FUJILOVE

ALL THINGS FUJI X

September 2017

DAVE KAI PIPER
DEBARSHI DUTTAGUPTA
JONAS RASK
MICHAEL SCHNABL
ISABEL CORTHIER
FRED ABERY
TOM DI MAGGIO
ANTTI KARPPINEN
NIGEL COOKE
JEFF SANDSTRUM

Arctic Horizon
by Michael Schaake

ISABEL CORTHIER

HOW TO CONNECT WITH PEOPLE IN AN AUTHENTIC WAY

When I was younger and had moved to the big city to study, there was something I never understood. When acquaintances met on the street they would often say, “Hi!” followed by, “How are you?” So it seemed like they were interested but I found out quickly that they weren’t really interested in listeing to the answer; it was just a way of saying hello. But if they didn’t want to listen to the answer, I didn’t see the point of asking the question in the first place! So for a long time I didn’t ask people that question, unless I really wanted to know and was prepared to listen. I just said, “Hello! Enjoy your day!” If I did greet with, “Hello, how are you?” then sometimes me and that person ended up in a bar, having conversations about our love lives, studies, decisions to make in life, etc.

From a young age, I felt I wanted ‘real’ connections with people and no fake interactions. Connecting with people has always fascinated me: the interaction, the discovery, the energy, the expected and unexpected, the observation, the fact that ‘we’re different but all the same’. Every interaction is a discovery to another. Humans are a fascinating species. So no wonder that we like to observe and photograph them!

APPROACHING PEOPLE

It was on the streets of Dublin that first I learned how to approach people. I had just quit my job as an architect and had bought myself one of the first Fujifilm Instax cameras. I started making and selling portraits of people on the streets and in the bars of Dublin. It became a very successful little business.

I discovered that people resonate with the energy you bring as a photographer. For me, photography is not only about the result but mainly about the experience we are creating together. For me it’s about the connection I get with the person photographed, the moment, the beauty I see and capture, and the feeling that this is the ultimate shot I could make in this situation. People I am working with do feel my excitement. They feel I take my job seriously, even though I am often not serious at all.

But how do you connect a build a real connection in a short time?

SHOW RESPECT

I noticed that I always start with an open mind when meeting people. It’s important that you don’t judge or have prejudices. Who knows what a person has gone through? So I would start by approaching people with respect. In my kind of photography it is easy to portray people in poverty without respect. I like to show respect for everybody that I meet in my life. The people with the most difficult lives might even deserve the biggest respect – something they often don’t receive. I always try to capture the dignity of the people.

SHOW REAL INTEREST

I often tell the people exactly what I see, how beautiful the light is or the colours are, or how interesting I find the activity they are doing. Sometimes it's impressive how people survive in very difficult circumstances. I tell them that. I tell them I like the colour of their dress, their funny hairstyle. And then I ask their permission to photograph. Nine times out of ten, it's a 'yes'. Sometimes even just a wink is enough to know whether the person is happy to be photographed or not. Even with your eyes, you can make a sincere connection with a person.

TELL THEM WHY

Always tell the people why you are making photos. If you believe in your own good intentions, people generally don't have a problem being photographed. If you're convinced by the sincere purpose of the images, people will not be bothered by you doing it. Try to be self confident and friendly and don't make it bigger than it is.

BE SINCERE

Being sincere and authentic yourself is the only way to make a real connection. Ask yourself the question: do I really believe in what I am doing?

INVESTIGATE

When you've made an appointment for a portrait session you have the advantage that the person has already agreed to expose him- or herself to you.

It's good to find out more about someone's personality. Have a nice cup of coffee before starting and meet the person behind the face. It's necessary to make a real connection. Be sincerely interested. Ask, "Hi, how are you?", this time willing to know the answer. Is the person nervous, or anxious for the shoot. Are they excited? Do they like to dance? Or meditate? Or read? Or play music?

This will all help you finding poses for your models and show them the way that they really are. Ask them how they would like to be portrayed and what kind of energy they want to be associated with. According to this info, you can choose your lens, angle and lighting in the right way.

You more than likely can't portray a person's personality in just one image of them. Everybody is complex. A person is not just a CEO, a refugee or a housewife. We all are people with a past, with pain, with joy, with dreams. Look for the soul, the essence, the reason of a person.

You can start giving some directions for posing. Often it's the moments in between that shows the soul of a person. So try to capture the reaction not just the action. Often you will have to put your energy and creativity to provoke the right expression that suits the personality. It can be a postive energy but also the other way around.

The famous shot of Winston Churchill by Yousef Karsh springs to mind. Karsh asked Churchill to remove the cigar in his mouth but Churchill refused. Karsh walked up to Churchill supposedly to get a light level and casually pulled the signature cigar from Churchill's lips and walked back toward his camera. As he walked he clicked his camera remote, capturing the 'determined' look on Churchill's face, which was in fact a reflection of his indignancy. The photographer explained afterwards that he had still approached the prime minister with respect.

PREPARE

When I'm abroad, I prepare myself for the trip. I try to understand the cultural codes of the place. It is enriching for myself and while understanding the situation, I get a better experience.

I learn a little vocabulary in the local language. I always carry a little notebook in my backpocket to write my new words. People just love it and find it often funny when I approach them in their own language. That's a very good ice-breaker and it shows your interest in the culture. You put yourself on the level of the people, not above. If the person talks English, French or another common language, they might swap themselves quickly to continue the conversation. In many situations the translator will do the job of explaining why we are there but if I make the first contact with the subject, I find it crucial for good communication during the rest of the photoshoot.

I ask their name and age, and note it in my little notebook. Afterwards I put it in the caption as I want to try and humanize them. After I have asked permission, I make some shots, show them, and then I pull back to let life resume. That's the moment when I start the 'real' shooting. Patience and time is important – something I regret I don't always get when I'm on a job with a team. They think that the first shots are enough. In some circumstances or cultures it's not possible to make a connection, neither ask permission. Try to follow your gut feeling to see how far you can go. And keep in mind that respect and a smile will take you a long way. Never break a holy moment or intimate interaction.

GIVE SOMETHING BACK

After making some photographs, I often show the result. That's sometimes already a very rewarding moment for the person. I often emphasize how beautiful the person is and I see a spark in their eyes. I often make extra pictures especially for them – a family shot is highly appreciated. If possible I print the photos on the little portable Instax printer but nowadays it's also easy to connect with people on Facebook and send them some digital files. I regard it as a part of my job.

KNOW YOUR TECHNIQUE

While shooting, you want to be connected to the people and you want to be in the moment so it is important that you don't think about technique or the gear you're using. That's why you need to master your technique. You choose your lens and make sure your settings are ok. If you have an assistant, make sure you communicate with him so the lighting is set up or easily adaptable.

The lens that I like a lot for portraits is the 56mm F1.2. It has wonderful bokeh and makes people stand out from the background. The 35mm F1.4 is also one of my favorites. It may not be as flattering as a longer lens but I find you feel a bigger connection with the person portrayed. The 55-140mm is a beautiful lens since the compression of the long lens makes the proportions of the face always look nice. But somehow with that lens you feel there's distance to the person, there's less contact.

For the more documentary-style work where I want to capture the scene, I like the 18mm F2. It's an underrated lens with a great angle. The famous 23 mm (35 mm full frame equivalent) is sometimes just too narrow for me to show the context and to tell the story.

I was happily surprised about the great performance of the 16-55mm F2.8. It's really a great all-round lens. It is fast, versatile and still it generates nice bokeh. In small rooms, you can shoot wide open, at the wider end of the focal lengths.

STAY TRUE TO YOURSELF

Shoot what you like and that you consider to be beautiful, not what you think others like. Stay true to yourself. Depending on your own character, your results of a same situation might be completely different than another photographer – not worse, not better.

There's a YouTube video that shows how different photographers portray the same person in very different ways. That shows so much about how we all put so much of our prejudices and ideals into our portrait.

Photographs are a reflection of yourself. It's the way you look at the world. There is a saying: "Smile at the world and the world will smile back." Time and time again, I have found this to be true.

ISABEL CORTHIER

www.isabelcorthier.com