

This Photography Life

Reflections & Photography on Life and Travel

Megan Kwasniak

PHOTOGRAPHER SPOTLIGHT – HARVEY STEIN



1) Thank you so much for being on the blog today Harvey! Please tell us a little bit about yourself. How and when did you start in photography?

Hi Megan, and thank you for interviewing me for your terrific blog. I didn't begin to photograph until I was 22 years old. This is considered "old" these days, so many people now begin to photograph in their teens and major in photography in college. When I was growing up in Pittsburgh, I was into playing sports and studying a lot for my high school classes. I enrolled via scholarship at Carnegie Mellon, a university that I could walk to from my home. Four years later, I earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Metallurgical Engineering. But I was surrounded by students who were art and drama majors in addition to engineering students. I loved my elective classes, including anthropology, English Lit, and Drama. When I graduated, I knew I would not work as an engineer for long. I was always seeking more creative outlets in college than what engineering could provide. After graduation, I wrote short stories, took ceramic classes, and tried to paint. A year after graduation I found myself in Germany in the U.S. Army (I took R.O.T.C. in college and had a two-year obligation to serve in the army). I bought a Zeiss Contaflex camera there to document my experiences and travels during this time. Once I began shooting I knew that photography could be that creative outlet I hungered for. Upon returning to the states, I moved to New York City, enrolled in a graduate program at Columbia University, and took several photo classes. I was hooked and have never looked back. I began shooting in the grimy streets of New York, its people and its decay in the early 1970's. It was thrilling; photography became my profession and my life.



Identical Twins, 1977



Identical Twins, 1976



Identical Twins, 1975

2) **Who would you say were your biggest influencers when you first ventured out onto this journey? Were they photographers, painters or artists in other genres? What was it about them that attracted you to their work?**

My biggest influence was one of my first photo teachers, the important street photographer of the 1970's and 80's, Ben Fernandez. He was a big, rough guy from East Harlem; he was an aggressive, in your face photographer with whom I was fortunate enough to study and then teach for at the New School here in New York. He told me to get a Leica M4, get a 21mm lens and go to Coney Island to photograph. Being the good little student that I was, I did all three. Now, nearly 50 years later, I still have the M4 and 21mm lens and still go to Coney Island. I just signed a contract to do my third book about Coney Island, it will be called **Coney Island People: 50 Years** and will be published in May 2022. Coney is my home away from home.

Other influences include Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and the great Garry Winogrand. Although often lumped together because they became well known together due to their group exhibit at the Museum of Modern

Art in 1967, their work is quite different from one another. But what unites them is that they mostly use the street as the place where they do their photography but in unique and distinctive ways. Each makes me think in a different way and challenges my notions of what a photograph should look like and can be.



Shoot the Freak, Coney Island, 2007



Happy Mermaid, Coney Island, 2010



Jumbo Jet Ticket Taker, Coney Island, 1997

3) Other than New York City, what are some of your favorite places to photograph? Is there any particular city or country you love to come back to over time and if yes, why?

I love photographing in New York City, of the nine books I have had published, six have been shot in New York. And the tenth book, the new Coney Island book will make it seven of ten. I have lived here since the mid-60s and cannot imagine living anywhere else. It's a fascinating and endless city. I am known as a New York photographer, and have been called a visual poet of New York. Next to New York, a favorite country to photograph is Mexico; my book **Mexico Between Life and Death** was published by Kehrer (German publisher) in 2018. The photographs were made during 14 trips to Mexico between 1993 to 2010.

My new love is India, I visited India this January/February, and have made five trips there since 2013. Both countries have a vibrant street life, amazing light and colors, and very curious people who mostly enjoy interacting with travelers and their cameras. I hope to make a book of the India work one of these days. Both countries provide new sights, experiences and shooting opportunities and certainly broaden my education and understanding of the human condition.



Mother and Child on Bus, Veracruz, Mexico, 2007



Man with Huge Caron on Back, San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, 1995



Two Women with Small Child, Mineral de Pozos, 1997

4) How (or if) has the pandemic changed your outlook on the photographic process? Do you feel that the quarantine has limited or liberated you in a way? Were you able to take any photographs during this time or did you mostly forgo making new work altogether focusing on other things?

The pandemic is terrible and has made 2020 very difficult for everyone on this earth. Our country has been completely unprepared for it, and our administration has failed us greatly in handling this scourge. But it hasn't changed my outlook about photography. I love most things about this art form but the pandemic has indeed limited my normal photographic practice. Mostly, I photograph on the streets, and the great social street events in New York, including parades, block parties, crowded gatherings, beaches, etc. All this has been cancelled and neutralized, and who knows when they will return. I miss the action and interaction of the streets and photographing the strange and wonderful people found there. The street is now more surreal than I could ever imagine or arrange. However, since I don't have a car and using public transportation isn't a safe option yet, I have been forced to shoot in my neighborhood the last two months—the

local streets and parks that are so familiar to me that I have overlooked as viable subjects. I have found that people wearing masks are friendly and open to being photographed, and usually easily engaged in conversation.

I also begun a new project to make portraits of the staff and workers of my apartment building—the superintendent in the boiler room, the doormen in the lobby and at the door, the porters gathering the garbage or sweeping the floors, the mail carrier; the people who do all the mundane chores that keep the building running and clean; the jobs that we as tenants take for granted. I've gotten to know the staff a little better and have learned more about their lives, a worthwhile endeavor. While the pandemic is having a negative effect on our lives, it is up to us to stay positive, working and engaged. I've seen some amazing images made as a reaction to the virus and that has to be considered a positive.



Man Holding Broom, Jodhpur, India, 2013



Teacher, Jaisalmer, India, 2013



Man in Orange Turban, Pokran, India 2014

5) **You have authored several books over the course of your career. What would be your best advice for new photographers considering publication of their work in this format? In the digital era we are currently living in, is making books still as important as it was years ago?**

I will always believe that making books is very very important, no matter the time or age. Making photobooks has been a major goal for me, it's very important and informs my work almost totally. My first book, **Parallels: A Look at Twins** was published in 1978 and was very well received. I'm now

working on my tenth book. It doesn't get easier the more books you do, it is still difficult to find a publisher and almost none exist now that will not expect the photographer to pay for it. That wasn't true until the last 10 years ago, so this is a major change. I love the process of doing books—the fact it's all up to the artist, that there are no real deadlines, and the book is the artist's vision in long form. There are so many reasons to do a book, but it's not easy to accomplish. My advice is to become an expert in the subject of the book, whether it's the depiction of a family or a geographic location. My advice is to cover the subject from all angles and sides, to not rush anything, to take time shooting it. All but one of my books has taken me at least six years to shoot, one has taken 40 years, and the next one covers 50 years of photographing. We need to be patient, thorough and complete in the making of the book. Research is important, it's not just about making the images, it's also about learning deeply about the subject. Listen to others, but ultimately, believe in yourself and what you are doing.



The Kiss, New Orleans, LA, 1979



The Laugh, New Orleans, LA, 1979



Two Faces, New Orleans, LA, 1979

6) **What's next for Harvey Stein? What should we be on the lookout for and where can we find your work?**

I have an online exhibit of work from my **Coney Island 40 Years** book with my gallery, Sous Les Etoiles, dates are June 9th through July. Check it out, the link is <http://www.souslesetoilesgallery.net/exhibitions/harvey-stein>

As I've mentioned, I'll have another book published in two years so I am working on that, making prints, editing and sequencing images, writing, conducting interviews and thinking about the book's introduction.

Additionally, my latest book, **Then and There: Mardi Gras 1979**, was to be introduced this April at the Paris Photo New York International Photo Fair here in Manhattan. Of course this was cancelled, so the publisher has postponed the introduction until the September or October. I also conduct travel photo workshops around the world, one was planned to China this fall, that isn't possible but I am busy planning workshops for next year to Myanmar, India, and New Mexico among other destinations. It's a full slate, and I hope that things will be much more "normal" next year for many good things to happen.

Thanks so much for the interview, some of my work can be seen on Facebook, on Instagram @stein.harvey and on my website at www.harveysteinphoto.com



Harvey Stein, self portrait

*** cover photo by Sonia Goydenko