

On knowing when to put down the camera



An interview with photographer Richard Renaldi

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2953 words.

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

Did you always take pictures, even from a young age?

I came to photography pretty young. I took art classes when I was a kid and I loved it. I took art classes after school, but then I kind of stopped when I was in high school. The next time I tried to take an art class was during my junior year of high school, but all the classes were filled up, so I ended up taking a photography class instead. I was surprised that I was actually good at it. I wasn't athletic and I had a pretty undirected creative impulse, so I really just adapted to photography rather easily. It came a little more naturally for me. I decided that I would apply to colleges for art programs and photo programs. I got into NYU and I studied in the photo program there. That was in 1986. Basically ever since my junior year in high school I have been taking pictures. My archive of photos actually goes all the way back to 1984.



Boy, New York, NY, 1995

It's a document of your entire life, created in a time before cell phones and digital cameras.

My next book is with a Japanese publisher, and it's going to be an autobiography. None of the work is going to be large-format. It's all going to be 35 millimeter, color slide, medium format, iPhone photography, digital SLR. Actually, today I'm digging deeply into all my archives.

Going back with a different eye and looking at that early work, do you find that there's a sensibility that carries through from the beginning?

I think there is. I always engaged with people in my photos, so portraiture has always been a big part of what I'm looking at. But I don't really think I honed my skills as a portrait person until I picked up the big view camera in the late '90s. Then, I worked with it for the next almost 20 years. It's funny when you go through your archives. Sometimes you're like, "Oh my god, I've come full circle." I'll realize that I've been looking at particular things or making certain pictures since I was literally a kid. It's nice, actually, to see echoes of your current self in things you did in the past.

So this book will be explicitly really about you, then?

It will be. I built it around Manhattan Sunday—which was a project I made around New York nightlife. When I exhibited the work last year in New York I had a little room, the Project Room, where I could do whatever I wanted. That's when the archive idea came to me, because I realized I had all these older pictures from night life in the late '80s and '90s, and then color pictures I took more recently. The space ended up being almost like a salon. It was completely covered. There were 80 pictures just in that small room. So it was a more like my own private view of the night life experience in general, but it was a little broader than just nightlife. It

included some personal imagery. So I'm going to expand on that with this next book. The publisher has given me a lot of freedom and creative license to do whatever I want, which is both exciting and a little nerve wracking.



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Your website gives interesting insight into your process. You're a subject in much of your work. The photos that document you and your partner in various hotel rooms around the world are poignant. Not only are they intimate, but they also show this lovely evolution—you both age as the photos go on. It's beautiful.

I often think of myself as a self-portraitist. The website thing is pretty new for me and I'm still adding to it. It's a monster. Photography websites are tricky. Is this the best way for people to see your work? I don't know. For me it's a way to share my work with the world in a way that doesn't require money, for people who maybe don't have the money or space for buying books or art. A lot of artists treat their work as something so rarefied that you have to be a special snowflake to see their work. For me, the internet is the most democratic thing.

Even then, there's still a lot of people that don't have access to computers. So for me, I like the democratic element of putting everything out there and letting it exist in that virtual space. It's also a way to catalogue all the projects I've done over the years. The hotel room portraits actually maybe work better on the website since, when organized sequentially, it has the effect of showing the passage of time. I like that that series can be about a lot of different things, because I think it also talks about class a little bit. Some of the more recent ones get a little fancier—the hotel rooms are nicer—and some of them are just dumps. I'm interested in what I call "the architecture of hospitality," how the corporate rooms are designed as opposed to a more boutique kind of room, etc.



Ashtabula, OH, 2012



Pompei, Italy, 2006

For visual artists, not just photographers, the artist website becomes a kind of virtual shorthand—for what your career is or what your work is all about. In your case, it's interesting to see these discreet, different projects represented under the same umbrella. Are you someone who's always working toward a project, or working in the context of a project? I know photographers who just shoot all the time, and then later they figure out what it's about, while others like to shoot towards a specific concept. Do you fall under either of those camps?

I fall into both, but I'm drawn towards organization, which might be a deeper psychological thing, needing everything to be organized and make sense. My apartment is not necessarily dust-free, but everything is organized, and I need that. I think I behave that way creatively, too. I have a need to organize and structure my work, so I've often worked on projects and thematically structured ideas that I continue to explore over time. If they're not successful they quickly drop off.

But, I love photographing in general, so I take pictures all the time. Not so much in New York—I'll just shoot things with my iPhone in New York—but when I travel I always bring my nice cameras with me. I take pictures all the time, of everything. Some of those images just kind of live in my archive. But now that I'm doing this project digging back into my own history, some of them might come to light.

I think it'll be interesting to present that side of myself to a larger audience, because I think people think of me as the 8" x 10" portrait guy, and I don't just do that. In every profession, even creative ones, everyone wants to put you in a box. Not that I'm the James Franco of photography, but I feel like I like to do a lot of different types of work, and I don't have to confine myself to only doing portraiture, because I love landscapes and self-portraits and stills.

A lot of people know of your work from the *Touching Strangers* images, in which you pair people who don't know

each other and allow them to pose however they see fit. Shooting that project—which is connecting all of these seemingly disparate people who don't know each other at all—what has been your takeaway? It must have been an incredible learning experience of what people are like.

I think the thing I most took away from it was how generous people were in the end. By just asking for something, you often get something incredible. You just have to ask. I don't think I knew that. I had to push the subjects a little, and a lot of people were definitely stepping outside of their comfort zone, but they were willing to participate. Meeting a complete and total stranger, and asking them as one human being to another, to interact intimately with another stranger, was so interesting. People would often just get it immediately, in pretty much an instant, and then give something right back. I thought that was amazing. I think I learned more from that project than any other portrait work I ever did, because it was asking for something more. That, I thought, was lovely. It really inspired me.



Cheyenne, Charlie, and Omarion; Cincinatti, OH, 2014



Elaine and Arly; New York, NY, 2012

Does taking photos become a compulsion? Are there times where you're just sort of like, "I need to turn off that part of my brain, and just live my day and not think about making images"?

It's both. I haven't been photographing nearly as much in the last year and a half, partly because I put so much work into *Manhattan Sunday* and archiving. But I did a big road trip in the summer, and I did a lot of shooting, probably the most shooting I've done in a long time. But it's true that I do really have to make myself stop and put the camera down sometimes, which is healthy. A good example of that is the recent eclipse. We went to see it in totality, and I had all three cameras with me, my iPhone, my SLR and my 8" x 10", and actually, I'm pretty happy with the 8" x 10" that came out. It's kind of cool. But nothing can compare to the actual experience. Nothing.

I was aware and conscious of that idea—"Why are you even photographing this?"—but I had to photograph it because I was witnessing it, and I was giving truth to it by photographing it. Sometimes I think a photograph can really capture the beauty of an event, but you also can't forget to just experience the world. I took a photo of the

eclipse, but then I just let myself experience it. It was just that the quality of light was something I'd never seen or felt before. There was an emotional power to that experience that a photograph could never duplicate... I mean, I cried.

I don't think that many photographs can make you cry, except for maybe some horrible war photography that touches someone's memory. I really do like to put my camera down, especially when I'm hiking or doing something outdoors. You get to the summit at the end of the hike and you just wanna take everything in instead of taking pictures. You tell yourself, "I don't need pictures of this." As a photographer that's really hard. Especially now because now we are always tethered to a camera thanks to our phones. I just want to put the screen down sometimes, too. You know? For my own sanity.

Taking portraits involves more than just technical skill with a camera, it also involves certain people skills—getting someone to let you photograph them, creating the kind of environment that lets them be their most authentic self in front of you, being able to put people at ease. How do you feel about that? Are those sort of intangible "people" skills something you can learn or something that can be taught?

I don't think you can learn it. It's just like doing an interview—you want it to be natural and comfortable. You want to bring this organic quality to the experience so that it feels real and warm and not weird. That's what I'm trying to do when I'm walking up to someone and saying, "Hi, I'm Richard and I'm a photographer. Do you mind if I take a photograph of you?"



Chris and Amaira: Chicago. IL. 2013

So many students I have in my workshops seem to think there's some magic formula to approaching people and making a portrait. It's so hard to tell them there's no secret to approaching someone you don't know. Some people have a lot of anxiety and fear about communicating with strangers, so it's going to be a bigger challenge for them. I mean, I learned certain behaviors from my family, particularly from my mom who would start yapping to anyone standing in line next to her at the grocery store, or wherever we were. Those were behaviors I learned. I think being a good photographer obviously has a lot to do with how you communicate, and how you engage and approach people. I think that's really key.

It's weird, I don't even do that much talking because I'm also thinking about making the picture. When I'm ready, because I use this big format camera, I have to be behind the camera under the cape and everything, and they usually can't hear me very well anyway because my voice is muffled. So when I've had assistance or when my partner has been with me, often they will ask more interview-y kind of questions. I always find that interesting.

To be honest, I have sometimes learned stuff from my assistants about the subjects I'm shooting more than I have myself, since my primary focus is to take their image and tell their story visually. That personal history is also there when you look at people, even if they don't tell it to you. It's in their faces. It's in their body language and expressions, even if they don't always verbalize it to you.

When you're not shooting with an iPhone, what is the preferred camera that you usually shoot with?

Well, most of the *Touching Strangers* and *Manhattan Sunday* images are from an 8" x 10" view camera. If you Google it, you'll see a picture of it right away. It's a big box with bellows. It's basically the old-school original camera technology. You have a detachable lens in the front, and then the box, and then a plate. They used to have glass plates, but now you use film holders. The entire thing is very big. It's like 30 pounds. So using it to shoot in nightclubs like I used to was kind of crazy.

What is it about that particular format? Obviously there are tons of small cameras you could use if you wanted to in those situations.

It slows the process down, and it allows for a different kind of interaction. It brings a little more seriousness and gravity to the situation. I think people also react and respond differently when you're bringing that kind of instrument with you. The other camera I use for the hotel room portraits and my airport series and the crossing is my digital camera, like an SLR. It doesn't have the same kind of seriousness to it.



Vincent and Charles; Los Angeles, CA, 2012

For young photographers that want to get their work in front of other people's eyes, what is your advice? Is it just about creating a website and putting up as much work as you can?

It's a tough question. I'm not good at it. I mean, I'm really not. I don't think marketing is my strong point, and there's far more successful photographers than me because they are better at marketing. I got a lot of success with *Touching Strangers*, but that project ballooned outside of the photo art world, which is very rare. Getting your work in front of people takes a lot of persistence and a lot of not being fearful of being rejected. It takes money to have the time to make the work, and some independence to really devote to your art. It also takes patience, because to make something good takes time, and a lot of practice to get better. I think that's probably true for any craft, like writing or music or dancing. Getting it out there is definitely tough. I wish there were an easier answer.

There are so many new avenues now to share your work because of the internet and social media, but then again, we're competing with so much more information and nobody wants to pay for content. The arts are really being squeezed. I don't know what my advice is other than to be persistent and not give up when people are like, "We can only start you as an unpaid intern." You just have to be committed. Also, maybe don't live in New York, where the rent is gonna eat up two-thirds of whatever money you make. There are people all over the place—particularly in small and mid-sized cities—that are making great things happen. Go find them.



Sumatra, MT, 2009

Richard Renaldi Recommends:

Five Delicious Soul Food Restaurants

Ernie's Restaurant - Charleston, South Carolina

Paynes Bar-B-Que - Memphis, Tennessee

Lannie's Bar-B-Q Spot, Selma, Alabama

Narobia's Grits & Gravy - Savannah, Georgia

Charles Pan Fried Chicken Restaurant - New York, New York

Name

Richard Renaldi

Vocation

Photographer



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