On engaging with the world through your work

Photojournalist Brenda Ann Kenneally discusses making art based on where you grew up, social and economic inequity, honestly connecting with your subjects, and why she doesn't miss cocktail parties.

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As told to Sophie Kemp, 1884 words.

Tags: Photography, Beginnings, Identity, Process, Politics, Money.

When did you first pick up a camera?

I first picked up a camera when I was 30. 29, almost 30. I had a long life of doing other things, probably trying to figure stuff out or fit in or all those things. Once I realized that I had been right from the beginning, when I was 12, as the Bible calls the "age of reason," the things that I thought were all bullshit [became clear].

I thought I wanted to be a journalist. There was nothing in my family or anything that would even give me an inkling of the idea of figuring out the reason why you're here. I thought maybe it would be something like Barbara Walters. That was someone I had seen on television, and something that looked like you were engaging with the world in an analytical way, but also that really made you go deep with other people that you felt like you couldn't meet. You could get close to people, and I liked that.

I couldn't do anything else and go on like that. I read this book, a biography of Diane Arbus. I didn't know who the fuck that was or that photography was a thing that you could actually do, like as a thing. I do know that the feelings she talked about—feeling like she couldn't connect with the world, and the world was at an arm's length to her—because she came from a family of privilege. I came from nothing. I identified with those feelings, and the idea of her seeking out people—that it was almost first visually, like it was agreed upon or assumed—that one could not approach. Photography seemed like a way to be in the world that I wanted to deeply engage with but felt that I couldn't. So I did. I got a camera. I was in Fort Lauderdale. I had been married the second time. I was really young, 17, after I ran away from home. And then I got married again. The camera became a way to really be in the world.

A lot of your work, or the work I'm most familiar with, is about Upstate New York, outside and around Troy. What is your relationship to being from that part of Upstate New York and taking photographs there?

I mean, they are my family. That's no pandering. That's just what it is. And that's just by virtue of the fact that I spend more of my time with them. It's like, you know how when you have a job at a place, a real workplace, those people, you spend more time with them than you do with your spouse or your kids or anybody. That's just the way it is. I think that's why the pandemic really had something that needed to be addressed about how alienating, for a lot of us, the work is that we were doing. Like for the folks up here, there's no phoning it in when you're a bus driver, a healthcare worker, or an essential worker at a Dunkin' Donuts.

I have a son. I'm not married anymore. I've had three husbands and I don't have them anymore, although I am good friends with my last husband probably because he's the one that's still alive. He went cross country with me for

this big *New York Times* gig. But he's also helpful in things that we do up here with the families. If there's a party, or something needs to be built or something needs to be done, like physical things, he does it. So that's good.

So we are a family. That book [*Upstate Girls*] was for the people in it. For me and for the people in it. It's a template for this whole internalized marginalization, and now trauma and social inequality and economic inequity. So that book is, as I call it, FUBU. Remember FUBU? "For Us, By Us"? It's during the time of Rocawear. Google it. Rocawear, Phat Farm, FUBU, it was big in the '90s. So that's what I think the book is: For Us, By Us. It became obvious that everything that I learned, we learned together. The places that the families were in their lives, second, third generation, that was the background for what I knew we needed to do next, which was to show the manifestation of our social and economic and spiritual investment in the most vulnerable of our sisters and brothers.

You're hopefully going on a cross country roadtrip with the Troy families later this year, tell me about that.

I'm buying a school bus. I have a place in Bombay Beach in California on the Salton Sea, which has been life changing for me because I'm also still here, and I'm also still in the trauma, still in the closed tiny rooms with a bunch of stuff, still right next to kids when they're growing up by video games, and that's also traumatizing to me for many reasons. When you're a maker of things, you do always keep one step ahead of yourself. I mean, I've heard it said, a lot of people keep a couple of projects going. I mean, I do that too, mostly now because I'm older and I feel like I won't get done.

So I was going to do it next year as a celebration and a closure, and so the kids could see where that place is. And they could take a plane there because nobody has ever taken a plane. So it's going to be as soon as the last kid gets out of school. It will be probably eight to 10 kids on the bus.

I think the [places we visit] should be a combination of post-industrial places where they can really see America as it used to be and what's happened, so they know they're part of a larger canon of exploitation and things to think about. And then hopefully we're going to wind up at my place, and then 40 miles, I think, southwest is the beginning of the Baja Peninsula in Mexico. So I would like them to cross and just see the wall. There it's a big fence. But just see these things. it's not going to be a Disney trip. We'll, of course, see the Grand Canyon. But when you see kids that have literally pretty much been living in their rooms, like small darkened rooms with video games, juxtaposed against these wide open spaces, I think it can really give you a kick—all of us a kick—in the gut about the ways in which we have been actually marginalizing, ignoring, pushing aside a large swath of our young people.

What is it like to make art about a place where you grew up? What has it been like watching these kids grow up?

I had to be here. I don't have to be here when I start sewing it up. When I start closing it together, I almost can't be here because then every time you look, everything you look at now is the most important thing. And the thing that's coming up after that is the most important thing. One of the kids said something about, "Oh, it sounds like when I used to play," maybe it wasn't kids, maybe it was their parents because this is older: "When I used to play the game where you had an avatar or a second life, you could just go on and on and on. And where do you stop?"

I realized one day, they said there was no end to this, and that's what it is. Except for now, it's not my second life, it's my actual life, which I think comes back to the first question of what are you doing now or what are you making now. I'm trying to make sense of the world, and realizing that, in fact, there is no avatar I'm sending out to be my photographer. There is no avatar I'm sending out to my real life to have a girlfriend or raise my kid. For me, it's all one. That's what I'm hoping for in the work, that we all integrate and just pay attention to someone or spend time with someone who comes from a different social background. We're not looking for a one-off, or this is my do-gooder self and this is my real world. Do you know what I mean? This is all our lives. So how could it be that way for me? And it just took me a while to realize that.

And then there are people who tell you, you need to therapize that out of you, that you're hiding out in this

netherworld. I guess what they used to call it was slumming, when some high-class dame went to a bar on Valley and kissed James Cagney. But in those film noir, there's somebody and she's "a dame like you." But the truth is, I'm not that high-class dame. I have traversed some class boundaries basically because I wanted to empower myself to be able to hold the rope down on the bridge for other people to do it, or for me to at least be able to tell them what's on the other side. And I wanted my own kid to go to one of those fancy schools and to have all of that healthy entitlement to be able to do something good. You know what I mean? So, for me, and it was then I realized, this, in fact, there's no cocktail party I'm dying to get back to. I don't drink anyway. But I guess if you wanted to see an example, it would be like Truman Capote. You look at him when he was writing about *In Cold Blood*. He really traveled in high-brow circles, intellectuals and New York City cocktail parties in the '40s and '50s. Really a glam era. And so you see him then going to visit the guys in prison and then go back to the cocktail parties.

It's not like that for me. I'm not dying to get back to the cocktail party. In fact, I believe I'm perfectly happy and meant to live life among my folks, my people, who really don't have a buffer between them and life, a buffer of comfort, a buffer of security. I do have that now, and I can do little things to make people's lives a little more magical or better or comfortable. Or have little dinners or certain things that wouldn't be readily part of life that maybe you could go and seek out and buy as an experience or something. But these folks don't necessarily feel welcome to do that, and now there ain't nobody doing that shit anyway.

Brenda Ann Kenneally Recommends:

The drive through Death Valley National Park from Nevada to California is probably better that going to the moon… or at least as extraterrestrial.

Take a road trip and shower at truck stops…give away donuts along the way.

robins egg blue nail polish for fingers and toes

hike through cemeteries

drink green juice

Name
Brenda Ann Kenneally

Vocation
Photojournalist, multi-platform documentary maker, activist