On slowing down your process

Photographer Schaël Marcéus discusses the value of completing projects, how being a model has helped his photography, and seeing failure as an opportunity.

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As told to Lauren Spear, 2012 words.

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It is hard to photograph someone in a natural state. What strikes me about your photography is that your subjects all possess this certain level of calm. They are often looking right at your lens and there is this degree of intimacy that you have achieved in your portraiture. How do you create that environment?

I think it came from the way that I started photography. When I was a kid, I wanted to be an actor then realized I was not a good actor so I got interested in filmmaking and the behind-the-scenes of everything. I started by taking portraits of my siblings and other people that were close to me. It was always about creating this moment with people that I have a close bond with. I put a lot of value in making sure the person is comfortable.

After you've shot and you're looking through your photos, what is it that you're looking for? How do you pick one image over another?

I'm a fan of the in-between moments, so oftentimes the photo that I choose will be where the person is no longer posing. I used to over-select images but nowadays, I really focus on what is strongest. Facial expression is definitely very important.

I think part of my process as an artist is always trying to understand why I like and don't like something. I'm now focusing on having a maximum impact with fewer images rather than this idea of always trying to create more, more, and more.

How do you find the editing process?

Editing has helped me change the pace at which I am working. Instead of working all the time, I have a burst and then an editing break which I think is a more functional way for me to slow down. It gives me time to live my life and then process through art and then live again. Trying to create all the time just for the sake of creating can produce things that are empty of meaning.

What is a through line for you across all your work?

I want to create the images that I would have liked to see when I was younger. That means that I'm more often than not likely to push Black queerness forward. I identify as a male, so most of my subjects tend to be men, but not always. Above all, I just want to make sure that going through my portfolio, I can see myself. I always kept this thing in my mind if one person that is younger than me sees my photos and it makes them feel like they can too be a photographer and do the same thing, then that's all I need.

I was a natural light photographer for a long time. Even though now I don't always use natural light, it's always what I try to emulate. Because I try to give a very true representation of my subject and add my own twist to it,

I’m very much interested in people looking like themselves or a version of themselves that they’ve been wanting to explore.

Being a model yourself, do you feel like it’s changed the way you approach the other side of the lens?

Working as a model has taught me a lot. As a photographer, I used to be a way more silent person when I was shooting. Sometimes I would just be in the zone and tell people that if I’m not saying anything, things were going well. But being on the other side of the camera, I realized that sometimes not saying anything can be the weirdest thing. It made me understand that my demeanor and my behavior as a photographer can change the dynamic a lot.

Do you have a preference for which side of the lens you’re on?

I do prefer to be behind the camera just because it’s what I’ve been doing for so long. But I also do enjoy being in front of the camera because it’s teaching me how to let go of wanting to be in control of everything. And it’s fun. What I enjoy is the mixture of everything. I told myself when I was a kid that I was not interested in doing the same thing all the time. I’m happy that I was able to give myself that.

I’ve noticed you have an affinity for film. Is this your preference?

I used to describe myself as not a technical photographer, but an emotional one. I think that film allows for a certain amount of space for freedom. The specific camera that I use, the RZ67, was designed for portraits and I feel like it was calling me. But over time, I noticed that even though I shoot a mixture of film and digital, I was always trying to make my digital images look like film. So I decided to just prioritize using film for that reason. I did spend a lot of money on cameras that would break after a few months, but it’s just part of the process. I’ve never been disappointed. There’s always an amount of surprise, that things can look slightly different than what I expected.

Using film allows me to slow down my process. Because I have to get my focus right, I have to make sure that everything is on point before the camera fires. When that is happening, I have the time to talk to my subject and create a moment with them. This goes back to this intimacy we were talking about.

Can you describe what it was like to take photos when you were young?

I remember the first time that I did an actual portrait shoot it was with my cousin. We went to the Westmount Greenhouse and took some photos. When I look back at the photos today, I see that my style has changed a lot but I still appreciate them because there’s this youthful innocence of just going to do something that you don’t really know how to do. Now that I’ve been doing this for almost 12 years, I find myself always trying to get back to that energy.

How do you prepare for a shoot, either mentally or practically?

I love to do a pretty thorough mood board—although I would describe it more as a deck of photos. Sometimes I even as far as having little stick-figure drawings of the poses that I want. When I have my idea, I try to think, “Who do I see in the shoot?” I come up with a few potential options of people that would work, then I make a certain breakdown of the story I want to tell. It doesn’t have to be a complete narrative, but I like to picture what I’m trying to say with it and write it down.

Even though having this extensive document may mean I’m over-prepared, it gives me the space to get on set and then just let my mind go. If I feel like I’m stuck or something is not working, then I always have that thing that is going back to the roots of the idea that I had. And if I happen to get carried away and get a bunch of great ideas on set that day, then I’m also happy because I’ve just followed the flow. When I present it to the people that I want to work with, I need to give them the space to do their thing and allow for an element of chance.

Do you communicate with your subject what the story is for you?

Usually, I explain it, and it's understood because it was literally designed around them. In talking about this, you made me realize that I'm literally building things around people.

Has it ever been the case where you cast someone and then their personality changed your idea when they got on set?

That definitely has happened. But what I tell myself is that I'll try to work my best with whatever material is in front of me. The reality is that I used to be so attached to my work because it felt so personal. To have "bad work" (I'm using big quotation marks) is just a thing that happens. I can't have every single photo that I take or every shoot that I do be amazing. I feel like it just helped me understand that completing something is more important than trying to be great.

It's funny, I was reading something Rihanna said that really resonated recently. She was talking about releasing albums and how one of the reasons why she took so long to release new music was because she felt afraid. She said that *Anti* was her biggest and highest-quality project and she was scared of releasing something after it. It had to at least match or be better. I think that I used to be in place as well, and I'm still fighting it. Sometimes you want things to be so great that you end up staying still and not doing anything at all. Those shoots that didn't go as planned are a reminder that it's like, "Okay, this one might have not gone as I wanted it, but there's always another one after this." Everything can't be perfect.

You can keep building and expanding.

Exactly. As you expand you start to see lines and connections through your work. So many times I'll be doing something and in the process, I don't think it's that great. Only when I am outside of it and can really sit and look back can I see it properly. Sometimes I'll be looking back at work that I've done years ago, and I can literally see my state of mind. I'm like, "At the end of the day, it's still something I've done and I've created, and if anything, it'll inform me later." I feel like the images that are my favorites are the ones that I'll put out and people won't care about, not that it matters. There's something in everything.

I like this idea of "failure" because a place to pivot and build upon. Are you able to find grace in those moments?

Part of accepting failure is to just complete things because then I'm able to move on. If I don't complete it, it'll just eat me up, and I always will have this reminder of what went wrong. Showing grace, and accepting things for what they are is also just a way to let go, especially when projects come from an emotion. That emotion will always be with me if I never complete it.

I used to think that I would do photography as a way to give people what they wanted to see. But the more I grow, the more I realize that looking within myself is what will be the most relatable to other people, but it's also what will help me the most as an artist. I'm trying to focus on using art as a way to show my own experience. That's the best way to create art for me. I used to try to make things for other people, but it didn't work. Because you're the only person that will push yourself, do the things that you want to do. Though I can say that now, that realization came through a lot of learning.

Schaël Marcéus Recommends:

Going on dates with yourself, or investing in quality time alone.

Everyone should read "On Self-Respect," by Joan Didion (1961) at least once in their life.

If you're in Montreal, dinner at Kamúy, and especially their Chef Paul Sour cocktail

Bettye Swann—or any soul ballad singer—always makes life a little more romantic. I actually have a playlist here

Aftersun by Charlotte Wells, one of my favorite movies this year—tied with *Everything Everywhere All at Once*.

Name

Schaël Marcéus

Vocation

photographer