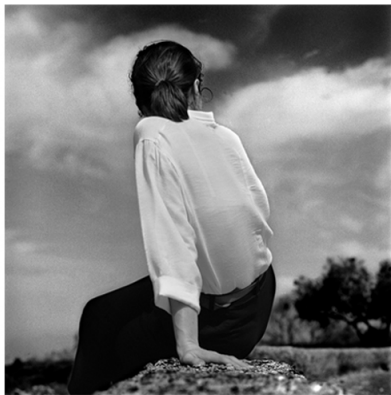


FILLING the BOX

part one: WHY PHOTOGRAPH by Robert Golden



Comments About Robert Golden's Work

Robert Golden ... builds his images with ... restraint: tactile sensuous shapes are riveted to a classical structure so tightly that no one thinks about formal qualities ... Mr Golden is not talking about himself but about others.

BRITISH JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Robert Golden is one of the most passionate photographers I know. He not only wants to take great photographs and make great films but he wants us to see what is really happening in the world, as he would say "under the rocks". I have known him for over thirty years and he hasn't given up yet.

Eamonn McCabe (2007)

It is the power of feeling in (Robert's) work that places it...ahead of other(s).

Robert Haas, critic

Robert Golden is approached (for his work) because of his individuality and his intensely held beliefs about photography.

BRITISH JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Comments About Robert Golden's Teaching

"Your teaching has opened up an entirely different window on my taking photographs – the possibilities are now endless. It has made me try new subjects, techniques and pushed me to look at the end result in a very detailed way, which I never did before."

"Until I met you it never occurred to me to tell a story through images. I have been more open to you; you let me realize that photography is as much to do with psychology as it is with talent."

"I felt that the 'why' question was becoming much clearer and it is the most important one to answer. When one is completely clear about that, one can attack the technical questions with more confidence as those answers will make more sense."

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

Rostropovich and His Student

The brilliant Russian cellist and teacher Mstislav Rostropovich had a skilled student in his class. One day, after the young man played a piece, Rostropovich handed him a finely inlaid box. He asked the student what he saw. The surprised young man appraised the jewelled inlay and the high gloss, looked at his master and said, 'I see a beautiful box'. 'Yes', said Rostropovich who then asked him to look inside the box. The young man tentatively opened it. Rostropovich asked, 'Now what do you see?' He replied, 'Master, there is nothing inside'. 'Yes', said Rostropovich, 'that box is just like your playing'.

I continually ask myself if my pictures communicate the meanings I believe they have and whether they matter in the world we share. Recently I've met others who are asking similar questions. I suspect part of the reason for this is that as we have all been let down so badly by the political, religious, business and media leaders, we are turning away from the superficial towards more profound questions. This series of books is the result of the many years I have thought about and made photographs and they are a way of sharing those thoughts.

What I often see people photographing and presenting is the outside of the box – wonderful inventive technique and super-real images but they seem empty to me because they are neither about the lives we share nor the problems we are concerned with. They are glorified snaps, postcard views, superficial images of loved ones that tell the rest of us nothing about real life. In short, they communicate little of true concern to others.

I am not making a judgment. You should pursue what you think makes you happy, but I, as a viewer, want my heart and mind to be fed with food for thought, beauty and truth, rather than with more shinny bling. I know I do not represent the vast numbers of people who are concerned with making pictures - but for those who wish to find a way to connect what they love and care about to the pictures they make, this may be the right place to look.

This is not, in the first place, a series about technique; there are already many good books available. It is about ideas and how they inform the picture making process; it is about developing a fundamental point of view, the bedrock of picture making. It is about connecting what you think about in the middle of the night to what to make pictures about, to how to make and present them. But the series will lead naturally to technique, because to control your picture making, you must be able to control the 'how' as well as the 'what' and 'why'.





previous page

Woman and child on a bed, Brixton, London, 1976

I see people I teach about photography and film-making shy away from choosing content that involves people. I understand it is often because they are unsure of themselves. This is a sensibility that comes partly from being uncertain who they are but also because they do not know why they would have the right to invade other people's privacy.

It only began to work for me when I recognised several things: that people are often pleased by the serious attention of another human being; that my 'right' is based on the principal that I have no wish to injure the individual nor take anything from them (their privacy, their dignity) but to tell a part of a human story that is as important to their wellbeing as it is to others. That is, I believe that they represent not only a particular story – their story – but a more universal story of value to many others. And, being driven by the belief that photographers and film documentarists are messengers, often making the invisible become visible, often providing a representation if not a voice to those who would otherwise be ignored by history, my entry into other's private worlds is, for me, a moral and political act.

Is this a justification, a self-serving excuse? I do not believe so, if for no other reason than that so often people have seen what I have done and literally embraced me, because they have understood that I have honoured them and created a shard of truth about their existence. They have intuitively understood my mission.

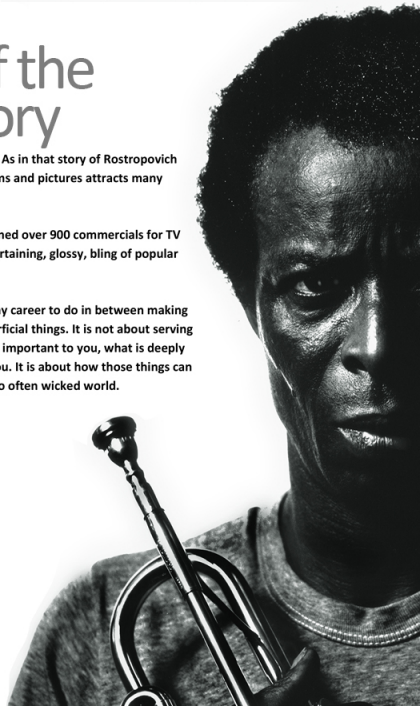
PART ONE

The Importance of the Rostropovich Story

The Rostropovich story is central to the meaning of my beliefs about making photographs. As in that story of Rostropovich and the student, I understand that the exterior bling of objects, performances, fashion, films and pictures attracts many people.

I've shot advertising for magazines, book and record covers and billboard ads and have filmed over 900 commercials for TV around the world as a director and Director of Photography ... so I do know about the entertaining, glossy, bling of popular culture ... but this book is not about that.

It is about a return to what I first did as a young photographer and struggled throughout my career to do in between making a living. This is not about the shiny outside of the box; that is to say, this is not about superficial things. It is not about serving Mammon nor selling something un-needed to someone. This is about who you are, what's important to you, what is deeply personal and how those things can stimulate making photographs which are fulfilling to you. It is about how those things can fill the box up. It is about finding and telling truths in an unnecessarily sorrow filled and too often wicked world.



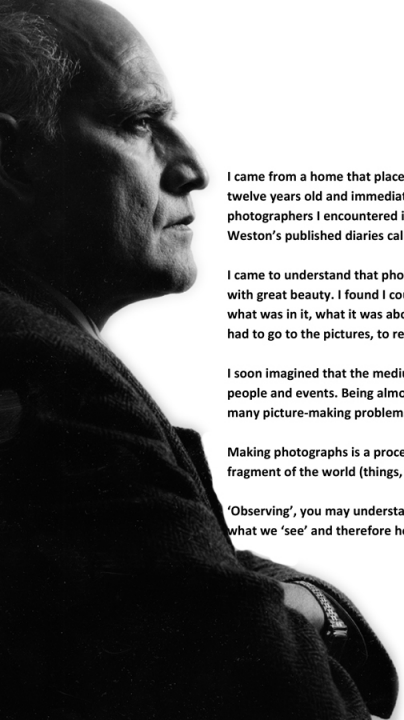


previous page

Workman, New York City, 1967

I was a young photographer, oh so naïve, searching for both whom I was and what I had to say. I felt deeply about things but straight out of university in the sixties, having been involved in the politics of the day, having been trapped in a church with Martin Luther King for many hours surrounded by state troopers and KKK, my sympathies were with minorities, the underdogs, the exploited. In those young days I still believed the system was correctable, that somehow I had contrived to believe that our civilization was rational and that at least those on the left really wanted changes for justice and equality.

I was sitting on the steps of a modern corporate building in midtown Manhattan waiting to meet someone. There I was, a kid from the Midwest not only wanting to 'figure it out' but to engage with the culture and find some acknowledgement for my work. Beneath where I was sitting, behind the passing screen of well-dressed people scurrying to their next meeting, were two stocky elderly men, silently labouring, all but invisible, hoisting rocks. I knew then, instinctively, that however I cut it, I would always be in opposition to injustice and that my chances at success would probably be limited. But then, life was full of surprises.



Observing

I came from a home that placed little value on culture and learning. I became entranced with photography when I was twelve years old and immediately began to read and look at everything I could get my hands on. Amongst the photographers I encountered in books and magazines were W. Eugene Smith, Paul Strand and especially Edward Weston's published diaries called DAYBOOKS.

I came to understand that photography was capable of revealing truths about life I was so hungry to grasp, and to do so with great beauty. I found I could look for many minutes at an image and then begin to see into it, to be able to describe what was in it, what it was about and perhaps even why it had been made. And I realised, unlike with music and film, I had to go to the pictures, to regard them.

I soon imagined that the medium would carry me beyond my restricted childhood to a broader world filled with exciting people and events. Being almost self-taught and pulling myself up by very short bootstraps had forced me to confront many picture-making problems.

Making photographs is a process of looking, seeing and then doing – making pictures, capturing a moment in time and a fragment of the world (things, people) and showing them to others.

'Observing', you may understand, is not only a matter of our eyes looking but what we take in from this looking, that is: what we 'see' and therefore how we attempt to fill the box of culture with meaningful ideas and emotions.

