

MENTAL LANDSCAPE: A Conversation with Stu Levy

BY CLAIRE SYKES

At the edge of Portland, Oregon's Washington Park, with its roses, Japanese gardens and forest trails, Stu Levy welcomes me into his bungalow home. Right away he gives me a tour of the art that he and his wife, Cris Maranze, collected over 35 years — images by photographers like Imogene Cunningham, Brett and Edward Weston, and Josef Sudek. In the living room it's books, magazines and papers; Native American baskets and pottery; and an upright piano, huge stereo speakers, a guitar case on its side, a conga drum and another drum that he tells me is from Ghana — nearly every surface covered, as if caught in the midst of a creative act. From the sofa, I glance into a room across the hall that brims with stacks of books, papers and photographs, the scene divided by the glass panes of French doors. And then it hits me.

Claire Sykes: I feel like I'm sitting in one of your grid-portraits.

Stu Levy: One early impetus for doing those portraits had to do with issues of stuff in my life, and how our possessions define us. Even if the person wasn't in the photo, somebody who knew them well could look at it and say, Oh, they always have that in their liv-



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ing room, or whatever. The objects are also part of the portrait.

I've recently started thinking about the grid-portraits as miniature movies of a person's life. We follow a person on certain pathways — in this room, in another room, at different times — and we remember this frame and that frame and another frame. And they are combined into the grid-portrait, a sort of memory trail of the person through these different aspects.

CS: You've photographed mostly artists, musicians and craftspeople — some famous, like artist David Hockney, musician Graham Nash, and photographers Jerry Uelsmann and Walter Chappell. But also the owner of a rock shop, a volunteer disc jockey and a Portland mayor. To me, a grid-portrait gives a more complete picture of the person than a straight-shot portrait.

SL: A straight portrait represents one fraction of a second, and I wanted to tell more of a story. The grid-portrait and my write-up about the person, explaining how I met them or know them, and a little bit about them, are combined in the final piece of art.

CS: I've enjoyed reading all 34 of them in your book *Grid-Portraits* (Nazraeli Press, 2010), your second monograph. Then there's your first monograph, a single grid-portrait of photograph-

Above: Stu Levy Opposite: *Sailboat and Shadow* (Golden Gate Bridge #176), 1994



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Gordon Gilkey

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er Carl Chiarenza, *One Picture Book #30, titled Cranial Czar, Eh?* (Nazraeli Press, 2005). And your latest, of Jerry Uelsmann — *One Picture Book #75, Honk If You Love Steiglitz*. Your other main body of work is made up of your landscapes, which are so lush and expertly crafted. What does photography say for you that no other medium can?

SL: Photography creates an illusion of reality. In a sense, it's one of the more evolved abstractions because of the intensity of the claim that it's recreating reality, when in fact it's not. It condenses a three-dimensional world with colors and sounds into a two-dimensional world, either in somewhat reasonable colors or in shades of gray that don't have a one-to-one correspondence, necessarily, to the reality.

One of the things I learned from Ansel Adams was that he highly interpreted things. He had a concept of how he was going to manipulate a scene through exposure, development, filtration and printing that created a different reality for him, and his art shared that alternate reality. So photography can pull off that illusion. When I realized that I was able to participate in that, it really excited me.

CS: As a child growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio in the '50s, how



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Barbara Crane

did you get into photography?

SL: There was no art in the house, but my parents did take photographs, which were important mostly as family archives. I learned that I could operate the camera at an early age, and I became the family photographer. It could've been a fascination with the camera itself, but also, photography allowed me to socially relate to people, as I was pretty shy. Then, in the sixth grade, I saw a friend develop some prints in his darkroom, and it was as if magic was happening to me.

I became my high school and college yearbook photographer. In college, a friend and I also started a rock 'n' roll cover band. We had a light show and dancers, and ended every evening with a fog machine and a 45-minute version of Jimi Hendrix's "Foxy Lady." When I wasn't playing guitar, I was photographing local groups and bands coming through town, like Iggy Pop, The Grateful Dead and The Rolling Stones.

CS: You became a physician, not a musician. Why?

SL: At the end of high school, I was reading about psychology and psychiatry. I got fascinated with how the mind works and decided to become a psychiatrist. Halfway through medical school, I was exposed to different specialties and got turned on to

clinical medicine.

CS: What about your photography then?

SL: At the end of my second year of med school, in 1972, I went with a classmate to Aspen and did my first backpacking trip, in the Rockies over a couple of 12,000-foot-high passes. That was my first exposure to the wilderness experience and the grand landscape. As I reviewed the photos I made on the trip, I realized I wanted to return to that experience and make more photos. For my residency, I wanted to come west. I landed here in Portland and just fell in love with it.

I had no time for anything extracurricular during my residency. Then, about 1975, I saw a show of Ansel Adams's prints at the Portland Art Museum. That was the first time I saw a print that looked like it had light glowing out of it. And I said, I want to learn how to make a print like that. In the last year of my residency, I finally had the time, so I set up a darkroom in the house and tried to learn printing on my own.

Around then, I came across Eliot Porter's book of photographs, *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado*. It got me interested in environmental and preservation issues and pushed me to photograph places that were threatened, starting with the



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Tiny Bishop and his Rock Shop



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Columbia River Gorge before it was protected.

So I finished my residency and worked as a family physician full-time for a year while my wife finished up her medical residency. Afterwards, in 1978, we took a year and a half off and backpacked around the western U.S. I photographed some places in Utah that weren't flooded by the dam, such as the Escalante area, and the newly designated Bisti/De-Na-Zin Wilderness in New Mexico.

CS: Tell me about the Ansel Adams workshop at Yosemite National Park that you did in 1979.

SL: My main objective was to learn how to make a good print. To do that, I learned that one needs a properly exposed and developed negative that suits the interpretation desired by the photographer. I also learned about the interplay between the emotional content of an image and its tonal interpretation.

The unexpected benefit of the workshop was that I got exposed to the worlds of photography as art and photographers as artists. Two of the other instructors were Paul Caponigro and Roy DeCarava. I started meeting other people whose work I'd been reading about or looking at for years — Jerry Ueslmann, Ruth Bernhard, Arnold Newman, Duane Michals, Olivia Parker.

Three years later, I was working half-time in medicine and became Ansel's workshop assistant. I served as an assistant (and eventually a full-time instructor) 15 times for the Ansel Adams Gallery Workshop and for Friends of Photography.

CS: What about your own workshops?

SL: While I was Ansel's assistant, Portland photographer Stewart Harvey and I were driving back home with all this enthusiasm, and we said, We have to keep this energy going. At that time, there were only a few local photographers making really fine prints. I had advanced the level of my own craft until my prints were as good as anyone's I admired. So we started the Portland Photographic Workshop, in 1982, doing workshops on the Oregon Coast. Our goal was to bring awareness to the photo-art community of ways to improve the craft and artistic aspects. Within eight years, it evolved into the Portland Photographers' Forum, offering print-sharing and critiquing. Stewart and I backed out of that, but I kept up the workshops, called Shore Acres Workshop, which I still do about once a year with Don Kirby, a Santa Fe photographer.

CS: What's the most important thing people learn at these workshops?

SL: We help them visually articulate the emotional message they're trying to convey in their prints. I try to tune into the person's artistic voyage rather than impose my own. It's rewarding to me, especially when someone comes back and I see an evolution in their work.

CS: Your own progress in photography is reflected by 32 national exhibitions and 57 group exhibitions since 1982. I know that your photos are also in permanent collections, including the Cincinnati Art Museum, George Eastman House, High Museum of Art and the Portland Art Museum, which has 82 prints you made in 1995 from vintage Minor White negatives of two Victorian houses here in town. What influences have helped shape your work?

SL: When Stewart and I started the workshops, the other photography group in town was the Interim Group, who brought Minor White to Portland every summer. When I had my first show at Camerawork Gallery in 1982, I was invited to become a part of that group. Minor was known to say something like, Don't just photograph something for what it is; figure out what else it is and try to photograph the "what else." I was attracted to his photographs because I couldn't always see exactly what was going on, in terms of his reconstructing the reality. I could see forms, shapes and tonal aspects that I liked, and trying to recreate how he constructed them and why he reacted that way to the natural landscape fascinated me.

Minor White fit in with surrealism, which I got into in college. René Magritte and others shaped my artistic interests more than the early photographers I was looking at then, like Yousuf Karsh, Henri Cartier-Bresson, W. Eugene Smith and Margaret Bourke-White. But more than anything, probably, it was the artistic and musical energy of the 60s. I felt like I was pushing boundaries in my life and in my appearance, interfacing with the medical profession.

CS: Your grid-portraits sure push boundaries. In your book you write, "Perception involves the visual synthesis of incremental spaces at finite points of time. These photographs explore and challenge our perceptive processes by testing the limits of discontinuity, in both space and time, which our brains will accept in reading an image." Can you elaborate?

SL: In a grid-portrait, I try to line up the edge of one frame with the next precisely, but only in one piece of the photograph. There's something about seeing what appears as continuous, but isn't, that lets us accept other things as continuous, whether or not we know

Opposite: Ice, Oneonta Creek



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that they aren’t.

CS: So if we see one part of a grid-portrait as continuity in the discontinuity, then we’ll extrapolate that continuity for the rest of the photograph?

SL: Exactly. I think that’s how optical illusions work, from what I’ve read about perception. They overload our brain circuitry, and the brain copes by making us think that something else is happening. My grid-portrait of Carl Chiarenza was done in two different rooms, but the ceiling for both is from just one of the rooms. In my grid-portrait of photographer Barbara Crane, I double-exposed the sky from one frame onto the ceiling of her workroom in another frame, to create a blending. So, how far can I take the discontinuity without losing the illusion of continuity? That’s what I’m exploring.

CS: How and when did you create your first grid-portrait?

SL: Cris and I were camping in Utah, in 1985, in a huge rock amphitheater with an overhang. It was too big to photograph, and I thought about David Hockney’s approach, doing it in 90 pieces. I did it, and it was a horrible failure. I tried another landscape that way, and it looked like I’d drawn some black lines through it.

I thought I’d try it one more time. This was in 1986. I wanted to photograph the bridge over the Sandy River in the Columbia Gorge, and Portland photographer Terry Toedtemeier went out there with me. As I was setting up, I did a Polaroid of him. Then I took a film picture of him holding the Polaroid, another of the Polaroid in his pocket, one of just his feet and another of him, then the bridge and the river. That was the first successful grid-portrait, and it just took off from there.

CS: I’ve read that for most of your grid-portraits, the process can take weeks or even months. You say in your book, “This work gives new meaning to ‘The Decisive Moment,’ for the lattice-window view presents a maze of scrambled time and recombinant architecture.”



©STU LEVY

Jerry Uelsmann

SL: Cartier-Bresson’s concept is the fraction of a second before the action happens when you’re pressing the shutter. I say, “The Decisive 12 Hours,” because that’s about how long it takes to do a grid-portrait, usually in two or three four-hour sessions.

First, I scout the subject’s environs for the areas most visually descriptive of their life, and then I solve the problem of how to juxtapose them visually. I look for lines or surfaces that can appear continuous, even if unrelated in the physical space. Then I do a mock-up of the grid-portrait and try to recreate it with the 4x5 film camera. My early mock-ups were poor pencil or pen sketches. Then I started doing 4x5 Polaroids of every image, using a Polaroid holder in the film camera and immediately repeating the shot with film. I used to literally tape the film negatives together and treat them as one giant negative to make a contact print, pin-registering Rubylith® masks over two to three negatives at a time and exposing each section, hoping for perfect alignment. It drove me crazy. Now, I use a digital camera and make a mock-up on the computer. I still use the 4x5 film camera, then scan the separate negatives, assemble them in Photoshop and print from there. And I’ve started



using color film, which still gives me the option of black-and-white.

CS: How have the grid-portraits changed over time?

SL: They started getting more complex by the third or fourth one, when I combined two or three different spaces in one grid-portrait. A breakthrough moment came when I moved the camera position and had the subject and background appear from two different perspectives.

CS: In nearly all of your grid-portraits, you're humorously there in the background — sitting, standing in a doorway or peering through a window. Why do you include yourself?

SL: I'm emphasizing the fact that I'm making a photograph of somebody, and that my presence is affecting the situation. The act of observing changes events; just pointing a camera at someone changes their expression and reactions. The references I had were Lucas Samaras, with him peering in from the edges of the portraits he took, and Alfred Hitchcock's cameo appearances in his movies.

CS: As a photographer, what have you come to know about yourself?

SL: I observe the different sides of myself that are compulsive-

ly organized and impulsively disorganized, and I see the interfaces between them. And I realize that how I feel emotionally is independent of the resulting artwork. I've done some of my favorite photos in moments when everything is perfect in my life and in moments of deepest despair. Just because I feel bad doesn't stop me from working, and that's sort of nice to know. Basically, it's an intellectual decision to do the work. But also — and this applies to any art, occupation or anything — passion is a necessary ingredient. Casualness can give you chance encounters, but it's the passion, and the addiction to pursuing it, that really can translate into success. ▲

Stu Levy's grid-portraits will be exhibited at the Viewpoint Gallery in Sacramento, California, October 9 – November 2, 2013.

Claire Sykes is a freelance writer living in Portland, Oregon. Her articles on photography and other visual arts appear in Afterimage, Art on Paper, Camera Arts, Glass, Graphis, Photo District News, Photo Insider and Communication Arts, among others.