

On feeling attached to your work



Photographer Adali Schell discusses why images need an audience, the constant failure inherent in the medium, and prioritizing being a good family member and friend.

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As told to Kali Flanagan, 2270 words.

Tags: [Photography](#), [Process](#), [Success](#), [Creative anxiety](#), [Failure](#), [Family](#), [Focus](#).

Your latest show, *Car Pictures*, which showed at Leica Gallery, was a massive success in LA. Truthfully, how do you feel receiving such a reception for your work?

I feel really blessed to have people pay attention to my work. I wanted a Leica for a lot longer than I've had one, let alone been friends with the people who work there. [Leica Gallery] has shown many heroes of mine: Ralph Gibson, Mary Ellen Mark, and Matt Stuart, whom I was paired with—a lot of heavy hitters have been in that space. When the opportunity came, I made it a really big deal to not bullshit it.

What does not bullshitting mean?

Tediously, I did all my printing by hand in the darkroom and built my own frames with a photographer friend of mine. I didn't want to have the process be one where I make my prints and put them in their frames, and then, at the end of the show, take them out of the frames—likely damaging the prints—and then just have them sitting in my closet. The prints are in those frames. My show is ready to go. It'll be ready to go forever now.



Adali Schell, Keni and Victoria, from the series *Car Pictures*, 2022

Do you find yourself surprised to be at this stage in your career, as an in-demand professional with accomplishments in both commercial and personal work?

I was 11 when I found out that this is what I love, and I have depended on photography to guide me ever since. Even through depressions, spells of not knowing what I want to do, of forgetting who I am, or why I take pictures—it just reappears as a force of life again and again.

I recognize that I'm young and I'm in a position that people spend much of their lives trying to get to. All I can try to do is be grateful for it and do the best work I can. No one told me, but success is kind of dangerous. There are no warning signs. You just get green lights to keep going. Before getting affirmations from the *New York Times* or jobs like that, everything felt a little bit like a failure. So I kept learning and readjusting my practice—making it a little bit this way, a little bit that way. It's like wind that you pull your sail with. But success isn't wind. All I can do is be present... There are now people who are rooting for me, who trust me. This isn't just about me and getting through my day anymore. I want to make my friends proud, which is a lot of what the show is about.

How are you navigating this new territory in your career?

Years ago, before these benchmark moments for me, photography was every second. Anyone who wanted to talk about it could entertain me with it. I could take a picture at any time. It felt like I could just sprint all day and not get tired. What I didn't expect—I say this with caution—is the strain. How delicate my relationship with photography actually is. I feel that my job now is to try to protect that umbilical cord that reaches from me to the camera. Photography is about seeing.

Doing photography for work, although I would never trade it, is sometimes like I am watching myself have

experiences as opposed to just being in my body. It's a little bit tricky because it's an enormous privilege to be in this situation.



Adali Schell, Jayden, from the series *New Paris*, 2021

How do you honor your practice and cater to its delicacy?

I used to have a laminated print on the back of my camera that said "SUBMIT", which was shortened from a quote in *Everything Now*, a book by Rosecrans Baldwin, an LA author: "Submit and be revealed." It's a recurring ambition in my work.

Hypothetically, when I can just get over my ego or my worries—the constant thing in my brain telling me, "Don't take that picture, it doesn't work"—to be truly intuitive and listen to the gut, a flow state happens. Suddenly, the camera is going to places and I am no longer making decisions; I'm just facilitating a picture. Clearing the plaque out of my brain, my veins, and my spirit. Receiving life wholly, without prejudice and fear, to find the harmonies that exist within myself in the world. That's where good pictures happen.



Adali Schell, Bob and Dog, from the series *New Paris*, 2022

What are some of those fears you have to get over?

It's an incredibly long list. For one, film's expensive. Second is asking yourself, "Is that a good picture? What do I do with this picture? Why did I take *that* picture?"

Having something people associate with me has helped me, but has also become a bit of a box. I'm trying to learn when to stay in the box, but also when to step outside the box and realize that I *built* the box. I tend to worry a lot that because I've made something I'm proud of, the next thing I do I have to be really proud of. Before there was this standard, I wasn't pushing against anything. Now I can feel a little stuck in my own trap of whatever I think I'm doing it for.

And this standard was set by success?

Yes. It feels as if it imposes on my ability to receive the world. But from a greater perspective, it's simply insecurity. Being in my head, which I would be in the pro league at.

What are those thoughts?

That 21 or 20-year-old Adali... knew something that the 24-year-old Adali has forgotten. That it was easier to receive the world without the filters that I have now, or that I used to be able to photograph much more democratically.

I've shot enough to know I can make a good picture. But if it isn't part of something that I'm attached to, or if it isn't part of something that I would really like to see willed into this world, I have a much harder time

making that picture. It's resulted in me needing a higher level of focus and structure in my practice.



Adali Schell, Tristan, Grace, Montserrat, Dylan and Anka, from the series *Car Pictures*, 2022

How do you foster a sense of purpose?

I have many different ideas: New York Street photography, Los Angeles street photography, Los Angeles landscape, pictures of my grandfather, pictures of my mom, pictures of my sister's things, and the family at large. Pictures from the bike, pictures from the car, pictures on this lens, pictures on that lens. I'm cooking 12 different things at one time, but I'm only going to serve maybe one or two of them. If my practice is a tree, each branch is growing a different fruit. It's up to me to pull the fruit and figure out what tastes the best. But it takes an audience sometimes. I listen to stand-up comedians [and] the audience is their instrument. You can't do stand-up comedy without an audience. I feel similarly about photography. It can't exist in a vacuum.

How does collaboration play into your work?

When I was taking pictures every day like a manic street photographer, I would make the point that collaboration existed in fleeting moments with strangers or these quick, candid things. Now, I have a much wider array of artists who I'm around, who inspire and move me to change the way I think. I like to engage my work with artists who don't just take pictures. More brains are better than one to loosen things up and move them along.

Photography is about memory and moments. Relating that to other people's work or ideas deepens the complexity and sentimental value of the work.

How do you converse with the work of other artists within your practice?

Photography bears this burden as an isolated art form. In school, I found that it wasn't engaged with on the same level as, let's say, painting or sculpture. To outsiders, it seems easy and immediate, largely accidental.

My dad used to burn CDs comprised of downloads from LA radio stations. When I was six, this car got broken into, and all these mixes that he made were stolen. They were mostly songs that he didn't know the names of. Late 90s/early 2000s, triphop, down-tempo tunes. Slowly throughout my life, randomly, I've rediscovered some of these tracks: Massive Attack, Thievery Corporation, Air, Zero 7, Weekend Players. There are more that I have yet to hear. This experience of connecting with my past, hearing these sounds that I hadn't heard since I was a very little boy, has continuously shown me what it's like for something to feel good in your gut. The connection with photography is that I need to make pictures which are gut-driven, not brain-driven. I have to remind myself that now, because I am getting away from that.



Adali Schell, Aiden, from the series *New Paris*, 2022

Would you consider the absence of that gut instinct to be failure? What is failure to you?

There is an instant feeling in my stomach that is non-negotiable, that indicates if something works or if it doesn't. That's what success is to me. To answer the inverse of your question, a successful image is something undeniable. I don't need to send it to friends and say, "Hey, what do you think about this?" I just know. It hits every note in my body.

Photography has a unique relationship to failure in that it's a constant failure because we make so many pictures. A photographer shoots millions of photos in their life, but their retrospective has 30 or 60 pictures. I'm not spending weeks on a picture. I'm spending a thousandth of a second on a picture. It is deeply humbling to work in a medium that reinforces failure again and again. On my best days, it makes me almost forget about looking for success.

Car Pictures has been in the making for years. What is your work's relationship to time?

For all mediums, but especially photography, time helps. Everything becomes more interesting as time passes. Photos develop historical context and appreciate as they become older. People grow and things change. Photography acts to freeze moments of time.

If I feel like I'm making bad pictures, I know I can afford it because there's a translation that happens as time passes, which I'm not even sure I'm old enough to have experienced yet. My oldest work is close to 10 years old. It's very often that photographers wait 30 years to put something out because the work will ripen. You don't always know how it'll age.



Adali Schell, *Girls and Chickens*, from the series *New Paris*, 2022

How does your role as a photographer change between places, such as in New Paris, Ohio vs. Los Angeles, California?

I am a different photographer in Los Angeles than I am in New Paris. Photographers need to constantly find themselves and adjust themselves. I'm constantly contorting myself to fit the needs of an assignment or place, the needs of a camera, workflow, film stock, lens... There are so many aspects to this.

Visiting my family in New Paris and making those pictures is a very special thing to me. That's a place that has yet to be documented otherwise. I spend time there every year, to be with my mom and my sister, and ultimately to make the pictures that deeply matter to me. Having photographed strangers for so much of my life, as well as my family, there's no question of what means more to me. But it took time to realize how important it was for me to be there for these pivotal moments: my mom moving to Ohio, her first house, watching my sister attend middle school and high school, etc.

I am grateful to have this practice that points me towards my aspiration to be a good friend, a good son, a good brother. Being oriented around my family has kept me from wandering the streets, alone and isolated, prowling for detached moments that affirm some deeper thing.

Is there any part of you that's conscious of the commodification of your family's life, or other people's lives?

My experience being from California and going to small-town Ohio is, ultimately, being seduced by poverty. Although it's my family, it's different. I'm not from there. I was born in LA. That's where I grew up. Photography is a game for outsiders. I have had one foot in and one foot out my entire life, and I'd like to believe that makes good pictures.

When photographers get to take a trip or see something new, they make a lot of work in those situations. [In] New Paris my radio signal is focused because I am not bored and I'm not totally alien. When I'm there, I'm in the middle, which is honest and sincere but not jaded.



Adali Schell, Pilot and Piper, from the series *Car Pictures*, 2024

Name

Adali Schell

Vocation

photographer

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Adali Schell

