

Amy Touchette on using photography to figure out the world



November 3, 2017 - Amy Touchette is a photographer based in Brooklyn, New York, who explores themes of social connectedness through street portraiture. Trained at the International Center of Photography, she began her artistic career as a writer and painter, earning a BA in Literature and Studio Art and an MA in Literature. She is represented by ClampArt in New York City. Touchette's first monograph, *Shoot the Arrow: A Portrait of The World Famous *BOB**, was published by Un-Gyve Press (Boston, 2013).

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2783 words.

Tags: [Photography](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#), [Identity](#), [Anxiety](#).

You have an intimate style of street photography. How do you usually work? Do your subjects always know you're photographing them?

Not always. I often just wait for them to look at me, or look my way. I call those images candid photographs, but that might not be the best word. They're just unposed. 99% of the time I don't actually talk to any of the people in the photos. I'm just taking them with my iPhone.

Sometimes, when I do need to have a discussion, they're pretty difficult. Usually people are just like, "Is she taking a photo of me? Is she taking a selfie? Is she looking at a map?" They don't really know what I'm doing. I still have a really small phone. Some people don't give a shit, but sometimes the conversations are hard because you have to justify taking a picture without asking someone's permission.

That's always hard, but I also find those conversations so interesting. I mean, my heart usually drops to my feet, but they're fascinating and I learn so much. That is really why I want to photograph on the street, because it keeps me engaged and on the level with humanity. You're out there with a random selection of people, which is how I like it. The photograph is just a pathway to that experience. It's secondary, actually. But sometimes my heart just breaks, especially during these interactions when people get pissed at me for taking their photo. It doesn't happen very often, but it happened the other week and it just sucked.



Skillman Street, Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, 2016, from *Street Dailies* (iPhone)

What happened?

Well, the man was a superintendent at a building in my neighborhood and he was sweeping the front sidewalk. There were three children who were popping out the window, looking at him, and they were saying, "Hey!" I live a block from here and I've basically watched these kids grow up. They are always hanging out the window, and I always try to photograph them.

So I made a couple of quick pictures, and he said, "Are you taking a picture of me?" And I said, "No, of the kids." The truth is, I was trying to take a picture of all of them, but he was like, "You can't take pictures of kids." So, we had to have this conversation about why I would want to do that, and the more I spoke, the more he got upset with me. It was very intense. I knew he was doing it to protect those kids, but I couldn't be more misunderstood. Those children are like joy incarnate. I would take that picture so I could celebrate that. In

fact, that's why I did take the picture before we had gotten into this exchange, and actually it is quite sweet. I really love it. It shows the kids, and they're smiling at me. It's hard when people don't understand your intentions, which for me is purely about just trying to enjoy your neighborhood and enjoy people and say, "Hi, neighbor," you know?

I'm assuming that kind of reaction is pretty rare.

Most of the time things like that don't happen. It's mostly super chill. Usually it's really lovely. Sometimes you make people's day. That's something that no one asks me about. Some people are like, "Oh my god. Really? You want to take my picture? Okay." They feel seen, and that's amazing. My intention to take people's photo is almost always rooted in the fact that I think they are beautiful or amazing looking or because of their personality. It's always a celebration of them, never to make fun of them or catch them in an unfair moment.



Chelsea, Manhattan, 2013 (Rolleiflex)

I'm also assuming that this experience probably varies greatly depending on whether or not you're just using your phone or if you're out there with a large, professional-looking camera.

When I'm not out with my iPhone, I'm out with my Rolleiflex, which is a more involved process. When I'm using the big camera, I introduce myself first. It's a super-slow camera and it's really old-fashioned looking. Everyone's like, "Whoa, my dad had a camera like that." It's a real conversation starter.

In those cases, I ask their permission first, and that's a totally different experience. Also, as beautiful and as heart wrenching as making candid photography can be, when you don't have to go through that barrier of taking a picture without asking them, when that's removed, when you're just like, "Hey, my name's Amy and I really would love to take your picture. What do you think?"... it's a different thing. Of course, when you ask and someone says no, that's still hard. That might be worse, actually. Some people don't even stop walking when I ask them, as if I'm giving out a flyer.

Like you're going to ask them for money or something?

Exactly. Some people think I'm selling pictures. A lot of the game in doing this kind of photography is just figuring out the best thing to say to people so they feel at ease, so they don't get the wrong idea, so they don't have misunderstandings about what I'm doing.

So when you have the bigger camera, and you stop someone and say, "Can I take your picture," and they say yes, how long does the process take?

Less than a minute, usually. I walk on the side of the street that has the lighting that I prefer, and I try to make it so that it's not disruptive. I take two images of each subject. For the first one, I let them compose themselves, and the next one, I might give them some direction. I always tell them to look into the lens, but then I sort of let them assemble the way they want. I only take two, and then I go. It's a very strong collaborative situation. Everyone's focused, paying attention, so it works. I only need to take two.



The Insiders, No. 1, from *The Insiders* (Rolleiflex)

What is your regular photographic practice? Do you try to shoot every day?

Well, to be honest, right now is actually a difficult time for me. I don't know what's going on. I don't know how to describe it, but I can't decide if I'm procrastinating, or if I don't want to deal, or if I just need time to think... I don't know what it is, but I haven't been shooting in the same way that I used to.

It used to be that during the warm months I would photograph basically every day. I would photograph from, like, 3:00pm to sundown. That was my goal. Then in the cold months, I would basically not go out and just do administrative shit at home, which there is a ton of. And it worked. As a street photographer, it's a super-lovely way to work with the seasons. It felt natural to be at home when there's only eight hours of light anyway, and it's fucking cold, and you just want to drink your tea or red wine. It's easier to spend those months sitting

in front of the computer and taking care of stuff, organizing files, and scanning.

I basically don't develop any of my film until the fall. I like to have some distance between when I made those photographs and when I start to evaluate them. That's been part of my process with using film that I really enjoy. Maybe also because it's the antithesis of your digital phone camera. Working with film, it's like a really well-baked process, where you're just super-slow and methodical.

We often ask people about what they do when they feel stuck or when they experience creative blocks, so it's interesting that you mention that it's actually happening to you right now. How are you dealing with it?

This is the first time this has happened to me, so I'm just trying to feel my way through it. It has to do with this project I'm in the middle of making, photographing on the streets of Bed-Stuy. This year it's just created a lot of pause and I'm kind of frozen. That's why I'm pretty sure it's not procrastination. It might be a little timidity. I do feel more timid this year than I did last year. Last year felt really fluid and warm, and this year has been really hot and cold. Every day was different on the street. Sometimes really painful, lots of rejection, the clouds are heavy.

It's like a fucking movie. One day is bad, but the next day the sun is out and everyone says yes and it becomes this rain of positivity, and I'm like, "Okay, *this* is what I'm asking for." It's just intense. I feel like this year, there's been a lot of extreme fluctuation in the experience. Or maybe my perception is off and I'm causing it to be that way? I'm not really sure. How do you know?



G Train, Brooklyn, 2016, from *Street Dailies* (iPhone)

You've been doing this kind of work for years now, so this is not new process for you. As someone who is often shooting in what are considered rapidly gentrifying areas, how much do you think that has to with with how many people say yes or no and how you are perceived?

I've moved around a lot in NYC and had a lot of different kinds of experiences. As soon as I set foot in our current neighborhood, Bed-Stuy, it just stole my heart. I think it's because people are really communicative. There's a lot of living out on the street. There's much more interaction. It's also just really friendly. People say, "Good day." It's different than Williamsburg and other parts of Brooklyn.



Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, 2016



Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, 2016

I don't really approach photography from a race and gentrification standpoint, and maybe this is why it's so great we're having this conversation because, obviously, that's what's happening right now and these are really incredibly deep, problematic issues. I am not used to having a political aspect to my work. I think that is part of my hesitation, too. I feel like for the first time I don't really like who I might symbolize and I have to be cognizant of that. I walk around in my fucking purple mumu, with my fucking old-timey Rolleiflex, asking for pictures. It's kind of embarrassing, when I put it in that context. At the same time, this is who I am. This is what I do. And I do it knowing that my intentions are pure and true. It's on me to communicate that to other people.

Did you always do street photography?

Yeah, I really wanted to be on the street. I was originally a painter and a writer and I loved both, but they were

super lonely pursuits. I was always hearing children playing in the street and being like, "Ugh, I want to be out there." I didn't want to be stuck in a room, smelling of turpentine, or glued to a computer. I really wanted to learn how to gain someone's trust. I wanted to interact with people. I thought it would be the coolest thing if your art was all about interacting with people.

Then, I saw the World Famous *Bob* and decided to do this super in-depth project with her, which was all about gaining someone's trust because we were complete strangers.

For that project, which eventually became Shoot the Arrow: A Portrait of The World Famous *BOB*, you were totally embedded in her life. How many years did that project span?

I photographed her for four years, and then I looked at all the images for another four years, literally, because I made so many images and so many different kinds of images. I was also trying to find my voice, and I didn't yet know the answers to the questions the work was asking: Who is the World-Famous *Bob*? And who am I to her? And what do I want to show? It took a long time, but it was fun because it was so rich and deep and slow and wonderful.



Marquee Night Club, Chelsea, from *Shoot the Arrow: A Portrait of The World Famous *BOB**



Winter Morning, from *Shoot the Arrow: A Portrait of The World Famous *BOB**

Working on a project like that where you become a fixture in someone's life, were there moments when you ever had to stop? Or when it felt too personal?

No. We had an arrangement. I started by saying, "Anytime you want me to go away, you just tell me." And there was only one moment, just one of all those years, and it was backstage at a show or something. It wasn't even a big deal. There were certain things that were off-limits in her life, and I respected that. Still, she let me into her life so completely by the end we were just friends. We had so much fun making this project together. It was what we did. It was how we hung out.

Do you do other stuff to make money?

I do. I write about photography, because I have this past as a writer that I mentioned. And I love writing. I'll always love writing. I love grammar. I love putting together a great sentence. I just don't enjoy it as much as photography.

I know that you also do commercial work. How do you make a distinction between personal and creative work? Or keep your creative work from feeling too much like "work"?

I have always been fairly protective about my photography, because when I started doing it I had another means of making a living, so I didn't have to depend on it for that. I was just like, "Oh my god. This is it. This is what I want to do." So, I haven't had that experience yet. Photography has never felt like work, even when it was. I don't want that to happen. That would be a real disaster. It would also be a personal disaster, because I don't know how I would take in life, you know? I don't know how I would figure things out.

It really is, for a lack of a better expression, a way of looking at the world

It really is. All the answers are there. That's how it feels to me.

Amy Touchette recommends:

Les Blank's film *A Poem Is a Naked Person*. Made from 1972 to 1974, but not released until 2015 after Blank's death, this movie is supposed to be a documentary about musician Leon Russell, but it's more like a lyrical, avant-garde documentary about seemingly unconnected moments happening in Oklahoma during those years. Filled with long, ruminating scenes, it is one of my all-time favorite movies.

Smoota's upcoming album. There's nothing quite like the music that Smoota makes: super fresh, humorous, sage lyrics set in various sexual and romantic circumstances backed by slow, groovy hooks. The next album, releasing in 2018, continues the conversation he started in his debut album, *Fetishes*, into even more sensual, honest, and hilarious territory.

Paul Graham's essay/presentation, "The Unreasonable Apple." Photographer Paul Graham discusses, in the most eloquent way, why the magic and art of straight photography is so misunderstood by and lost on the fine art world and people in general.

Diane Arbus: A Chronology. If you want the truth about what really went on in this iconic photographer's mind, get it from the source herself. This book compiles Arbus's extensive correspondence with friends, family, and colleagues, her personal notebooks, and other unpublished writings, and reveals that her writing is just as original and compelling as her photographs.

Alan Watts (1915-1973). We are wired to get in the way of our own happiness, but it doesn't have to turn out that way. Watts lectured extensively on Eastern wisdom during his lifetime, breaking down Buddhism into lucid bites I can actually put into practice.

Name

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Vocation

Photographer

Fact

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