

A ROLE FOR  
ARTISTS  
IN TROUBLED  
TIMES

Ways to Think About Making Art  
Ways for Artists to Find an Audience  
Renewing Humanity Through Art

by Robert Golden

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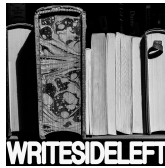
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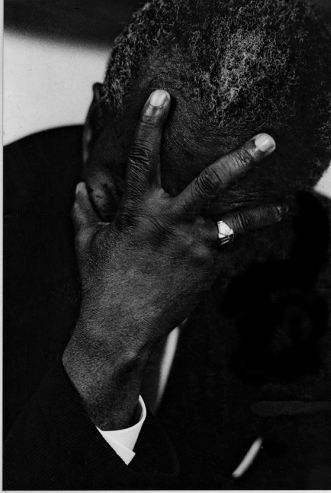
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OLD MAN, LONDON



WATER CAME OUT OF MY EYES  
AFRO-WEST INDIANS AND BRITAIN

“I came here 1957. I came up here with an English passport, because I was an Englishman as I was concerned. I know the English way of life from a kid. In Barbados history creates that until 1966, Independence, we come under the British government. I had an opportunity and I said right, I want to see my motherland, the place I hear about, and I was shocked when I come here and find different. I expect civility. It's no joke. And while working on the buses, money was taken and thrown at me. I cried. Water came out of my eyes. I'm telling you the honest truth, I had a bit of hatred.”

BUS CONDUCTOR

“You (the European) are making us (the black, brown and yellow skinned people) into monstrosities; your humanism claims that we are at one with the rest of humanity but your racist methods set us apart.”

FRANTZ FANON

1562 It becomes apparent to British merchants that they, like the Spanish and Portuguese before them, could make large profits by trading in slaves. John Hawkins makes the first British slave run from Guinea West Africa to the West Indies, with the financial aid of his "worshipful friends of London".

Panel from an exhibition about black people's lives in England in the 1970's; photograph/text: Robert Golden

## INTRODUCTION

*For artists surrounded by our hollowed-out  
culture  
to be able to create for a socially progressive,  
hungry-eyed audience while making a living  
and not being ignored and forgotten  
we share a struggle.*

Over the years I have worked as a photographer and film-maker, and via my history of publishing and encountering agents, publishers, producers and editors, (see biographical notes) I have learned that what I have to say is contradictory, not to the proclaimed but to the actual values of Anglo-American middle class cultural and political practices<sup>i</sup>.

From what I have witnessed as well as researched, I have come to understand that capitalism is now practiced in the most injurious way for the majority of people and that democracy has been profoundly undermined by the ultra-rich who purchase politicians and political parties and then bend them to their demands rather than to representing the wishes of the electorate. Since the early 1980's, they have purposely transformed our culture, morality, ethics, wishes and our art. In so doing, they have stolen hope, especially from our bewildered young. They have in part accomplished

these changes by increased centralized control of educational institutions, and increased media monopolization of popular culture and the news.

The Establishment<sup>ii</sup> has guardians at the gates of all these institutions who control what does and does not get taught, made, seen or distributed. Every

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<sup>i</sup> Leonard Cohen wrote in his song *You Want It Darker*

*"They're lining up the prisoners and the guards are taking aim. I struggle with some demons they were middle class and tame and I didn't know I had permission to murder and to maim."*

<sup>ii</sup> The Establishment can be counted as those with power in the media and entertainment industries, the financial markets, corporations and institutions of the state including the big bureaucracies, and the upper ranks of the army, secret services and police. They comprise about 10% of the society.

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**1**  
**PICTURES, PURPOSE**  
**AND PRESENCE**

A VISUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A  
PHOTOGRAPHER/FILM-MAKER

In the following essay it is vital that readers see the images I am referring to during the course of reading. That way, what I am saying will make more sense and offer a richer experience.

There are several problems about printing these pictures in the published book.

The first is that the charges to purchase permission for image usage are high, thus, by necessity, pushing this volume's price up.

The second is that some universities who are in possession of certain photographer's works will not respond to requests.

The third is that at the moment it is not possible to obtain a high standard of four-colour reproduction for published work on the Internet, at least at a reasonable price.

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With these limitations in mind I have provided, at the appropriate places in the texts, two ways of viewing the references. There are my own images and those of the painter Ricky Romain that are accessible here:

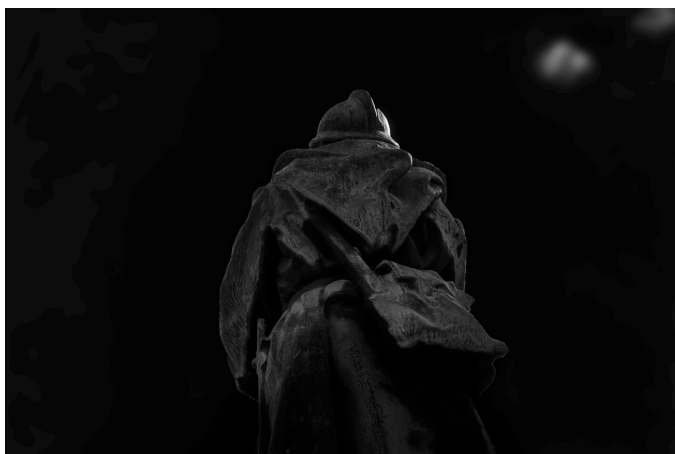
<https://vimeo.com/301462319>

This will take you to a film you can start and stop before and after each section. Use SEE 1 for instance (the number) with a short description. Go to the URL and keep it open as you read. That way you can hit the button and the images will play. With some there is accompanying music, which, should you wish, just turn off.

The second group are noted in the text as FIND xx. The essential key words are given to help you Google the correct image.

This essay is mainly about photography and the fine arts, but it is also about life becoming richer when we are compelled by the beauty and empathy of the fine arts, films, photographs, poetry, music and novels to look into the souls of others.





Commemoration, Sarteano Italy, March 2016;  
photograph: Robert Golden

## INTRODUCTION

I'm going to take you on a journey of images; images that transformed me from being a kid living in a home with no regard for art and with no books nor ideas to discuss, into a person whose entire adult existence has been dedicated to making photographs and films. As you will come to understand, my dedication has not been to photography and film-making, but to using them as tools to make sense of life. I have become what I am because I was rescued by culture and by pictures in particular.

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I'm not saying that how I understand the following images would be validated by academic research. I'm only telling you what I made of the pictures and how the pictures affected me. I hope, in explaining my experiences, you may see that I have tried to turn away from suffocating cultural/social and political attitudes, from sexism and macho nationalism, from racism and the hatred of those who are different, while turning towards ways of thinking which ask questions about who I wished to be and what my responsibilities to others should be and in particular, what my responsibilities with a camera in hand should be.

Consciously or not, we have all been raised within a culture affected by, and in part formed by great artist's images. Their attitudes, which have become a part of our collective visual understanding, have also affected my development and my work. This visual language, like all languages, helps us to know who we are and how to discover truths beyond the surrounding, swamping Anglo/ American popular cultures. In other words, my photographs, have inherited, not their genius, but a fragment of the artist's humane worldview.

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**SEE 1: images from earlier in my life.**

<https://vimeo.com/301462319>

(This URL is for all of the 'SEE' images.)

**SEE 2: images from 30 to 40 years later.**

You will have noticed that my pictures are not high dynamic range, chocolate box coloured photos of fireworks against starry skies. They are simple images. You may see they are united by a particular visual sensibility. Before I continue I want to relate two quick stories

## **DIEGO RIVERA'S DETROIT MURAL**

When I was 8 years old, I was offered special drawing and painting classes in the Detroit Institute of Art. On the second Saturday I attended, we children were shown into a high narrow room that had a painted story. It continued from wall to wall and on two sides from floor to ceiling created by the famous Mexican post-revolutionary muralist painter, Diego Rivera.

**FIND:**

**Diego+Rivera+Detroit+Industrial+Mural+Art+Institute  
+of+Detroit**

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I thought the whole world was in that huge mural. The walls vibrated with life flowing out of the earth to the farmers and workers. I sensed everything was connected: from the soil to the roots of plants to the weather which nurtured them; from the farmers who harvested the food to the women who pounded the maize to bake the bread; from the women's bread to the miners who dug the coal and pig iron; from the sailors on the ships who transported the minerals to the mills that coked the iron ore; from the men who pressed and punched the steel into cars that produced the owner's profits; to the priest and the wealthy who owned and disdained the workers. Everything had a meaning and everything was interrelated. I thought all of life was described within the mural.

The teacher explained that after it had been viewed by local business and religious leaders, they demanded the painting be covered over because it was Marxist propaganda. But, said the teacher, "*to his lasting credit the museum's curator, Wilhelm Valentiner, refused to allow that to happen*".

After I had been introduced to that mural I knew I needed to be some sort of visual artist. Because of that experience, I never

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had to be convinced that all children need to be exposed to all the arts.

## DISCOVERING PHOTOGRAPHY

Two years later I opened the pages of a commemorative annual published by Life Magazine. I turned the pages, looking at the ads for cars, cookies and refrigerators and came across a set of photographs that took my breath away. They were in rich black and white, glowing off the smooth semi-glossy pages. Picture after picture showed, in an almost three-dimensional sharpness, the effects of war on American soldiers from the battle for the Pacific in 1945.

**FIND: W+Eugene+Smith+War+in+the+Pacific**

I saw that the photographer was called W. Eugene Smith and that he was, as I, born in the Midwest. Once again my world was altered. Diego Rivera's museum mural, my continual amazement with the look, beauty and effects of light; my childhood dream of life having meaning; my childish wish to achieve a heroic something; all these unclear desires fused in Smith's photographs: Smith from the Midwest; Smith with only a camera in hand.

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## LEONARDO DA VINCI'S PORTRAITS

Now to truly begin this journey I want to tell you about my encounter with Leonardo Da Vinci's portraits. Look first at Leonardo Da Vinci's St Anne and Family.

**FIND: leonardo+da+vinci+portrait+st+anne**

Now look at these icon painting of about the same period.

**FIND: Icon+painting+15<sup>th</sup>+century**

Leonardo was born in 1452, in the middle of the Italian Renaissance, during a period when icon paintings like those I just referred you to were still a dominant mode of picture making.<sup>ii</sup>

In those pre-renaissance medieval icons, neither an individual's characteristics, nor an individual's psychology, nor distinctive attitudes and emotions, nor the trials of life are present on the icon's