

Mike Harris, Den Bosch (NL), is a documentary photographer and outdoorsman who convinced his way to silver at SO 2013. He presents uniquely stylised versions of the most non-clichéd social scenarios.

Interview

by:
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Mike Harris

Silver

Q. Good morning Mike Harris, I have an interesting question to ask you. How much do you like being photographed yourself?

MH. Good morning. Many photographers do not like it but I think it is a necessity. As a photographer there is something wrong if you don't like being photographed. A conflict might emerge as you ask people that pose for you to give you something. If you are not comfortable with that yourself you have a problem as a social photographer, in my opinion. I also think I pick up things from that, I learn how people feel when they are being photographed so it is good for my process when I experience this.

Q. Do you think you have a full appreciation of how you came to be considered, and eventually be a winner at SO 2013?

MH. I think every contest has uncertain sides as you cannot predict outcomes. It is easy to say now that I understand why I won but I had the same work entered in other contests where I did not win.

Another reason I think I might be one of the winners is that I was able to put a lot of time in the project. This does not happen very often. This was a community art project commissioned

by Het Makershuis in which I could employ my own concept. They enabled me to work for ten months on this special project.

Q. Do you prefer other competitions to PANL SO 2013?

MH. What was good with SO 2013 is that you were judged on your portfolio and photographic identity. There are not many contests with this approach. This was why I entered and thought it might be worthwhile. I think I do have an uncommon style for a documentary but there was no guarantee that the jury would view this favourably.

Q. Is your submitted work of the 'now' you think?

MH. I think it is. Of course photography in this style has been around for a while, but not on the mainstream circuit. I view a lot of photography and I am also a keen collector of photo books, so I think I know what is going on. I am deliberately looking for a style that is modern but communicates on a conceptual level. The subjects I photographed for this series are usually approached in a very traditional way. The subject is a neighbourhood in city in the Netherlands, which is designated as a 'problem area'. There is a tradition in international photography, from the start of social documentary photography in the late 19th century, where subjects like this are approached with a humanistic point of view and where the photographer tries to create understanding. This is a classic social documentary style in which the problems and existing prejudices are explained, but in doing so, the attention remains on the problems. The prejudice is only strengthened. What I tried to do is make a series of this neighbourhood in which you could not recognise this cliché.

Q. Can you explain a bit about the challenges you had with this project? About this particular neighbourhood and social stigma etc.?

MH. The challenges were to gain the trust of the people in this area and convince them to participate in the project. Long before I even started taking pictures I did about 20 interviews with all kinds of people including social workers, the principal of the local school and people from the housing association etc. This did not help me too much as all these people thought they knew the area and pointed towards the same people I was not looking for. I was not looking for the stereotype. I was looking for the different people, those who would not fit the cliché. I had to avoid a lot of things like tattoos and pit bulls; things associated with crime, child abuse and drugs. This has been quite an intensive search and in the end I decided I would create this picture in a different way by showing an alternative reality. Content that was more or less an illusion of truth, just as the existing image is.

Q. Have these experiences and challenges in fact changed you?

MH. It was quite a project, certainly. Yeah, it has changed... well, it has influenced me into new understandings, especially when it comes to ethics. I am always thinking about the ethics in social documentary but in this case it was even stronger. You ask something from people living in this area and for those people participating in the project it is not necessarily to their own benefit. When I started I told them the series would be published in a booklet and distributed door-to-door throughout the neighbourhood. What happened next however, was that some of the subjects became afraid of real or imagined consequences. "How will the other people in the neighbourhood react?" "Will I get into bother and trouble because of this?" I had to then undertake a meticulous process of explaining what could indeed be consequences set against the style in which I worked. I showed them examples of my own work and that of other photography styles, those which I assumed for them, would be recognisable as they were more classical or 'nicer'. I did my best to explain this and went back later with some prints of the photos I had made. These were the shots I imagined they would like to hang on their walls or give to their children etc. Next I would show them the photo I would actually use, in the booklet. It was never the classical image one would expect to find within a journalistic tradition and especially not by persons who would usually only read mainstream newspapers and magazines.

Q. Most people do not have a clue what photographers actually do. Is it so that to capture passion it takes some involved thinking?

MH. I think a good documentary photographer is an anthropologist. Like an anthropologist, I did the research before I started and I also brought it back to the people, explaining what I did. Even before I edited the booklet and later on the competition portfolio, I went back to the people and showed them the context within which the image would be used. The idea was that it would bring something good for the neighbourhood and similar neighbourhoods in general so I had to be careful that it would not work the other way around. My concept should be in it, it ought to make a statement, and at the same time not be received badly in and outside the neighbourhood. People should not be irritated by it. That would be missing the point.

Q. Do you see yourself doing a follow-up?

MH. Well, I thought about that. One of the ideas is to do a similar project in a very different neighbourhood, like in a fancy neighbourhood. To produce the same series with only wealthy people so that when you

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put them both together you would not be able to tell which is which.

In a broader context it is also about showing that as a documentary photographer you can create every truth you want. You can make different stories without lying. It is also a comment on press photography in general, as mostly you find the same clichés repeated over and over which give people in these areas no chance. This is also because there is no time within press photography to go deeply into the subject.

Q. Social documentary maker, anthropologist, photographer, would you also call yourself an artist?

MH. No. I call myself a photographer because the word 'artist' is abused very often. The words autonomous and conceptual are also abused too often; I am a photographer and nothing more than that.

Q. I think you are familiar with the statements from the Yahoo CEO (Marissa Meyers), who had a few things to say about the future or lack of future for professional photographers vis-a-vis encroaching digital technology and the tremendous increase in amateur photographers. Do you find such analysis about there being big problems ahead worthy?

MH. I don't think so. In this time it is more difficult to be a photographer because there are more good photographers, more educated photographers - that's the problem. As far as the hobby and amateur photographers are concerned I do not see a problem as their work is mainly used for media which did not exist before. To compare it to when literacy increased; it did not produce more great literature. People could read and write but could not produce literature. It is the same thing with photography.

Q. Major media houses have been closing their photography departments. Does this mean that photographers have lost a huge potential market to sell into?

MH. I think as long as you produce..., of course I am not blind to this, but it is also not completely new. It has always been that you have to be a good entrepreneur as well as a good photographer. That earns you money and assignments. It has never been easy for a documentary photographer. The problem is more precisely for commercial photographers who need a lot of income. I am

not a commercial photographer. I am happy I can make a living from photography and keep on taking pictures but I do not need lots of money. If you work hard it is possible for any decent photographer to make a living from it, not get rich; that is something else entirely. I think 15-20 years ago there were many photographers who were making almost too much money. That's over. But it is not a problem for me. I also think you will get different answers to this question from different photographers. I even know photographers who have stopped taking pictures due to frustration with the current economy, but my conclusion is that they were doing it in the first place to make money. Money is not my motivation and if this was your motivation you would have a problem now.

Q. Have I uncovered you as an idealist?

MH. Maybe I am, but I think all good documentary photographers from the past and present are in that sense idealists. This is the basis of social documentary, you want to tell a story, show something, you want to make a difference.

Q. What are your ideas about the role of the photographer and your vision for photography? Is there still space for your 'art'?

MH. My role is to show people who cannot be at that place, at that time, how things look; to broaden their mind, knowledge, understanding and perception of the things around them. This can be done in different ways and there is no objective photography. I think if you ask ten photo journalists whether their photography is objective or not, that eight will say "yes it is". I do not believe in this kind of thing. It is always biased, within a certain style. Journalism has an iconography and people are used to it and when they do see it they tend to say to themselves that it must be true because it is delivered in a newspaper-like, journalistic style. My mission is to show that every image should be distrusted, whether it is staged, commercial photography, or whether it is in a newspaper. It is only an interpretation of the truth. It is only one of the possible realities. A skilled photographer, with his technique and style can change reality. From one situation he can make different realities. I hope, but I am not too optimistic, that when people look at my photographs, that they would think about this. They would first ask themselves whether it is staged or not. Is this documentary or not.

Q. Photoshop?

MH. Well, that happens as well... In a way Photoshop has always been there, in the form of dark room tricks. It is more important to distinguish between photographs that are staged or not. It is about people asking themselves whether there is more truth in a documentary image than there is in a staged

image. What's the difference? The difference is with the ethics and morals of photo journalism. People trust and rely on the image when it is in a newspaper and in other mediums it is not so necessarily. I hope people start thinking for themselves and interpret the images they see in newspapers and magazines and realise that what they see is just an interpretation of the photographer at any time. With my technique I aim to mimic the style of staged photography. Overdoing composition, extreme use of colour, thus creating a theatrical image. I hope it will confuse the spectator and make people aware of the line between documentary and staged photography.

Q. Do you think SO 2023 would bear any significant comparison to SO 2013?

MH. I think it could be more or less the same especially when you look at the three winners. I think this photography could still be made in 2023 without being obsolete. As far as Photoshop and new techniques are concerned, if you look at the competition shortlist, I do not think that there are many nominations with a lot of Photoshop in them. If it is not there now why should it be there in 2023? When the jury starts judging on different criteria change can happen but if it is the same kind of jury then there will be no change. Photoshop and digital photography have been booming for at least ten years so if it has not happened yet...