

100 Great Street Photographs



David Gibson

 PRESTEL



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David Gibson

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INTRODUCTION

The premise of this book is a celebration of the very best street photographs emerging from the so-called Internet generation.

I chose every one of the photographs because in some way they inspired me but also because they stimulated thoughts that I wanted to set down. Some of the choices were already planted in my mind but I went determinedly looking for more. Consequently the vast majority of the photographs are from the last five years.

Yet, during this fascinating process, I felt the need to deviate slightly from the work of the Internet generation, as, quite simply, the street photography community encompasses more than one generation. I wanted to offer some balance, some context of what came before – as a result, among the many images taken in the last five years, there are a few older photographs including a handful taken in the 1990s, and one from as far back as 1981.

I have been taking street photographs for about thirty years, so my time straddles both the analogue and digital worlds of photography. In theory I should have my finger on the pulse of street photography but I am very wary of trying to sum up or offer any kind of prediction for its future. All that has ever mattered to me is: Does a photograph pull me in, does it inspire me?

What is certain is that the digital age has transformed street photography, not only in the way that photos are taken, but above all in how they are consumed and shared online. Technology has seemingly brought photography to everyone. At the forefront are camera phones and all this ultimately means more photographers and yet more photographs. But does this represent a creative revolution for photography? Only about ten of the photographs here are taken with a mobile phone camera; it could easily have been more, but arguably it does not matter. You could push such an

agenda and fill up a book with smart-phone pictures, but would we look at the results any differently? I would argue that whatever camera is used, whether digital, film or camera phone, has very little relevance when considering the 100 photographs here.

Photography has always been about sharing but that has now been accelerated by technology and, specifically, social media. With street photography a great deal of mediocrity is shared online, but so too is the genre's rich history which includes its very best photographs. Essentially this is shared education and the growing consequence – hopefully – is that more and more people are visually literate with street photography.

Ultimately, I fervently believe that the words of Henri Cartier-Bresson still ring true:

'Photography has not changed since its origin except in its technical aspects, which for me are not important.'

My subtle agenda then, even with the changes that have taken place thanks to new technologies, is that it is still the best in street photography that matters.

But I think (or at least I hope) that I've picked up on a building momentum in the street photography world. It is quite possible that there is a marked acceleration; more people identify with street photography, and there are more online groups, collectives, festivals and competitions. And this expansion can be found in more and more different places around the world. No longer does the majority of the interesting work come just from New York, Tokyo, London and Paris, arguably the traditional strongholds of the genre. Now the energy resides as much in Bangkok, Manila, Hong Kong, Tel Aviv, Moscow or São Paulo.

These cities are easy names to mention, as if they are exact truths and nowhere overlooked. Besides, might all the photographs reside in one country, the Internet? The same

applies to the difficulty of defining street photography itself, because it overlaps with documentary and fine-art photography, its closest cousins. People sometimes get heated about definitions. But at the outset, let me offer my own well-worn description that I still believe is about right:

The term 'street photography' can be applied to any photographs taken in a public space, with or without the inclusion of people, which are entirely natural, and not set up.

It might be wise to leave it at that, although you could build a longer interpretation around the word 'street' itself. Street suggests 'street-wise', to which you could add a list of adjectives, such as edgy, surreal, poignant, etc. Basically, street photography is real, it is ordinary life made extraordinary by a great variety of photographers.

If you try to add more, it gets complicated and probably pretentious. But there is one issue I should tentatively mention here – interference, that is to say, over-manipulation of a photograph and sometimes outright cheating.

To use the word 'cheating' can sound harsh, but I dislike photographers who take short cuts. I view it as joyless because it shows a fundamental lack of respect for the spirit of street photography, and it also reveals a lack of genuine talent. Another point is that those who 'cheat' usually get found out. Yes, I might be naive on that count but there are many experienced photographers who have a sixth sense for what does not appear to be entirely natural.

In putting this book together, I have felt agitated on a few occasions, when I sense that the moment has come to question a photographer more closely. It is difficult when you find a great photograph only to discover that it was a double-exposure, and disappointing to hear a photographer who casually says, 'Oh, it was a job, I set it up'. My main concern, though, is that some photographers do not admit that they have manipulated a photo,

unless you ask them bluntly, leaving most people to assume the image is completely natural.

Whenever I meet photographers, without knowing what their photographs are like, I always drop into the conversation something like, 'So who are your heroes in photography?'

Therefore I asked each contributor this question: 'Please name three photographers, past or present, who have inspired you. Absolutely anyone you like.'

One photographer declined to answer, and another found it impossible to do so, but the rest listed three and a few gave four. The top five 'inspirations' were as follows:

1. Henri Cartier-Bresson
2. Garry Winogrand
3. Alex Webb
4. Robert Frank
5. Martin Parr

Other names that came up several times were: William Eggleston, Trent Parke, Daidō Moriyama, Josef Koudelka and Sebastião Salgado.

I think the results of this 'survey' are quite revealing, and the choices the photographers made were honest ones because there was no hidden agenda of people trying to promote themselves or their friends, which is a common distortion with online polls.

The age of the photographer was not taken into consideration, but only a handful, as it turned out, were under the age of 30. I did consider gender, race and location; I tried a little to balance things out, but again it always came back to the photographs themselves.

There was another, relatively minor, point when I tried to balance the selection. I really wanted more vertical photographs, to alter the pace of the book, but I could not find many. I hesitate to raise this question, and admittedly Instagram is mostly square, but I wonder whether constantly presenting

photographs online has made it more natural to take horizontal shots?

Of course the term 'great' – disregarding whether the photo is vertical or horizontal – is contentious. Photographs themselves need time to marinate, and putting 100 together in a book might with time show that a few lack something, while others might grow. I can only liken this to an exhibition where the curator's words cannot necessarily influence people's instincts. I personally think that this collection would make a great exhibition, but then I'm biased.

And yes, a few of the images do not show a 'street' at all. One or two, for example, present a forest scene, or a snowscape. Some are also abstract, with blur or movement, but to my mind they all come within the street photography ethos.

I had some hesitations over the cover image. After all, it is true you judge a book by its cover. And I thought whatever might be inside, at least the cover should scream 'street'. But then, why not put out a slightly ambivalent message? The cover gently asks a question; the answer might be inside.

There might be a debate around 'presentation', for example, Instagram with its 'sugar-coating' apps, but talent will always out, surely. If there is an antenna for manipulation, or cheating, the same applies to apps. Apps alone are not enough but on Instagram it's like wading through all the imagery on Flickr – the gems are still there. For example, Jeff Mermelstein, well known for his street photographs in 1990s New York, is on Instagram, using a mobile phone. The photographs are original, and Instagram seems the perfect platform for him.

But not everyone uses Flickr or Instagram or Tumblr or Facebook. Some photographers might have nothing more than their own website. But they still get picked up by others – that's the street photography community for you, they gather up the strays. The best photographers all have

something in common, something vital: they have intelligence, depth and humanity. Yes, that sounds a little grand, but it's worth highlighting a photographer like Sebastião Salgado who is clearly not a street photographer but is an inspiration to many. One of the photographers here, Graciela Magnoni, tells a charming story of meeting Salgado when she was just 17:

'Sebastião Salgado was a huge influence. I grew up in Brazil till the age of 13, so obviously I felt culturally attracted to his work. When I was 17 years old, he was already a rising star in Paris. I remember one day I grabbed the phone and gave him a call. I had never met him before. He answered the phone and was quite gracious. I told him I would like to meet him and talk about photography. He called me to his house; his wife Lélia was there too. He was lovely, intense, telling me all about his trips and passion for photography. His living room dining table was packed with negatives. Going to his house and seeing all the negatives, cameras, and his strong passion for photography and the stories he could tell through it was a huge motivation for me to become a documentary/press photographer. That day he gave me the best and most useful piece of advice. He said that the most important thing to improve my photography and be meaningful was to study, not photography, but history, economics, or any other subject I enjoyed. He also recommended I look at lots of good photographs. He explained that the most important requirement to become a good photographer is to have something to say and that without a strong education this would be difficult. He insisted that technique and mastery of the camera is not enough. He also insisted on the fact that to know what you want to say is not so easy and that many, many photographers stopped improving because they had nothing to say. As a 17-year-old, I found this extremely inspiring.'

Salgado is a rare bird, with all his great photographs, his sense of purpose and his desire to communicate, and it would be

absurd and unfair to expect others to equal him. Yet his particular commitment sometimes helped me as a yardstick with difficult choices. There was one photographer, for instance, whose photo, to me, bordered on greatness. I couldn't quite make up my mind, so I asked him to tell me the story of the photograph... as I did with everyone. All he could muster was, 'I took this photograph when I was 24'. This left me thinking, 'Come on, give me more, show me you care or have some understanding of what you're doing... of what you're trying to say.'

I accept that this might sound harsh, even arrogant, and besides shouldn't the photo speak for the photographer? What else can he or she add? Well, some photographers can get away with this, with their silence, because they have built up a reputation, and there is plenty of commentary on their work from others. But with emerging photographers it's another matter. The photographer may need to explain, to convince, to offer more.

I readily concede that a few of the photographers in this book might be considered 'one-hit-wonders' and accordingly the premise of a 'Great Street Photograph' becomes a little shaky if it cannot be backed up by a few more decent images from the same photographer. But equally with some photographers, in our exchanges, I sensed some depth... they had something to say. Subsequently it might seem incongruous to include seasoned photographers like Alex Webb or Nikos Economopoulos alongside a few relative beginners, some with 'just' mobile-phone cameras, but the key point here is potential. Sometimes you just have to go with a hunch.

To finish this introduction, I would like to quote the Spanish film director and photographer, Carlos Saura:

'Long ago I came to the conclusion that in photography, as in so many other things, everything had already been done shortly after it was invented and we only run in circles in order to come back to the same

thing. Some photographers who engage in experimentation forget that most of the advances in the realm of aesthetics have already been done. What changes is the time and place, as the song *Todo cambia* by the Argentinian Mercedes Sosa says: "We change, our world changes..."

Saura's quote is from a beautiful book of photographs portraying village life in Spain during the 1950s. I don't entirely agree with his view, and yet I'm troubled by it; he speaks with wisdom. All I know is that the world does change, but it's often a case of who you choose to listen to. And maybe this book hinges on Saura's assertion. Nearly all the photographs here are quite possibly part-reinventions, part-homages. They borrow from the past, in other words, but all the photographers are trying to forge ahead and make sense of their present. A few of them might eventually 'go down in photographic history', and some are already famous, but I hope this book helps all of them in some small way by putting them on the page.

For me looking at photographs in a book is a pleasure; it is by far the best way to appreciate them. Most of the photographs in this book have not been published before, which is particularly pleasing. I like to think that they have been 'rescued' from the computer screen, and given the kind of permanence that they deserve.

David Gibson

Jacek SZUST

b.1976, Wrocław, Poland

Photograph Wrocław, May 2012

www.jszust.com

www.instagram.com/jszust_

Inspiration Martin Parr, Alex Webb, Matt Stuart.

Jacek Szust finds people funny,

not in a cruel way but because he delights in catching them at odd moments. His photographs are sympathetic, and one of his themes is people in a tangle with modern-day life. This sometimes means with objects or their own clothes. A large red ball is a man's head; a boy obliterated by his blue coat becomes a coat with legs. Or a woman reads a paperback on a tram; the book seems to overwhelm her.

The man here is not concerned or in a tangle – but he has no legs, so it's another illusion. It's a double-take photograph; you have to look carefully. Some of the best photographs work like this.

A well-dressed man carrying an expensive-looking suitcase floats above the ground like a hovercraft. What is he doing, where he is going? He looks like a man who would normally get a taxi. We can only speculate.

This is a sight gag and it's not entirely clean; there is just a glimpse of his back foot under the suitcase. This is a minor imperfection but it makes the photograph believable and this is important with street photography. Street photographers seek the unreal but tied to the real world. In other words, life on the street is surreal enough, it does not need setting up or post-manipulation. Besides it would be hard to preconceive a shot like this.

Szust's floating man teases the eye, but there are other smaller considerations. If you squint you might just see a cluster of whites that could be joined up like a constellation in a night sky: the bright white of his shirt cuffs just visible on both hands, his white handkerchief, which link with the white markings on the road. Might the whites stand out more, if the photograph were black and white? Certainly, it works as a vertical photograph; if it was horizontal messy distractions left and right would be revealed.

Szust shot just two frames, both from a slightly higher vantage point, and he describes the bit of magic that day:

'I remember as if it was yesterday. I saw the magic. The first frame, I was unhappy because the foot was visible. I tried to catch him again, I was running after him but the result wasn't so spectacular.'

Szust is one of a number of very active street photographers in Poland and he cites in particular the photographers in the Magnum Photo Agency and the Polish-only collective Un-posed as major influences. On his website it says that 'most of his photographs are attempts to comprehend the chaos in public spaces' with an 'empathy and joy of every situation' that might 'turn a simple journey around town into something almost magical'. His floating man is a simple journey made magical.



Ilya SHTUTSA

b. 1972, St. Petersburg, Russia

Photograph Kiev, July 2012

www.flickr.com/photos/krysolove

www.observecollective.com

Inspiration Matt Stuart, Sergey Maximishin, Gueorgui Pinkhassov Harry Gruyaert.

This is a perspective-bending

photograph where a seemingly giant woman is about to carefully cover a priest and two policemen with her shawl. The woman could be a matador. Or a waiter – she has that peculiar stance of someone laying a table.

Then there are the three men. The conversation between them appears friendly, there are faint smiles in the sunshine. The priest is making a point with his hands, the one visible policeman listens intently. This does not seem like a day for crime, just for friendly banter. But we still come back to the woman; she is not part of the conversation but she has ambled into the scene and provided a lucky moment for the photographer.

Ilya Shtutsa is consistently 'lucky'. You need only look at the opening page on his Flickr account to catch his keen sense of composition. Nothing too skewed, and he's always happy to break up the perspective. In fact that could be his trademark: people or things blocking the view but actually making the view.

There is a problem in trying to describe Shtutsa's work because as soon as you think you've unravelled the approach, another image come along to suggest other slight shifts in style. However, Shtutsa does like a lower perspective; you imagine he bends his knees a lot to get 'his view' which means the bottom half of people to partly fill up the frame, but with the main action a little further away. The woman laying out her shawl is a good example. Shtutsa's take is less flamboyant:

'It was taken in Kiev Pechersk Lavra in Kiev. These two policemen and the priest appeared interesting, and they were talking without paying any attention to me. Then there came the woman who began to put on her shawl before entering the church. And by chance this picture came out of all this.'

Shtutsa, who is a member of the Observe collective, neatly sums up his story:

'I was born in 1972 in the Far East of Russia. I was about twelve when I got my first camera. It was the simplest thing, a Smena 8M. I believe that probably each Soviet child had such a toy. I was taking a lot of pictures of all that surrounded me, but when I was 18 my interest in photography faded away. It took me 20 more years to resurrect it. It happened almost accidentally, when I got a cellphone with a very small camera inside. Mobile photography captured my mind, and then I found an article in a photo magazine about Matt Stuart, Nick Turpin and David Solomons that made me realize what cameras are for. After this it was just a matter of time before I bought my first DSLR and began shooting street.'



Paul RUSSELL

b.1966, Weymouth, United Kingdom

Photograph London, 2015

www.paulrussell.info

www.in-public.com

Inspiration Tony Ray-Jones,
Robert Frank, Mark Powell

This Paul Russell photograph

catches a typical contemporary London street scene, and indeed one common in many other cities in the world similarly caught in perpetual 'building site' mode. Yet for the keen-eyed or nostalgic it carries at its heart – dead centre – a subtle echo of a classic Henri Cartier-Bresson photo from Paris in 1932, *Derrière la Gare Saint-Lazare*, otherwise known in English as 'the man jumping a puddle'.

The man in the middle is a whole story on his own. Cartier-Bresson's photograph has a poster in the background showing a leaping acrobat; this businessman in sunglasses, tightly clutching a briefcase – and using his mobile phone – strides nonchalantly off the tightrope-like piece of wood. This is business and performance. And decisively his front foot is forever off the ground, exactly like Bresson's man jumping the puddle.

But Russell's intricate photograph also has a left and a right, giving more stories. The hard-hatted construction worker quietly leans back to read something on a sheet of paper; while the woman walking out of the picture perfectly completes the balance. Like the businessman, she happily goes about her day, but while listening to music, the soundtrack to the scene that we will never hear.

Russell, who has been a member of iN-PUBLIC since 2010, is known for a very particular take on Englishness. It would be easy to call him a hybrid of Martin Parr and Tony Ray-Jones, but his own body of work is distinctive enough to influence others. The key is a precise intelligence – he is very good with words – but also his wry humour. He recalls how he took the photograph:

'Like most of my photos, this one was taken on a daytrip from my home in Weymouth. It's quite an unusual photograph for me, in that when I'm wandering around taking pictures I try not to retrace my steps, as I find that boring. But on this London visit I made a point of going back through this junction in Soho a few times as it looked quite promising, with human traffic from several directions being forced together, and the feeling of an area in transition. I never hang around in one area to take shots, as this feels like "cheating" to me. The second or third time I passed through the area, the besuited man caught my eye, as he was walking on top of a long piece of red and white painted timber while other pedestrians were choosing the more obvious pavement areas. It seemed like a small, jaunty act of rebellion on his part. The young woman then walked very quickly in front of the shot I had intended to take, and the plan changed – I waited a fraction longer and managed to get both her and the beam walker in shot, with the construction worker acting as the stationary anchor on the left. The beam walker became beam jumper. One zone-focused shot with the FujiFilm X100, and mercifully with a very fast shutter speed that froze the woman close to me.'



Alain LABOILE

b.1968, Bordeaux, France

Photograph Arbis, France, 2011

www.laboile.com

Inspiration none.

As soon as you start

considering Alan Laboile, some adjustment is required. Ask him to name the photographers who have inspired him and the question flies over his head; it is not relevant. His photographic life has evolved completely cut off from the mainland, as he partly explains:

'It is frequently said, as an absolute truth, that photographers were forever inspired by other photographers. I disagree. When I started in photography, almost accidentally, I was completely ignorant about technique or photographic culture. My passion for entomology led me to macro photography and then I turned my lens to my growing family. When I started to share my family album on social networks, people told me that my work reminded them of Sally Mann. I didn't know who she was.'

We are therefore shipwrecked with our assumption of a family home brimming with photography books. However, Laboile has his own book, *At the Edge of the World*, (2015), with an introduction by the photographer Jock Sturges, who sums it up perfectly: 'This work feeds my eyes and soul like nothing I have ever seen.'

Laboile acknowledges his mentor: 'As for you, Jock Sturges, you are the one who awakened me to the photographic life and brought me confidence and a future...'

Laboile lives in rural France; his photography has grown with his family that is his wife but mainly his six children. Strictly speaking he is not a street photographer, because no streets fill the background, but the spirit of street photography is there, without question. Laboile mentions the term, 'Family Street Photography', which connects with the family of street photography.

His pictures touch the theatre and imagination of children everywhere. His children play exactly the same way as the street kids photographed by Helen Levitt in New York during the 1940s. Ultimately, they recall the intimate family photographs of Larry Towell and Emmet Gowin but particularly Sally Mann's *Immediate Family* (1992). This is inescapable, but attempting to neatly fit Laboile probably remains unfair. We must accept his stance: 'I rarely purchase photography books. I stay away from trends and from photographic influences.'

Laboile's photographs are independent. The example here catches the joy of childhood, the bright tones celebrate black and white photography. The arch of water thrown by the boy frames the child behind, the balance and shape are extraordinary. And the mood is intensified by the blur, the impact would be less if it were perfectly focused.

But one question burns: How would he fare on the streets with his camera?

'I like big cities, because I know that I don't have to live in them. I enjoyed São Paulo, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Buenos Aires, but I brought only a few images back. I have many photographic ideas or projects, all consigned to a notebook. The daily documentation of my family life is a full-time job, but I don't miss inspiration for the future.'

'I travel a lot with my work exhibited worldwide, However I keep living the same life with my family, in the deep countryside, isolated from the photographic world. We used to say that we're living at the edge of the world. I like making photographs, but that doesn't make me a lover of photography.'



Florence OLIVER

b.1962, Saint-Nazaire, Brittany, France

Photograph Biarritz, France, summer 2015

www.instagram.com/mabelmorrison

Inspiration Ernst Haas, Saul Leiter, Viviane Sassen

Florence Oliver, who uses the name Mabel Morison on Instagram, uses her iPhone 6 mainly to take delicate photographs by the sea in south-west France. There's not a lot of variation, and she could be compared to a painter setting up her easel each day to paint from the same spot, where the only thing that changes might be the light.

The one constant is her use of glass, as a filter or to reflect back, and often to do both at the same time. The images are consistently beautiful and she frequently uses her own reflection. Indeed, though layered and anonymous, she is the subject. The sea, sky, beach, parasols, and other people are bit-part players, all interchangeable for different scenes. The overall feeling is one of lazy summer days, fading sunshine with time left to amble and maybe have a dip in the sea.

They also evoke the past, in a dream-like way; they look a little like old autochromes by Jaques Henri Lartigue, who recorded privileged lives in similar settings in the 1920s and 1930s. With some photographers, there are maybe a handful of images that press forward, or just one that stands out, but with Oliver it's one long, languorous walk through fine images. Every one is a pleasure. But for now this particular photo represents all of her images.

It looks like a watercolour with all its muted colours, and you genuinely expect to see a signature in the bottom right-hand corner. The boardwalk reflection is an expensive fur coat, and Oliver's slightly profiled head includes a painterly swimmer sitting, resting before going back to swim. Its sheer elegance, where photography – and maybe iPhone photography in particular – meets fine art.

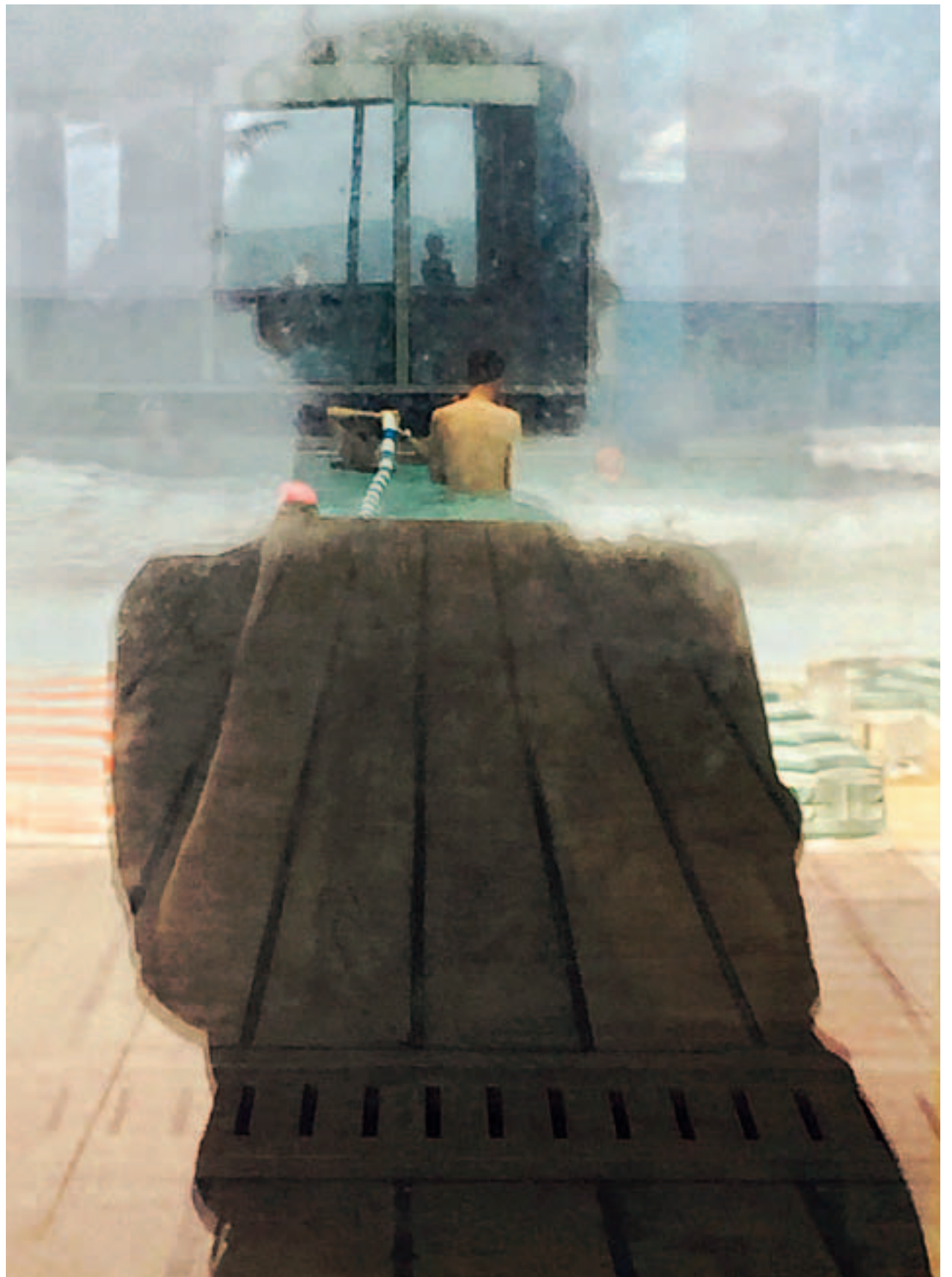
In her simple (left unedited) English she tells us more, and it all makes perfect sense:

'I am a painter and amateur photographer. I live in France, in Marseille. I'm doing photo for pleasure since two years, and with a smartphone is much spontaneous, fun, and always in your pocket!

'This photo was taken during the summer of 2015 in Biarritz, in the south-west of France. I utilise iPhone 6 and sometimes Snapseed app to correct contrasts and colours. This photo is a reflecting story and a kind of selfie. It was taken facing the sea. Choreography games and reflections from the windows of the pool and beach.

'My photos are in the form of collages or overlays but I never manipulate the image. Looking, mirrors, games, reflections, optical illusions. I like to be between abstract and reality, between photo and painting.'

Finally, just look at her points of inspiration; they make good sense, too. Saul Leiter, who was also a gifted painter, would love Oliver's photos. That really is the point, because a smart-phone photographer like Oliver is equally, if not more so, immersed in the world of art.



Sarolta GYOKER

b. Hungary. Lives: Ottawa, Canada

Photograph Ottawa, January 2015

www.facebook.com/sarolta

Inspiration Masao Yamamoto, Bruce Davidson, Alexander Rodchenko

This image might initially seem an unusual choice for a street photograph, because no street is visible. But consider Josef Koudelka's black dog in the snow, an iconic image and the cover for his book, *Exiles*, which is frequently cited by street photographers as hugely influential. Snow both disguises and enhances everything, whether on grass or street.

Sarolta Gyoker (known as Sasa) is acutely aware of this, as she explains:

'I am very much drawn to the aesthetic of winter, i.e., two graphic elements that the snow helps to reveal, be it animals, humans, the curvature of branches, or any odd objects. I find the whiteness of the snow is a perfect background to observe these in winter. I tend to take solitary walks with my camera at lunchtime. The day when this shot was taken, I did not expect to find too many living creatures in the streets, given the freezing cold. And then, just when I happened to turn back at the end of my walk, I was happy to notice a dog-walker herding quite a few marvellously disobedient dogs back to his car. Given the sun that day, they also cast a lovely shadow on the snow.'

This is a stunning photograph, in shape and mood: a variety of dogs in a pristine white landscape. You can't hear photographs, but this one has the muffled crunch of snow. And bright, bright light! You keep looking at the dog on the near left, wishing to see just a little more of its head. But it doesn't matter, the composition is close to perfect. Like birds flying in formation in the sky, but reversed. Indeed birds in the sky are one of Gyoker's subjects.

Gyoker was born in 'Communist Hungary'; her father was an architect and an avid photographer. When she came to Canada she studied philosophy and eventually did an MA in Art History. Working as a Curatorial Assistant at the National Gallery of Canada, she also enrolled in a private school to learn graphic design, which is another abiding passion. All this has gone into her photography, as she concludes:

'Photography has always been a latent passion before becoming a strong one some eight or so years ago. It allows me to enter a (semi-) meditative state, be it on the street or in a forest.'

Gyoker has won a few photographic prizes and produced a Blurb book called *Of Trees and Birds and Snow and Silence*. Her silent photographs deserve hearing a little more.







7

Aaron ALEXANDER

b.1979, Oregon, United States.
Lives: Taiwan

Photograph Taipei, Taiwan, November
2011

[www.flickr.com/photos/
ant eater theater](http://www.flickr.com/photos/ant eater theater)

Inspiration Nils Jorgensen, Jeff
Mermelstein, Garry Winogrand.

Some photographers take

photographs that please them and leave others to unravel any meaning, but it is interesting to single out one image from a photographer and then push him or her to tell its story and describe what they then feel about it. Aaron Alexander, an American living in Taiwan, has a clear-eyed perspective on his photography and much else. His words need little embellishment:

‘I was going for a late-day stroll with my wife. When I chanced upon the old guy sleeping on the bench, I didn’t think much of it at first. Public snoozing is common here, and I’ve taken lots of similar shots before. There’s not much challenge in shooting a passive, vulnerable, unconscious subject. Yet something about the dog seemed to add that ever elusive little extra something, so why not? It’s always better to try and to fail, than never try at all, etc. Since the sun was setting, the light hit the lens to create what seemed like some rather atrocious flare. It took one shot to see just how “bad” it was, so I used my hand as a shade for every shot after that (maybe ten). As it turned out, that first shot was the only one that worked. The rest were just of a guy sleeping on a bench.

‘As for why it works – if it works at all – it’s clearly the flare. And what’s the appeal of flare? Is it the religious or spiritual association with slanted light? For a while I wasn’t too crazy about the image for that reason. I’ve seen hundreds (thousands) of shots with similarly “inspired” light. Like silhouettes, cross-walk stripes, or gratuitously geometric compositions, it just becomes familiar. Then the dog began to work on me. The eye contact seems compelling (despite what I think about not being able to tolerate it). The fact that the guy is in the twilight of his life also seems significant. It wouldn’t be the same had he been younger. Maybe it evokes a feeling of transition or passing (i.e., death), particularly with the late evening light. I imagine that as we age, we get tired more easily. Perhaps napping becomes something of a pastime. One could think of it as a gentle easing into death. And then one day you lie down for a nap from which you never wake up. If you’re lucky, you will have had someone to see you through, even if that someone is just a dog.’

What else to say? The man in the waiting room for heaven sleeps on bench number six; politely, he has taken his shoes off and the dog points with one leg, which complements the slanting light, everything is balance and harmony.

Alexander does little social media, except Flickr, where he goes by the name of Aaron Aardvark, AntEater Theater. He says it’s partly a gag but it keeps him humble. He prefers to ‘fly under the radar’ adding that ‘so much Internet culture seems to be about vanity and self-promotion.’ It’s almost a pity to disturb him – like the man sleeping – but he is absolutely right.

Taras BYCHKO

b.1987, Lviv, Ukraine

Photograph Lviv, June 2014

www.flickr.com/photos/tarasbychko

www.instagram.com/tas0ma

www.instagram.com/380collective

Inspiration Saul Leiter, Josef

Koudelka, Daidō Moriyama,

Trent Parke

The first point to make about

this photograph is that Taras Bychko was a little resistant to it being chosen to represent his work; he believes that he has better photographs, and he may be right. Bychko pointedly pushed one colour photograph: a looking-down perspective of a clear hand print on a snow-covered ledge, while on the street below a man walks past with a red umbrella. There are shapes and rust colours, it's clever, and it will no doubt garner praise in the street photography community. But arguably, although it has mystery, it lacks soul, character or depth; it is not a photograph to linger upon, to truly fire the imagination.

The photograph chosen here has all those attributes, and it also has a timeless quality – that gives it its depth – made possible by the black and white tones. It seems slightly incongruous to note that Bychko took this with a modern Fuji X20 camera, and then converted it into mono. His account of taking the photograph is matter of fact:

'I remember that I was doing something at home, and casually looked out through the window. My attention was caught by this man who looked from another time. He was moving quickly and I ran for the camera. But when I came back he had gone away. But I quickly went to the other side of my home and made this picture. I made this photo from my fourth-floor flat.'

The details, then, are mundane, but the man from another time remains fixed, gazing in the street below. The present – as we know it and expect it to be – is completely absent. The dark clothes offer no modern outline, but the hat might place him in Los Angeles, or Vienna in the 1940s. The power and telephone lines, long gone in some parts of the world, add an old-time feel and the man's walking stick might give a clue to his older age, too. Perhaps the photo is a film still, from *The Third Man* or a Hitchcock thriller. The bird on the wire, a crow probably, sets the tension for the story.

So is Bychko caught between the past and the present, between colour and black and white? His Instagram account suggests he is undecided; there is a mixture, and perhaps no choice is required just yet. Bychko has been taking street photographs for little more than three years and considers himself self-taught from looking at photography books. However, he has a folio where you keep looking; it's consistently interesting and every now and then, a picture hits... you stop to take in the composition, light or colour. Roland Barthes in his famous book, *Camera Lucida* (1980), used the word 'punctum' for something like this: that which pricks the mind's eye. So far, this might be the photograph by Bychko with the most fiction.

