Fear because I could only see their eyes and I knew what they most wanted to accomplish in death, and comfort because I knew I was sitting

across from another human being, even if they happened to be wearing an explosive belt

MJ: As photojournalists go, your work is far more portrait based. I also think that visually it's diabolically simple, and I mean that as a compliment. There's very little of the traditional action and visual tension that we normally associate with photojournalism. What is it about the portrait that serves your work?

KA: Because of the influence of the decisive moment and Cartier-Bresson, there's a history of photojournalists capturing life in this very designed and composed way. I never put much energy into that. I was more interested in the story. Not that there's anything wrong with that style: it can be beautiful and poetic, and it's an important way to see. It's just not always me. Maybe the story always felt stronger than the style and forcing a style took me further away from the truth of the subject.

You're so drilled on aesthetics in school: How to compose a frame, think about the foreground, the background. It was overwhelming to me. Not

that I didn't try. My first camera was a Leica that I saved up for ages for ... I truly love the purity of that camera and the approach.

Then I switched from working with a Leica to working with a Rollei. It was a little disorienting at first, because everything is reversed, but I was interested in the simplicity. With the Rollei I could just point at the subject and shoot ...

I experimented with a bunch of cameras over the years, the Mamiya 7, the Fuji 6 x 9, Rollei, Leicas, but most of my work was done with the Rollei. In a way, it's a reflection of my weakness as a photographer; my lack of interest in the technical aspects of photography.

I'm trying to perfect my skills with digital now, although my recent work in Haiti was shot with the Rollei. I tripped my second day there and almost fell into a pile of bodies. It was pretty disturbing. I damaged the lens on my digital camera, which forced me to use the 10 rolls of 120 black-and-white film I brought with me. It wasn't much, but I shot the whole story with it, which worked out because that camera has this ability to record all the subtlety of the scene. It forced me to slow down and really look. There was so much happening, but when you stopped and took a few more minutes to look, you could see under, or through, the rubble in a way. Bodies emerged through the chaos and the rubble everywhere.

I'm impressed with work I've seen other people do digitally so I've taking up the challenge of relearning photography digitally. As you know, it's more like shooting slide film so you have to be a lot more careful with the exposure. You just don't have the same latitude you have with film. I'm happy with the results I'm getting from my digital camera and I like working with it.

My newest project on Albinism is all shot digitally. I just bought an 85mm f/1.2 and I'm excited by how the lens renders the subject. But ultimately I want the person, or the situation to speak for itself. The camera is just the means to the end.

MJ: Falling into a pile of bodies brings me to another point I wanted to talk about; in our lives as photographers we see things that most people don't see ... Is there a psychic toll from the work? Does it change you? And in a way, don't we do it in order to be changed?

KA: Well, yes, it has to, how could it not? We're still human at the end of the day. Each situation



affects you differently, but as I've matured I think I've found a way to cope and process my feelings better.

I think the Romanian orphan project was the most difficult for me to process, because it was my first experience, and you know, what's that expression—"The first cut is the deepest"? Landing in that situation, seeing how systematically abused these children were... it just opened up a window into how barbaric we can be to each other. Crossing that threshold was probably the most significant for me.

It's interesting, on my first trip to Africa people would ask if they could see other work I'd done. I had my computer with me so I'd show them the Romanian work. It was amazing. No matter how poor the people were, no matter how dire their own situation was, the Romanian photographs always shocked them. The idea of housing children like animals was beyond anything they could imagine.

Nothing surprises me any more, but it's been an education. As awful as it can be, I have also

had so many positive experiences. I can meet someone in an African village in the morning and find myself eating dinner and staying the night in their home that night. People have opened up their world to me. There's incredible generosity out there, so that balances it out for me a bit.

MJ: I'm curious, now that you are shooting digitally with the Canon 5D Mark II and having produced your "Bloodline" multimedia piece, are you interested in shooting video?

KA: Absolutely, I've been fortunate enough to be a little ahead of the curve on that. I have always collected audio on all of my stories and later collected video as well. As powerful as the still image is, there are limits to what you can translate and communicate to the viewer. Sound is a powerful component of our experience. It's a no brainer; we'll all have to become conversant with it as we move away from the old models of magazine stories on paper pages. It's just another challenge I'll have to master. It's all about the story.

Karen Cunningham



1969: Born in Princeton, NJ

1991: BFA Tisch School of the Arts, New York University

1991–1996: Photojournalist. Clients included New York Daily News, New York Times Magazine, Vibe, and The Village Voice.

1996–2004: Karen Cunningham Fine Art Printing. Master black-and-white printer using traditional gelatin silver techniques as well as gum-bichromate, platinum, hand coloring, custom toning. Clients included *New York Times Magazine*, *National Geographic*, and *Vanity Fair*; Mark Seliger, Amy Arbus, David La Chapelle, Patrick Demarchalier.

2004–present: Karen Cunningham Photography Boutique Wedding Studio.

Fine Art Group exhibitions

2009: The Barn Gallery, Massachusetts

2006: Kala Art Institute, artist in residence, San Francisco, CA

2001: PS122 Gallery, NYC

1998: Artspace, Virginia

1999: Harper Collins, NYC

1999: Throckmorton Fine Art, NYC

FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHER

Wedding photographers are some of the best photographers in the field and they seldom get the respect they deserve. Weddings are challenging, requiring the photographer to have skills in photojournalism, still life, architecture and interiors, as well as studio and location portraiture. A wedding is an event, a fast-moving freight train that won't stop while you load film or fumble with lights. The pressure can be intense: guests will make requests for candid photos just as you are setting up for a very important formal portrait, churches and clergyman will restrict your access during the ceremony, the wedding cake will come out just as you have sat down to take your only break in a grueling day. This is hard work: 12-hour days are common. It requires diplomacy and a genuine interest in the event; outstanding people skills are mandatory. It's not easy, but the challenges are also what make wedding and family photography one of the best educational and rewarding experiences available for young photographers.

Karen Cunningham has had a few different, and very successful, careers in photography, as both a photojournalist and as a custom printer for an amazing roster of "A"-list photographers. It all adds up to a savvy woman who brings skill and dedication to every assignment.

MJ: So you've gone through some career moves and changes. How did you settle on shooting weddings as a career?

KC: I started out as a photojournalist. I went to the former Yugoslavia in '91/'92 at the start of

the war on my own to cover the diaspora of refugees from the former republics. When I returned, I freelanced for the *Daily News* and the *New York Times* as well as *People* magazine. I liked the work for several years, but found the lifestyle of journalism incompatible with my lifestyle. The compensation was poor and left me with little time to pursue my own artwork.

I started a custom printing service by accident. Edward Keating, who worked for the *New York Times*, asked me if I knew any good printers for a book he was working on at the time. I volunteered. I had worked as a printer at a high-end black-and-white lab all through college. The lab was started by Andy Warhol and Peter Beard and serviced high-end fashion and editorial photographers such as Patrick Demarchelier, Bruce Weber, and Annie Leibovitz.

After the job I did for Eddie, Kathy Ryan, editor of the *New York Times* magazine, called me to ask if I would print for them. It was through the *Times* magazine that I printed for Gilles Peress, James Nachtwey, Antonin Kratochvil, Eugene Richards, and many others, but as digital became the dominant medium, silver-print work declined and I felt I had to rethink things.

Weddings were a good fit for me because I was always interested in the social dynamics I observed when I was shooting news stories, and weddings are all about social dynamics.

One of the big draws for me was the lifestyle of the wedding photographer. There's a wedding season, and I work really hard during the season, then I have big blocks of time when I'm free to work on my personal art. Unlike a lot of photographers—like you, for example—I've always considered commercial photography as my day job. My creative outlet is in my printmaking [Karen is also an accomplished printmaker who exhibits her photo-etchings]; weddings give me the time to make my art.

MJ: Because you're primarily working on weekends when you're shooting weddings?



BEGUILING BRIDE

While this photograph looks simple, it packs a lot of relevant information for the bridal couple; featuring the bride, the engagement ring, the bouquet, the location, the dress and hairstyle, as well as her flirtatious glance to the groom.

▷ STAY ALIVE TO THE SCENE

Karen's background in photojournalism is most evident in the "off moments" she often discovers in the course of shooting weddings.

KC: It's actually a solid five- to six-day-a-week job during the season, but yes, during the winter I have some time for myself to make art.

Weddings were also a good fit for me because it combined a set of skills I already had. I'm really good at flattering reportage, and environmental portraiture.

MJ: So take me through your gear: you used to shoot film, now you're shooting with...?

KC: Nikon D300s, and I chose them primarily because of the size. I'm 5 feet 4 inches (1.6m) and weigh 115 pounds (52kg). I have to carry those cameras all day. The D300 was the best combination of quality with portability. I have two Nikkor 17–55mm f.2.8s and that's pretty much all



I shoot with. I do have a 105mm that I'll use occasionally, but I'm very "Cartier-Bresson": I like the 50mm perspective. I like the equipment and technique to be simple.

MJ: And for lighting?

KC: I use a Nikon flash set to TTL on the camera and shoot in manual mode on the camera, so I'm controlling the exposure manually by using the aperture and shutter speed in combination to create different mixed light and shutter drag effects. My assistant has a Lumedyne on a stick (mounted to a monopod) that's triggered by a Pocket Wizard connected to the camera. We have a fairly elaborate sign language that we use to communicate across the room, so I can tell him how to set the power and where to point it.

MJ: You don't set up stationary room lights?

KC: Less so now that I'm shooting digitally. At ISO 800, the files are still super smooth and I have all the ambient light I need. A lot of high-end weddings these days hire lighting designers, so I want to make sure I'm not overpowering the existing light.

MJ: When you were working as a printer, you were able to dig through the contact sheets of some of the world's greatest photographers. What did that teach you?

KC: It was great; I got to work with the best photographers in the world. From the photojournalists I learned how to approach a subject and tell a story. I also learned their palettes. Antonin [Kratochvil] is very dark, big expanses of shadows, whereas others were really open and light.

From the fashion photographers I learned more about lighting: how you can use contrast to add some age and maturity to someone who is

really young, or how you can project an emotion onto your subject by just using light skillfully.

I also learned a lot about how to get people to pose with their whole bodies: You know, you'll do a portrait and then you look at the person's hands and then realize they have a clenched fist because they're nervous. Fashion photographers taught me to look past just making a flattering portrait of someone's face and to look at the whole body. I'll tell people to shake out their hands and other things to get them to relax their whole bodies ... I'll get them to move around and then shoot just as they stop.

One thing I learned from working for fashion photographers is that models really work hard! There is nothing easy about what they do.

MJ: Absolutely, and they are smarter than anyone gives them credit for ... I used to be so concerned about being ultra-professional that I never flirted with models as I was shooting, but now I realize that even they need a little bit of help, and they know that the flirting isn't serious.

KC: And with untrained subjects that's even more true: you have to let them know they're doing a good job. They need the positive reinforcement and they can't ever feel as though you're judging them. Even if the lighting isn't quite right, I'll start shooting just so the subject doesn't think it's something about them. Then my assistant and I will make adjustments as we're shooting.

MJ: So take me through the day... I haven't shot many weddings but what I remember was that there was this great long list of about 75 pictures I was expected to get: Mother with bride, father with bride, grandparents, bouquet being thrown, etc. Do you have a script of shots?

KC: I don't do that. I have an itinerary of what's going on over the course of the day. I allow one hour for all the formal portraits. I spend twenty minutes with just the couple and then twenty minutes with the family, the extra twenty minutes I'll use to fill in anything I might have missed. I try to never do more than 10 to 15 portraits of all the family combinations, which requires the family to come up with a realistic list, that is just what they really want for the family portraits.

I make a list of everyone's names and I have them all memorized before I get there. I address everyone by name, never their title like "Mom" or "Maid of Honor." I think that's important.



MJ: That's an amazing skill and strikes me as very, very important.

KC: Well, I type up the list for my assistant and once I've done that then it's in my head, but that's also part of my emphasis on being "the family's photographer" ... Little things count; like my assistants and I never shout out to each other or to the family, because I want to reinforce that idea of being the family photographer.

MJ: One thing that scared me about shooting weddings that is it seems like there's often a disconnect between what I shoot and what people remember. It's this great day for them, but maybe they don't notice how tacky the banquet hall is, that kind of thing.

KC: Yes, but that's often a very positive thing as well. They often look through the proofs and say, "Wow, I didn't see that!"

One thing that's interesting to me, as a woman who has a certain awareness of her own style and appearance, is that I realize that we

seldom really see ourselves. We tend to look at ourselves in the mirror from the one angle that we think makes us look good. So I'll ask the subject specific questions about what they might feel uncomfortable about. Later, when we're reviewing the shoot I'll gently bring up the idea of retouching certain pictures and just explain that, because modern cameras and lenses are so good, any woman would have to be twelve years old to look flawless without retouching, which is really true.

MJ: Right, and a lot of "flaws" are actually caused by the way the camera records things, like the extremely short exposures of flash lighting.

KC: And formal wear. Most people don't dress formally very often and you have to carry yourself differently. Strapless dresses and tuxedos require a different posture and presence than a T-shirt and jeans. Look at pictures of the Royal family sometime. They really know how to do it!

MJ: Tell me about your workflow.

◀ GO WITH THE FLOW

Unlike many wedding photographers, Karen lets the subjects relax, relying on psychology, location, and composition to carry the photograph.

▶ SPECIFICS MAKE IT SPECIAL

A photo of the bride and groom kissing is *de rigueur* in a wedding album, but Karen gives it a fashiony taste of New York.

KC: My assistant downloads the cards and backs them up to an external hard drive during the wedding, but none of the cards are erased until all of the files have been loaded into the desktop computer back at the studio and backed up again. Then we load them into Lightroom and I do 90 percent of what I need in Lightroom. Occasionally I'll go into Photoshop to use the "liquefy" tool to slim someone's arm or something, but Lightroom does almost everything I need.

Then I upload the shoot into a web gallery for the client to look at, and have a "proof" album made. Most young couples are comfortable looking at the photos online but sometimes parents and grandparents aren't as computer savvy, so the proof album is important.

MJ: So what's the appeal of this for you? I mean I know there was an economic imperative, but why weddings?

KC: There was an aspect of shooting weddings that held the same satisfaction I had as a printer, because I was helping someone else realize their vision. I liked being in that position as a collaborator, but I also had the autonomy that I enjoyed when I was a printer. I'm the art director, the editor, and the photographer of the story ...

I love observing how people interact. But also, as a woman I'm fascinated by the fashion component of weddings and how the women present themselves to the public and to their husband. The wedding dress started out 300 years ago as way of presenting a dowry and was a symbol of a family's wealth; in many respects, it still is.

I heard a famous wedding dress designer on a TV show advise brides to look at the wedding aisle as a fashion runway. That comment made me think about how we live in a society where style and beauty is actually a route to power, with



celebrities for instance. These brides, especially in New York, want to present themselves as stylish. It's exciting and fascinating to record.

MJ: And that's interesting because the family is commissioning you, which is very different from someone like an editorial photographer. In your case, you are entrusted with carrying their projected image forward.

KC: Um yes, but it has more facets than that. Part of it is simply recording, telling the story of what happened that day, and they also want

Sarah Wilson



1977: Born in Durham, NC (raised in Austin, TX)

1996–2000: Photography, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, Department of Photography and Imaging

1999: Intern for James Evans in Marathon, Texas

2000–2001: Awarded the Daniel Rosenberg Traveling Fellowship to complete project about the Cajun area of Southwest Louisiana

2000: Solo show of Louisiana Project at NYU's Gulf and Western Gallery

2000–2003: Assistant to photographer Mark Jenkinson

2000–2004: Project about the town of Jasper, Texas in the aftermath of the brutal murder of James Byrd, Jr.

2004: Published: Jasper, Texas: The Road to Redemption (University of Texas Press). Exhibited in six cities in Texas, and showed in New York's White Box Gallery.

2005: Stills photographer and field producer on Keith Maitland's film, "The Eyes of Me," a documentary following four blind teenagers at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired

2006: Volunteered as prom night photographer for the Texas School for the Blind, and has volunteered every year since

2008: Awarded the PhotoNOLA Review Prize for Blind Prom

2009: Blind Prom shown at Foley Gallery in New York, New Orleans Photo Alliance Gallery, and Lishui International Photography Festival, China

Currently working as editorial photographer for magazines such as *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *Texas Monthly*, *Time*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Mother Jones*, and *Der Spiegel*

www.sarahwilsonphotography.com

THE BREAKTHROUGH PROJECT

In the past, the concept of "the extended project" or photographic thesis was usually reserved for graduate students working towards an MFA. Now, almost every undergraduate class in photography relies on each student completing some form of extended project for every class.

From a teacher's point of view, extended projects bring real intellectual rigor to the classroom and teach students to build a consistent artistic process and a coherent identity. Most important, extended projects require a strong work

ethic that helps students break free of "the lucky shot" mentality.

However, as teachers and practicing artists, many of us also realize that there is something inherently artificial about any project that starts at the beginning of a semester and is expected to be complete by the end. Students, under the pressure to perform, will often choose to work on an idea that isn't motivated by an inner creative need, but something that is less ambitious and can be completed within the constraints of the class schedule. Real projects, by real



FREDDIE GONZALEZ, MARATHON, TEXAS

Freddie Gonzalez, a transvestite who was well accepted in the small town, and worked as a waitress at the local pizza shop.



BOYS ON BIKES, MARATHON, TEXAS

The marks and stains around the edge of the photo are due to the Polaroid type 55 film the photographer used. Type 55 has been discontinued by Polaroid but is still revered by many photographers. It produced a paper positive print as well as a 4 x 5 negative that could be saved by immersing the negative in a solution of sodium sulfate immediately after processing.

artists, evolve much more organically. Sarah Wilson was a student that came to my attention as a freshman at NYU. She was funny, smart, and creatively ambitious. These qualities, combined with a strong work ethic should have made her a stand out, but she just couldn't seem to find her focus.

In the summer between her junior and senior year Sarah went to the small town of Marathon, Texas, to intern with local photographer James Evans. She came back knowing what she wanted to do with her life.

Since then she's gone on to shoot many more projects, including stories on the racially motivated murder of James Byrd Jr. in the small town of Jasper, Texas.

Most recently she has been working on a new extended project, "Blind Proms," at the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Austin, while balancing a busy career as a contributing photographer for Texas Monthly magazine and shooting a variety of commercial assignments.

MJ: So, we know each other way too well [*Sarah was my assistant for three years*], but tell me about the Marathon, Texas, pictures. What was different about working there? What did it do for you?

SW: I had the opportunity to go assist a photographer there. Marathon is a small town of about 400 people in the West Texas desert and I had just come from being in New York for three years. I grew up in Texas, but I had never lived in a town that small. Going from New York to

Marathon I was suddenly in a community that I could really sink my teeth into. Within two weeks I knew everybody's name and I could wave to everyone as I drove by.

It was a place I could really get a handle on; the story of this community just unfolded itself to me very quickly. It felt like I was in a sitcom about a small town and I was another one of the characters in the story. It was very accessible to me; I could meet everyone and also be part of the community. Asking to photograph someone was nowhere near as scary as doing a portrait project in New York City. It was more open. It was the perfect place to do a first portrait project.

MJ: And the town seems almost like a Twin Peaks kind of town. I mean, I don't know too many small towns that have a town drag queen. It seems very typically Texas, but also very liberal at the same time.

SW: (Laughing) I know, I know. There are great characters. There's a real mix of people. In that



little pocket of West Texas, there are a lot of real progressive people and some real traditional cowboys.

MJ: Tell me about shooting 4 x 5, what did that do for you? It wasn't really your medium before this.

SW: No, not at all. I had been playing and shooting with a lot of cameras, but I didn't have a real solid idea for what I wanted to do with photography before I did this project. I learned a

lot from the photographer I was working for and he had a 4 x 5 field camera I was able to borrow.

I remember we were on a road trip assignment for a magazine and we saw an awesome exhibit in El Paso by the photographer Max Aguilera-Hellweg about Texas border towns that he shot on 4 x 5 Polaroid pos/neg. They were these beautiful portraits of these really interesting characters in the Mexican and US border towns that he had shot for a story in *Texas Monthly*. There was one I remember of a kid with an inner tube on his head because he was

getting ready to cross the Rio Grande into the US, and other pictures of barbers, the town prostitutes, just amazing people. I also loved the clarity and crispness of that film. I went back to Marathon the next week and knew what to do.

MJ: I know Aguilera-Hellweg's work well. It's amazing. I used to borrow that particular portfolio to show to class. It was just 8 x 10 prints mounted in a handmade book constructed from cardboard and plain brown wrapping paper, then tied together with a piece of twine. It was a



◁◁ **BRENDA, MARATHON, TX**

This portrait of a young woman with her Quinceañera dress (a celebration of her 15th birthday) blowing in the breeze combined with the long shadows of the late afternoon light speaks volumes about both the culture and landscape of rural Texas.

◁ **IKE ROBERTS**

Shooting with the limited depth of field of a large format camera can make it difficult for the subject to stay in the plane of focus. In this portrait, Sarah helps the subject by allowing a pose that feels natural, but also locks him into position.

fantastic low-tech presentation device that completely launched his career as a magazine photographer.

SW: I actually called him after I saw that work, he was really nice and we talked for a long time. It was pivotal moment for me. Suddenly what I wanted to say was all right in front of me. I went back to Marathon and made it happen.

MJ: The beauty of that Polaroid pos/neg film was that you had something you could hand to someone after you took their picture, like a thank you. It helped them understand what you were trying to do, it was great for establishing rapport with the subject.

SW: Yes, and that 4 x 5 was so much fun. I remember photographing this rancher, Ike Roberts, and I can tell he's thinking, "what is this girl doing? And why is she putting so much effort into a picture of little ole me?" Using the 4 x 5 camera is really formal way of photographing someone; it takes time and it's like you're really honoring them. You're taking a real portrait, not just a snapshot.

MJ: Part of what makes you special is your amazing ability to just charm everybody. I don't have that ability all, it's different for me. People really like you, and it's so apparent in all of the pictures. How do you approach someone?

SW: I really bend over backwards to make people comfortable. I feel like a therapist; in fact, if I

weren't a photographer that's what I'd probably do. It's all about having empathy and the ability to really put yourself in their shoes. I could probably be happy sitting on a couch and just listening to people, but the great thing about being a photographer is that you get to go into their world. I feel like when I photograph someone I completely immerse myself in their life.

MJ: I think the pictures reflect that. It's like the interaction between you and the person is the real reward. I think you're genuinely interested in everybody you photograph, that's a gift in itself.

SW: Yes, coming away from a situation, sometimes it's not about the photography so much for me, it's about the moment I got to share with someone I didn't know yesterday.