

On finding your focus



Photographer Erin Douglas (the Black Burner Project) discusses following your passion, creating work and community, and stepping outside of your comfort zone.

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As told to Loré Yessuff, 1719 words.

Tags: [Photography](#), [Identity](#), [Process](#), [Success](#).

I would love to hear how you got started with photography and what your experience has been like.

I was the friend that always had the camera growing up, and really, just didn't think anything about it. Whether it was a disposable, a point-and-shoot, or a film camera, that's where it all started. I took a class in high school, and I took a photography elective in college, but that was as far as I went when it came to learning photography. I went to a school for finance in New York and started my adult career life in that industry. Then, the recession hit, and that's when I really noticed how I desired to use my time.

I was in Harlem and had this camera, and I kept getting a lot of nudges from people like, "Oh, what happened to your photography?" I took that as a little clue to remember that it was something that I enjoyed. But I had a film camera, and without a job, I didn't want to spend a ton of money having to buy film. Eventually, I got two cameras, one from my boyfriend at the time, and another from my parents for Christmas. So, I decided to take the more advanced camera, and return the other one, and just started to reteach myself photography—mainly by taking street photography and portraits of friends.

I would take free classes wherever. Then, I got a few internships, which were good for learning different processes. But I was very nervous—going from finance to photography—and especially how it happened being laid off. It felt like I just had no other option, so I was insecure about doing so well and making money. I didn't know many other women photographers, or Black photographers who were doing well and weren't starving artists. Not seeing that and not having those expanders didn't help with my confidence. I never really thought about it as a profession. It was just like a dream.

Eventually, I moved back to Maryland with my family, and my brother convinced me to enter into an emerging artist call for [Artscape in Baltimore](#). I only had a few days to apply, and I prayed and said to myself, "If I get this, then I'll take myself seriously." I was chosen as the photographer, which gave me the opportunity to print and sell my work and get a mentorship. So, that's what took me down the road of being a professional photographer.



Erin Douglas, Black Burner Project

It's crazy that something as unfortunate and annoying as getting laid off is what propelled you into doing photography more consistently. That's very cool and inspiring. I recently got laid off, too, and I live in Harlem as well, so I know the feeling. Was that period like when you'd recently been laid off while living in New York, and were spending your free time rediscovering your love for photography?

I learned to love being more of the fly- well, the butterfly, I used to say-on the wall. I wasn't rushing, so I started seeing things that I wouldn't normally see, down the same streets that I had walked a million times. I noticed the details of the things people wore, and how they all went together. And I remember just being like, "Man, there's so many moments happening at the same time, that are worthy of capturing, and nobody is noticing except for me, and a few other people who may be people watching, or doing the same thing as me." That was a cool time, but it didn't feel cool. It just felt a little bit overwhelming, a little unnerving. But I felt really inspired by what I was seeing, so I was combatting those two feelings.

New York is full of so much magic, but not a lot of people have the luxury of time to experience it. It's cool that you had the ability to slow down, and really take in everything that was going on. That's the cool thing about photography. It forces you to slow down, and really consider the beauty around you. How did you eventually gain the confidence that you have now, the ability to walk somewhere, and take photos?

It took a long time. I still get nervous sometimes, depending on what space I'm walking into, but I think it's all mainly internal. I probably get more nervous around directing people. I think travel had a lot to do with that, specifically when I started to travel solo because I had to be intentional about creating the experience that I wanted. [When you travel alone], you create the energy, so I had to realize, "Oh, in order for me to meet new people, I had to either approach them or create an inviting energy." Traveling really helped me learn how to approach people, start conversations with them, and ask if I can document the moment. I think that had a huge impact on my confidence.





Erin Douglas, Black Burner Project

How did you eventually get involved with Burning Man?

That was several years later. I have a friend who is still in New York, and she started going to Burning Man, which I hadn't heard about prior. And she would always say I should go, but she didn't really give much detail about it. I knew very little and wasn't interested enough to research it, or anything. But eventually, she gifted me a ticket for my birthday.

I was excited to go, but I was also nervous, because just the little bit that I knew, I was just like, "Am I going to really vibe with it?" And I knew there was probably not going to be that many Black or brown people, and I'd never camped before. So it was just a ton of different things. Even as a solo traveler who'd been around the world, I was nervous. So, that was my entry into Burning Man.

At the festival, there's a lot going on, but it's still intimate, and very caring out there. The first year I went, I brought my camera, but I was nervous about taking photos. I didn't want to invade people's personal space and experiences. It took me a few days before I took out my camera and started taking photos. The sunrise is a really magical moment out there. The first time I saw it, I forgot my camera, and my phone died, but I recognized I was supposed to just be very present in that, and experience it for myself, which then, allowed me to realize how magical it was. The next few days, I started taking photos of people watching the sunrise. Afterward, I'd approach them and tell them that I had taken a photo, and give them a little piece of paper with my info. I figured that they were going to lose it, but pretty much every person contacted me later.

Ok, wow.

That was really cool and made me more comfortable going up to people at Burning Man. And then when I posted the photos on my Instagram, I think, because I was a woman of color, people saw that I was there, and I was someone that they could ask questions, and say, "What is that? What is this place?" Or, "I wanted to go but didn't have never seen any proof that [Black people] were really out there. So I didn't think we were invited. I didn't think we were welcome." That's what led to me think about the idea of going back a second year, with the intention of

focusing on documenting people of color.

Something that really stands out to me about your story and your evolution from when you were in high school to now is just how much you continually put yourself out there, embrace the unknown and the uncertainty, just for the love of photography, and because of your curiosity. What that experience was like the second time around?

It was amazing because I really felt myself stepping into my purpose. I had such great responses to people who I stopped to photograph, which led me to come up with the idea for the group photo, which was a really magical experience as well. So yeah, it was great in a lot of different ways, both personally, and in terms of the experience itself and evolving as a person, an artist, a photographer.

And have you gone since then?

So, I went back in 2019. That was a third year going and my second year doing the Black Burner project, and it basically blew up that year, because I did a lot of work in the in-between: being a resource, posting information, and putting a lot of time and effort towards creating a community, that Burning Man wasn't creating in terms of inclusion for people of color and just recognizing the importance of seeing yourself, and how something so simple can make an impact. If you're not being affected by it, you're not thinking that way. And that was having a huge impact on people's decision to go, or not. The visuals and the stories that were out there weren't really depicting what Burning Man was really about. We were small in numbers, but we still were there. Nobody was really focused on making sure they were including that, so that is what my work is focused on.

Erin Douglas Recommends:

Go on a solo trip if you haven't done so already.

Book: *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself* by Joe Dispenza

When you feel resistance, do it anyway. Do something that scares you a bit. It can be small. My next challenge is to take myself on a solo date roller skating. I haven't been skating since I was in elementary school.

Rest well, and don't give yourself a hard time about it.

Burning Man. If you've never been, but have always been curious. Just do it.



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Vocation

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