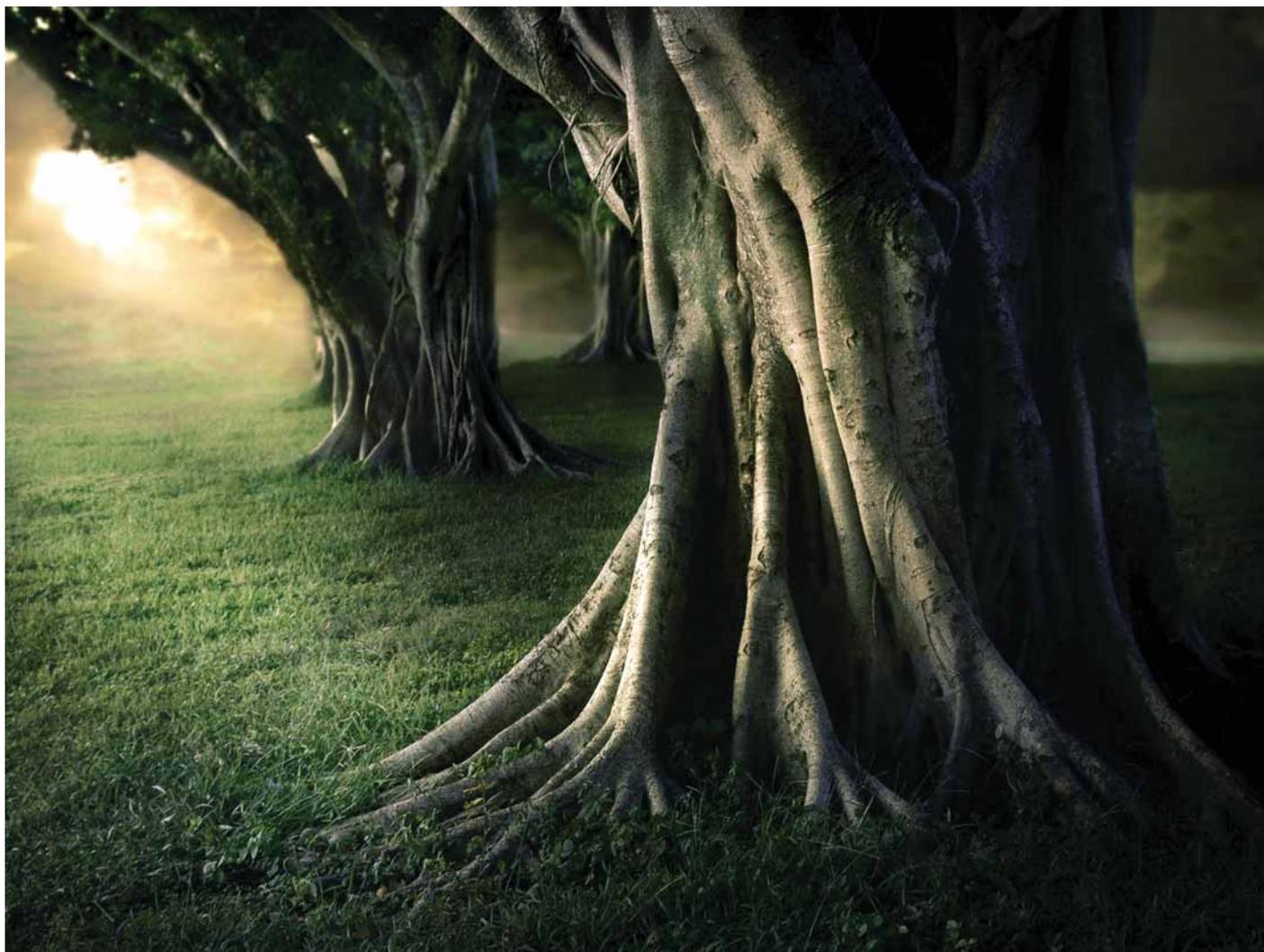


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DANNY LYON: WORLDS TO CONQUER  
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# WORLDS TO CONQUER: THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF DANNY LYON

BY KIM BEIL

In a booth on a quiet side of the Flying Star Café in the small town of Bernalillo, New Mexico, I found Danny Lyon working on an old Mac Powerbook. His heavy grey wool Pendleton coat, thrown across the table, bore a black and red “OCCUPY” button pinned to its lapel.

Lyon, now 70, began photographing seriously when he was a student at the University of Chicago in the early 1960s. When one of his photographs received first prize in a university contest judged by Hugh Edwards, associate curator of prints and drawings at The Art Institute of Chicago, the two embarked upon a friendship that formed the core of Lyon’s emerging professional career. Lyon wrote recently of Edwards’ influence on him during the sixties and seventies: “At the time, I think I printed and edited my pictures so that I could bring them to Hugh for him to look at. After he died [in 1986], I thought, ‘Now who do I show the pictures to?’”

Echoes of Edwards’ influence continue to resonate in Lyon’s work — especially in his writing about photography, as in his retrospective monograph, *Memories of Myself: Essays by Danny Lyon* (Phaidon Press, 2009). *Memories* includes images from nine different projects spanning four decades, as well as writings about each drawn from diaries, letters and interviews that Lyon conducted with his subjects. A number of contemporary essays also accompany the project in Lyon’s singularly lucid prose.

While still a student in Chicago, Lyon joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and made several trips to the South in order to document the group’s actions. His photographs of members participating in demonstrations and sit-ins are iconic records of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s. Recently, in the Delta terminal at the Atlanta airport, Lyon passed one of his own images, blown up to mural size, depicting SNCC workers sitting in at a lunch counter. It’s the only image



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*“The Coal Truck Drivers, Jiexiu, Shanxi Province.”  
From Deep Sea Diver: An American Photographer’s  
Journey in Shanxi, China*



representing the civil rights movement in the airport's history of Atlanta display. While the image is uncredited, Lyon shows me a picture of it on his iPhone and marvels. "This is not a museum; it's a corridor that 25,000 people a day pass in both directions. And they chose that out of a gazillion photographs. I love it. I wish there was more of it," he says, hinting at his ambivalence over the role that the art world has played in the distribution of his work.

Lyon ended his affiliation with SNCC in 1964, opting instead

to work on self-assigned photographic projects without outside editorial pressures and deadlines. The work for which he is perhaps best known began during this period, building on photographs he took in the spring of 1963 at a dirt track motorcycle rally in Wisconsin. The photographs he made as a member of the Outlaws Motorcycle Club became *The Bikeriders* (1967), a book combining Lyon's images with transcriptions from audio recordings he made of the group's members.

Edwards continued his strong support of Lyon during these





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**People come alive in Lyon's photographs,  
seeming to present themselves on their own  
terms before his camera.**

years, giving the young photographer his first solo show at the Art Institute in 1966. A statement from this exhibition, which is reproduced in *Memories of Myself*, clearly articulates Lyon's philosophy of photography during this period, ideas that would also feature in conversations with Edwards, as further commentary in *Memories* attests. The statement, which Lyon identifies as his own, reads:

Of what value is a glance into the face of the wife of a tenant farmer who came from Alabama and holds her family together for a few brief years in a tenement in Chicago in the twentieth century? And what will be its value in fifty years? The pictures are not made to disturb people's consciences but rather to disturb their consciousness. The pictures do not ask you to "help" these people, but something much more difficult; to be briefly and intensely aware of their existence, an existence as real and significant as your own.

The images to which the statement refers were made in the impoverished Uptown section of Chicago during the summer of 1965. They feature young adults and groups of children, often posed on the street in front of graffitied walls or the flat metal body of a vehicle. Sometimes a mother or a father of an infant is included in an approximation of a domestic scene. The remarkable candor of these portraits, made on a Rolleiflex that Lyon borrowed from Edwards, offer the ineffable quality found in the best of Lyon's work — a quality that many writers have tried to explain and many photographers have tried to emulate.

In *Memories*, Lyon alludes to the way he managed to establish relationships with his subjects. In Uptown and Brooklyn, he brought contact prints to share on subsequent visits. He has an easy way with people on the street, whether offering to help fix a car in Knoxville, Tennessee or listening to life stories in Galveston, Texas. Still, none of these anecdotes can fully explain how people come alive in Lyon's photographs, seeming to present themselves on their own terms, with visible frankness, before his camera.

Edwards also noted the unique quality of Lyon's relationship to his subjects in the *Bikeriders* pictures, writing in a letter reproduced in *Memories*:

Thank you and God for no too-often-served social messages in these pictures. In them you evoke and pro-

**"Three Young Men," From *Memories of Myself: Essays by Danny Lyon***

## Lyon's own voice and opinions share the stage with a large cast of characters; his presence is both strongly felt and somewhat dispersed, as in his photographs.

voke emotions and are modest about your own self-expression. ... When I say your pictures this time do all these things I like, I am not implying that you are not felt or recognized in them, because I feel these are yours probably more than any of your other work.

Lyon admits that for years Edwards' comments puzzled him: "How could there be more of me in my pictures, if I had purposefully stayed out of them?" This is one of the central mysteries of the photographic portrait, addressed by a litany of critics and photographers from Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag to Walker Evans and Robert Frank. Especially in work in the vein of new journalism, the question of the photographer's relationship to the people he documents is particularly vexing. Lyon maintained in an interview for a 1991 solo exhibition co-organized by the Center for Creative Photography, "I don't think you can live life 'objectively.' I think the whole idea of 'objective reporting' is a bunch of bullshit."

Lyon achieved other significant recognition during the 1960s, including an invitation to join Magnum and inclusion in John Szarkowski's influential 1964 exhibition, *The Photographer's Eye*, at the Museum of Modern Art. The publication of *The Bikeriders* was followed by two other important book projects, *The Destruction of Lower Manhattan* (Macmillan, 1969) and *Conversations with the Dead: Photographs of Prison Life, with the Letters and Drawings of Billy McCune #122054* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971).

For *Conversations*, Lyon gained access to six prisons in Texas, creating a powerful record of the American prison system while emphasizing the humanity of the prisoners who suffered under its control. The book included not only Lyon's photographs, but also the words and images of prisoners juxtaposed with official prison documents. Lyon recalls, "When I was doing the prison work, there were 12,000 prisoners in Texas, mostly men. There were a quarter of a million prisoners in the United States. Now there are two million, and there are 200,000 in Texas. We have become a nation of wardens."

He continues, "One thing I learned in the civil rights movement was to be neither a slave nor a master. In other words, it is as bad to be a master as it is to be a slave. A lot of people don't understand that, or don't believe it. They say, 'No, I'd rather be a master.' But it's bad to be a master; it's bad for your soul, it's bad for your experience of life. If we insist on locking all of these people up, it's taking something from us, as a people and as a culture."

Each of his books, Lyon feels, is radically different from the last. Then, he says, "As I got older, I turned around and thought,

'Well, what do I do now?' The truth is, I felt with *Conversations with the Dead* that I'd reached the end of developing the photography book for myself. Meaning, I had no more worlds to conquer. So, I became a filmmaker and moved out here [to New Mexico] and spent 10-15 years mostly making films."

His commitment to continual reinvention is also evident in his recent written work. While earlier books drew on material that Lyon gathered and curated — from the collage of official documents and prisoners' drawings in *Conversations* to the interview transcriptions in *Bikeriders* — the heart of Lyon's latest books, *Memories of Myself* and *Deep Sea Diver: An American Photographer's Journey in Shanxi, China* (Phaidon Press, 2011), is his own written commentaries.

Like his mentor, Hugh Edwards, Lyon supports his writing with a web of citations. Even during our brief interview in Bernalillo, his conversation borrowed from sources as diverse as W. H. Auden, Gore Vidal, C. G. Jung, Joseph Conrad and Václav Havel, along with the thoughts and words of at least a half dozen friends and critics. Lyon's own voice and opinions share the stage with a large cast of characters; his presence is both strongly felt and somewhat dispersed, as in his photographs.

This kaleidoscopic style was an aesthetic that Phaidon sought to recreate in *Deep Sea Diver*, a limited edition volume with reproductions of taped-in 8 x 10 silver prints, pages of a typed travelogue, and ephemera. The book's title is couched in referentiality: a piece of advice handed down from Carl Jung to James Joyce, then on to Lyon from a fellow photographer. Prior to embarking on a trip to China, Lyon revealed to this photographer (who remains anonymous in the book) that his son had been in trouble with the law as a result of bipolar disorder. Lyon writes in *Deep Sea Diver*, reprising their conversation about his son, "The funny thing is, the way he acts, the way he speaks, the things he does, I do all those things myself." Lyon's acquaintance then passed on Jung's words to Joyce, who was similarly perplexed by the resonance he saw between his own actions and those of his mentally ill daughter. Jung apparently told Joyce that although both he and his daughter were traveling to the bottom of a river, Joyce was a deep sea diver while his daughter was simply drowning.

Though Lyon titles his book *Deep Sea Diver*, the difficulties he encounters on his trips to Shanxi feel, at times, much more like drowning. When I ask him about this point of convergence, he reminds me of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*. Lyon describes Lord Jim as a ship's officer who jumped to save himself, only to be so deeply ashamed when he later learned the ship did not sink that he was forced to abandon civilization entirely. Lyon explains that



*"Woman at the Clubhouse."* From *Memories of Myself: Essays* by Danny Lyon

## Along the way, Lyon has reinvented the expectations of photography and journalism, books and films.

Conrad's narrator identifies this moment of decision as "submitting yourself to the destructive element." He continues, "Maybe this is what happens when you're swimming and you almost drown. Norman Mailer says that existential situations are the ones in which we're not in control."

This lack of control is evident, and deeply affecting, throughout *Deep Sea Diver*. As I read the short essays that narrate incidents from each of Lyon's trips to Shanxi, I wondered continually why he kept going back. He was profoundly separated from the Chinese by language (with the exception of his translator, who left him partway through one of his visits), and his essays describe hours of endless travel between remote towns and the constant frustration of being thwarted in his quest to photograph workers in the region's many coal mines.

Compared with Lyon's confident reminiscences in *Memories of Myself*, his experiences of Shanxi almost feel as if they happened to a different photographer. But these limitations end up being the meat of the story; more than in any of his other work, Lyon is fully present for the reader in *Deep Sea Diver*. The results reflect a complicated humanism, on par with any of his photographs taken during the past 50 years.

At the end of the book, Lyon admits to the existential element of his travels, asking, "What kept me crossing the globe and then moving from town to town, taking road after road and going from place to place? What was I looking for?" Indeed, he concludes, he was looking for something of himself. He writes:

I loved my time in Shanxi because it took me back to my childhood in America in the 1940s and 50s, when bicycle repair shops smelled of rubber, and trolley cars ran across the cobblestones of Metropolitan Avenue in front of my apartment building in Queens. It was as if inside all those dirty, young mechanics was the boy I had once been, struggling to put a chain back on a bicycle or dragging a dachshund across the street on a leash, trying to beat the trolley car, and missing my father, who had gone off to War.

The advance of time, both personal and societal, is palpable in much of this book. The title and subtitle are exceedingly accurate; this book does not claim to represent China, or even Shanxi, as it is. Rather, *Deep Sea Diver* is very much about one American photographer's journey and the ways in which that journey put him in touch with the "destructive element" — forcing him to look closely at his own life, challenging him to face down the possibility of drowning.

In speaking with Lyon, I was struck by the apparent differ-

ences between the photographer of *The Bikeriders* and the traveler of *Deep Sea Diver*, work separated by 40 years. While in the 1960s Lyon was so deeply involved with his subjects that he became one of them, during his travel in Shanxi the photographer was forced to remain separate, relying instead on his relationship with a translator and guides. How do we make sense of these two bodies of work together? Rigid consistency is often what we expect of retrospective exhibitions or career monographs. Yet, in this case, guided by his own staunch individualism, Lyon has constantly reimagined what is possible. Along the way, he has reinvented the expectations for photography and journalism, books and films. This allowance of difference is central to Lyon's practice; making all of his work adhere to a singular motive threatens to erase decades of experience that sometimes give rise to contradiction rather than a monolithic point of view.

Hugh Edwards may have had similar misgivings about the drive to historicize. Lyon writes on his website, [www.bleakbeauty.net](http://www.bleakbeauty.net), that when he and his wife, Nancy, returned to Chicago to record Edwards, the curator refused, protesting that he didn't want his words "etched in concrete." Lyon recalls, "When I wrote that down on a pad, he asked me what I had just written down and I said 'etched in concrete.' He answered, 'That's absurd. Nothing is etched in concrete.'" In speaking with Lyon myself, and reading his retrospective project *Memories of Myself*, I was similarly conflicted. Everything is there — in *Memories*, but also in more than a dozen other books, portfolios, and films — but the meanings and motives that attach themselves to Lyon's work change continually. This history is — and just as emphatically is not — etched in concrete.

At the café in Bernalillo, Lyon described a scene from Gore Vidal's *Lincoln* in which two characters regard a portrait of the president after his assassination, leading one to ask the other, "Don't you know that's all made up?"

"Reality," Lyon clarified, "is all made up."

CURRENTLY ON VIEW: "This World is Not My Home: Danny Lyon Photographs" at the Menil Collection, Houston, Texas, from March 30 – July 29, 2012 and traveling to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in Winter 2013.

To see more of Danny Lyon's photographs, please visit: [www.dektol.wordpress.com](http://www.dektol.wordpress.com) and [www.bleakbeauty.com](http://www.bleakbeauty.com). ▲

*Kim Beil* recently received her Ph.D. in Visual Studies from the University of California, Irvine. Her writing appears regularly in art ltd. and X-TRA: Contemporary Art Quarterly.