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CAMERA *Arts*



Untitled. ©Lynn Goldsmith



HUMANITAS:



Beautiful Nuns, New Swami Narayan Hindu Temple, Bhuj, Gujarat, India.

The Photography of Fredric Roberts

Interview by Tim Anderson

For both Humanitas I and II, how did you decide where to photograph?

I spent 30 years in another career. Two things happened during this period: one was I traveled extensively to third-world countries because of a series of potential deals that were evolving in my business. I began to study the people, not in the context of observing them, but in the context of just watching them. I was fascinated by the cultures; by the way they dealt with the difficulties of their lives. I started going to the region of India 25-30 years ago when their lives were even more rudimentary than they are now.

I used to lecture to groups of CEOs and I would

always begin the talks with a discussion of the meaning of the lives of those in attendance, who were mostly from the corporate world. I could immediately see their eyes rolling. They were trying to figure how quickly they could get out the door. I suggested that this may not be of interest to them, but that they needed to remember the results that I used to get selling companies. And I would tell them that if they didn't have this philosophy of life (that your life is bigger than your business), then I wouldn't take them on as a client. Sometimes they would get it, not in large numbers, but I could see a light going on in their "minds."

On the other hand, when I went to a village in the middle of a rain forest or on a mountain, I

page 18: *Brahmanpuri 2003, Jodhpur, India.*

found that the people who lived there had all the wonderful spiritual and human qualities that you would like to see in everyone you know. They had wonderful relationships. They had children and parents, families and their communities, people and their environment, people and their gods. It was extraordinary to see the way that, despite the fact that they had no toilets, no running water, and no electricity, that these people had extraordinarily rich lives. They created their own art, folk art, and their houses were so beautifully decorated. They have so much integrity in their work, in their religion, and in their relationships. These are people who when I started photography six years ago, I began to look at in a different light. It became more crystallized and began to work itself through my photography.

You took a workshop in 2000, aptly entitled "Beginning Photography." After that one, you took many others. Was it your goal, then, to become a published photographer?

Well, no. Because I love photography and when each workshop at Santa Fe Workshops was completed there was a Friday night slide show in which images that resulted from the class were shown to all the other classes and I couldn't believe I had taken the pictures that were on the screen. I got so much encouragement from the instructors that I immediately fell in love with photography. It became a defining part of my life. It's not like I didn't have a life, though. I was on several different boards and ran scholarship programs for gifted children. Even though I had retired from the corporate world, it's not like I didn't have things to do. So then, however, with my involvement in photography, I began to move away from my other activities and migrate almost totally toward photography. It is so fulfilling and so expressive of what I feel and of who I really am.

How long did it take you after your first workshop to return to India to photograph?

About three years. I first went to Africa, Cuba, Mexico, and Burma with photographic intent, but I did not start photography from a standing start in 2000. In 1986 I went away to think about what I wanted to do with my life. I went to Thailand, China, and Tibet. Tibet was just opening to tourism. I essentially shut down my business for six weeks and went to those countries. I bought a camera for that purpose and took some film. I got on a plane

and flew to Bangkok. While on that plane I read the instruction manual for my new camera: where to put the batteries, etc., and then I just sort of taught myself the basics of photography.

At the end of six weeks I came back and had a bunch of slides and I took a course with a couple who were senior photographers with *National Geographic*. At the end of the weekend, the husband asked me if I had ever studied photography. I told him I hadn't and he asked me if I would like to. He said that he and his wife had never taken a private student but "we would like to teach you." I agreed and went to one critiquing session at their house and it was marvelous. I found out a week later that all the money I had made in my business had been stolen, everything. I went from potential retirement in my life to complete disaster. I went to their house and told them that it wasn't a good time for me to pursue photography and picked up my slides, took them and my lenses and camera and put them in a closet. I didn't look at them for 14 years. Didn't even think about photography for that period. And then in 2000, when I again retired, I tried to find my teacher and found out that he had died of a heart attack. So there I was, without an instructor. So someone suggested I call Santa Fe Workshops. And the rest, as they say, is history.

In the introductory statement to the exhibit at the Rubin Museum, by Deborah Willis, Ph.D. (Guest Curator New York University, Tisch School of the Arts), in New York City, she wrote, "These photographs reveal the rapport Roberts establishes with his subjects as well as their own sense of elegance and self-possession." What do you think she meant by that comment?

That comment means that I have a great deal of respect for them. As they become more "civilized" I find that to be somewhat sad. So in that regard, I'm kind of counter-culture. I'd like to see these people maintain their culture, and still have antibiotics... better nutrition. As an example, on a recent trip to that region, I flew to the middle of nowhere, hiked to the middle of nowhere, and ended up in the middle of nowhere in the mountains. The people in the village were watching satellite TV, doing karaoke, and wearing Armani T-shirts. And this happens because the Internet and satellite TV

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Harijan Beauty, Ludiya Village near Bhuj, Gujarat, India.

Making Chapatis, Dasada Village near Zainabad, Gujarat.





Old Monk, Shwe Yan Pyay 2002, Naung Shwe, Myanmar.

Kawant Eyes, Kawant, Gujarat, India



are in the process of homogenizing the world. In some sense, it's a tragedy. And the point is, rather than shooting skateboarders in LA, which anyone can do, I want to shoot people whose culture may be evaporating. So, I'm really doing three things in parallel: one, I'm trying to make beautiful images that people will love; two, I want to tell the story of these relationships of these values; and, three, I'm trying to preserve in whatever way I can these vanishing cultures and civilizations.

What do you tell new photographers/ students about going into the business?

You need to go to the best liberal arts college. You need to study history, philosophy, early civilizations, and architecture. You need to major in English and French Literature. You get to get a broad-based, but firm grounding in the humanities and in a liberal arts education.

And what that does, is gives you a context, a structure, a system through which you can filter information through which you see the world. It will change the nature of what you see and what you think. The thing about photography is that it is a skill, a craft. But learning to be an artist is about learning what's in your head.

What I am saying to these people is that you have to be more concerned with developing your soul, than with getting the lens in focus, which is still something that is very difficult for me.

What kind of camera do you use?

Canon 1DS-MkII. And I use an Epson 2200, for proofing only, and Nash Editions for my archival printing. And they use an Epson 9800, with archival pigment inks. I print everything on Epson Premium Luster paper because it has the broadest spectrum of colors. CA

The next project for Fred Roberts will be about devotion, both secular and religious.

Humanitas (2004) and Humanitas II (fall, 2006) are both published by Hylas Publishing (www.hylaspublishing.com).

The Rubin Museum of Art showing will run September 29, 2006 through February 27, 2007.

top: Meer Girl and Boy, Dasada Village, near Zainabad, Gujarat; bottom: Kali Holy Man, Delhi, India 2003.

