

“sub25.ro” online magazine (Romania)

Interview with photographer Nacio Jan Brown

1. You talked in an interview about not being able to photograph rocks and streams, when so many things were happening around you. I was wondering what made you want to document them, instead of doing art for art's sake. Why did you want to be a photojournalist?

I think there are two reasons. I began learning photography at the student darkroom of the University of California at Berkeley. Much of the work being done there was in the style of Wynn Bullock, Minor White, and Edward Weston—contemplative nature studies. The goal was to produce the finest possible prints. What was important was that the physical print itself be impeccable, its subject matter well composed and rich in detail. Beyond that, subject matter was just a vehicle—raw material for a print. I worked this way for a while but soon lost interest, not in the striving for fine prints, but in applying that skill to images from nature.

This brings me to the second part of the question, ‘Why did you want to be a photojournalist?’ The time period we are talking about is the mid-1960s, the era of the Anti-Vietnam War and the Civil Rights struggles, and the place we are talking about is Berkeley, a major center of student protest activity. Nearly every day there was something going on—speeches, marches, sit-ins—something. As I was a supporter of all this, my camera became a way to be involved and make a contribution. My goal was to produce images with meaningful political content which could be used in what was known at the time as the “Underground Press,” small local newspapers that sprung up to support the political struggles.

2. You initially thought the Rag Theater project was going to take a few months, but then it went on for four years. What made you go back and keep shooting, and how did you know when it was over?

One thing that made me continue shooting for four years is that, as I worked, I became aware of limitations in my work—there were things I needed to learn. One example is that, when I started, I was very good at straight-on, classically composed individual portraits. As I accumulated more and more of these I saw that, for balance, I was going to have to learn to make other kinds of images. I studied other photographers' work closely to see what I could learn. I also began to experiment with different ways of using the lenses I had, especially wide-angle lenses. An example here is that I learned how to make effective photographs pointing a wide-angle lens down. The resulting "keystone" distortion, usually a negative, can be effective in the right circumstances. By the end of shooting for *Rag Theater* I was, among other things, shooting my subjects from behind, shooting from a variety of distances, shooting in tricky light conditions, and making photographs where there is no easily identified subject matter, where instead the subject matter is diffuse and where the eye wanders here and there around the image.

My answer to the question about how I knew it was over is, I suspect, the same as for many artists—exhaustion. There came a time when I just couldn't shoot anymore. I'd like to say that I looked at the body of my accumulated work and saw that it was good, and enough, but that's just not how it happened. The fact of my being done wasn't even obvious at first. It only became clear when I realized that I hadn't been shooting for a while and that I wasn't going to shoot anymore. Being done sort of snuck up on me. (I wasn't really done, of course—I was only done with the shooting phase. The next step, which took two additional years, was to do all the work necessary to get *Rag Theater* into print. But, that's another story.)

3. What was your working process? Did you go around the block with your camera? Did you talk to the people you photographed? Were these interactions easy for you to manage, or was it an acquired skill? I am particularly curious about the talking part, because I know many young photographers who shy away from starting conversations and asking permission to shoot.

My situation was different from that of most photographers doing “street photography.” When I began the project in 1969 I had been a regular on the block for five years. The scene I documented arose during that time and continued to develop over the next several years. I was a part of it from the beginning. Also, I was quite candid about my project—I told everyone that I was working on a book about the block. At a certain point I began carrying with me a large binder with dozens of photographs I had made. I would show to people to engage them in the project. I would say that I knew to talk to over half the people I photographed. For the others I didn’t know, the binder, along with the clear acceptance of my photographing by most of the other people there, helped me gain acceptance. I did ask those I didn’t know if I could photograph them. The answer was almost always yes. Sometimes people I didn’t know asked me to photograph them. Bottom line, it’s a lot easier if you are regarded as an integral part of the scene you are photographing rather than as an outsider whose motives are unclear.

4. When things started to change and drugs became a big part of the story you were telling, was your shooting style influenced in any way? Did you start focusing on different things than before? Were you tempted to go for a darker approach?

I would say that, in spite of the changes that were occurring, nothing changed in my approach. I just kept on photographing what was in front of me. When it came time to lay out the book, and later, RagTheater.com, the sequencing of the images was roughly chronological. Both show the scene changing from one characterized by a kind of exuberant innocence (but not so innocent in retrospect!) to a scene where the toll taken by drugs is clear. Actually, the photographs don’t capture the full tragedy that took place. Many of the kids who feature prominently in the photographs were dead within ten years.

5. What are two of your fondest memories from the time you spent shooting Rag Theater?

One was having taken the picture of the girl sitting on a chair with one half of a hard-boiled egg in her hand and the other half in her mouth—and a great twinkle in her eye. I loved this shot, so

much so that, merely on the basis of having taken it, I decided to do a book on the block. Apart from that, I would say that being part of the period of exuberant energy I mentioned above was infectious. It passed too quickly. On a darker note, another time that comes to mind isn't exactly a fond memory but it was an occasion where I became really excited. This is when I saw a guy passed out on the sidewalk near a painted left-turn arrow pointing directly at him. My first thought was that I needed to shoot fast before the guy got up and the shot was gone. I did get the shot but since then have realized how cold I was in worrying about the shot and not the human being lying passed out in the middle of the day in a crowd of people. One of the hazards of undertaking a project is becoming so gripped by the needs of the project that other more important considerations fade.

6. While working as a photographer, did you ever cringe while photographing something? Was there a moment when you felt like putting your camera down, or when it was really hard to go on with what you were doing?

The most cringe-worthy moment I can recall is when a heroin-addict girl asked me whether I would photograph her as she injected herself under her tongue. I just wasn't ready for that. Since then, I have wondered sometimes whether I should have agreed and made the shot. I think not. What could the image have been other than a document of a sad moment in a lost young girl's life? Realistically, who could benefit from seeing such an image?

7. To you, which are the main advantages of youth when you're a photographer? What should young photographers try to do most when they're still at the beginning? (I'm asking this because you seem to have been the kind who didn't put money first and who constantly gave himself something to do).

I was 26 when I began the Rag Theater project and 30 when I finished shooting. The age range of most of the people on the block was from about 13 to about 40. My age put me more or less in the middle and this aided me in being accepted. As for the advantages of youth in general I

think it depends on the age of those being photographed. The main thing is that it can be an advantage in not appearing threatening. I have long thought that women, of whatever age, have an advantage over men in this. As do older photographers. I feel as though I would be much less likely to meet resistance now that I'm older than I would have been during my thirties or forties. As to the other part of the question, about young photographers, I would say this to them. Do not imagine that you can have anything worthwhile to say about scenes foreign to you. Stay home and photograph what you know! Try to show things that are there, right in front of you, plain for all to see, but which have somehow been missed. This is very hard. Analyze different kinds of images. Teach yourself about the history of photography by studying the work of the greats. It's all online, both photographers' images and documentaries about photographers on YouTube and Vimeo. Immerse yourself. And one last thing. Do not get caught up in a romantic notion of what it means to be a "photojournalist." There may have been a time, before the demise of the mass-circulation picture weekly magazines, when there was some truth to the image of the dashing, world-travelling photojournalist *a la* Robert Capa. But even then, I think, it was largely a myth, true for only a very few. If you chose to pursue a career in photojournalism you must carefully consider what venues will realistically be available for your work to appear—and how often—and how many people will be likely to see them there. You must know what you are getting into.

8. You were quite young yourself while shooting the 2400 block scene. How was your life back then? Which were your main interests and challenges? How did you see the world and your place in it?

The Sixties and the Seventies were exciting times, especially in places like Berkeley. The anti-war and civil rights movements were at their height as was the hippie-counterculture movement. Above all else it was fun, this in spite of the seriousness of some of the causes. We all thought we were part of something new and special and were changing the world—and we were. The thought that there might later be unintended consequences from our actions never crossed anyone's mind.

9. What made you quit your career as a photographer, and what did you miss most about it afterwards?

As I mentioned, I became a photographer more or less in response to a subject matter—the politics of the times. In 1975 *Rag Theater* was published. That was also the year of the final fall of Saigon and the chaotic evacuation by helicopter of American personnel and Vietnamese refugees from the roof of the American Embassy. The Vietnam War was now definitively over. And, after ten years, my subject matter was a thing of the past. As for missing being a “photographer” that didn’t happen. “Photographer” never defined me—for me photography was always craft in service of a cause.

10. What aspect of today's youth culture would you focus on if you were still a photojournalist, and how would you go about documenting it?

Being decades away in age from today’s youth culture I can’t answer this question. What to photograph will be discovered by young photographers.

For the book, *Rag Theater*, go to Amazon.com.

Link:

http://www.amazon.com/Rag-Theater-Telegraph-Berkeley-1969-1973/dp/B000KGNKG0/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1436905720&sr=8-1&keywords=rag+theater

RagTheater.com is a much expanded version of the project and is set up to allow those who were on the scene at the time to post their recollections.

Link: <http://www.ragtheater.com/>

More of Nacio Jan Brown's work can be seen on both his personal Facebook page and the "Rag Theater" Facebook page.

Links: <https://www.facebook.com/nacio.brown>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Rag-Theater-The-2400-Block-of-Telegraph-Avenue-Berkeley-1969-1973/291721747546225>

For archivally processed vintage silver-gelatin prints contact Joseph Bellows Gallery

Link: <http://www.josephbellows.com/artists/nacio-jan-brown/#1>