

Allen Dutton

the serious side of humor

Bill Jay

Allen Dutton was born in Northern Arizona in 1922. He studied art in Los Angeles, California, before returning to Arizona, where he painted, worked in ceramics and taught general art classes in secondary schools prior to becoming interested in photography in 1958. Allen Dutton studied with Minor White, in 1963 and 1964, and has acknowledged this association to be one of the greatest influences in his photographic development. He taught photography at Phoenix College, Arizona, since 1961 until his retirement.

I had never heard of Allen Dutton when I received by mail a package of his prints during my time at Album magazine in 1970. My first reaction was that the photographer was "sick," even though I acknowledged the raw visual power of the pictures - enough to publish a portfolio in the magazine. When I arrived in Arizona it was inevitable that we should meet. I quickly came to the conclusion that he was one of the most intelligent, humanistic, wise and significant people working in the medium today. I - and most of my peers - had misunderstood his photographs and mistakenly relegated him to a photo-oddity. It is true that his work, in both subject matter and style, is out of phase with current taste. Nevertheless I believe a closer, more open-minded, attention to his work (of which still photography and montage are only a small part) will reveal Allen Dutton as a fascinating photographer. I hope this extract from a long interview will contribute towards this understanding.

Q. When and why did you begin making montages from your photographs?

A. When I went on a sabbatical leave [from Phoenix College] in 1968, I made a deal with Encyclopedia Britannica to learn movie making. I worked on some films but I ended up by being a producer of film strips and film loops. This turned me off movie making because Britannica's methods were such a cut and dried thing. I learned cinematic skills but educational films left a lot to be desired. They definitely fill a need but there is little interest in aesthetics. I attempted to persuade them to upgrade the imagery. The sales department told me, "Teachers will go for anything - you don't have to produce something aesthetically pleasing - they will buy crap which is less expensive to produce." During this time I didn't

do much personal photography since there was no darkroom available to me. I began to spend more time away from Britannica to do my own things. This was the start of my composite imagery. I always liked surrealism. When I painted, I always worked in a surrealistic style. It was part of the general introspective movement. I became deeply involved. I discovered I could make the photographic imagery come into line with the kind of things I had been painting for years. It was capable of doing a more convincing job. Dali called his images "hand-painted dream photographs." Why *hand-paint* them?

As I began to put images together, I realized I don't dream in terms of painting. Regardless of how well a painting is done, it can never be mistaken for a photograph. If I had a dream about a painting, it was in the frame on the wall and recognizable for what it was. My dreams are photographic. If you recall your dreams, you might as well be watching a movie, and a black and white movie at that. And so, when I discovered the means with which to do this, I was merely doing in photography that which I had been doing in painting. I can justify it now and think I could have justified it at the time although I had not articulated it. This method becomes more direct because we are dealing with photographic imagery. This is the way we see. The best surrealist painter always must let you know it is a painting and to the extent you know that it is a painting, it isn't working. This is why so much emphasis was placed on that kind of realistic painting. The surrealists never were carried away with the rough style that was current at the time. Those who painted like that were never as effective as were the painters who came close as paint can come to the photographic image. When I began to do this, I felt satisfied. Of course, it took three or four years to really work out the mechanics. You need a great backlog of photographs. The equivalent image no longer interested me after I found this new means. It involved dealing with my subconscious.

One of the things with which I have always had a problem is getting some of my thoughts out in the open. I remember with painting - there were some things I simply didn't paint because I did not want to make people privy to what was going on in my head. Each time I would go a bit further with this - either in photography or painting - it was a big step. I am near the point now where I can put almost anything in my photographs and deal with it. One of the things I early discovered was there were many attitudes I couldn't deal with effectively... things I wanted to keep hidden. This imagery was kind of an emotional purgative, so to speak, because I could let more hang out and trust that my viewer would not see me but himself in the image. Yet, it is not an easy thing. I get a lot of criticism for this and many people are very direct with questions such as, "Is that the way you think?" "Is that the way you see things?" I have spent many years hiding things and compromising what I think about them to be more acceptable. I think my art has helped me overcome this and to the extent it has, it has been very therapeutic for me.

Almost anyone would have real problems should he or she sit down and tell someone their

daydreams. Not only are these shocking but they also are disjointed. Certainly they are not logical. A revelation of them would make us look as though we don't have good sense, or that we are perverted. It is very difficult for people to deal with certain parts of themselves. As soon as you think of something and determine you are going to make it public, the censors go to work. You question what part to make public and what part to be ambiguous about and what part to cover up entirely. We would have to look at some of these things to be specific, but time after time when I started to photograph, the censors popped up; the internal policeman stopped me. The first time I photographed a pregnant female, it was very difficult to admit that I really dug the look of a woman about ready to deliver. I am really turned on by fat ladies. I think they are sensuous beings. Current fashion decrees we are not supposed to like obesity. I am not being very specific here, although I feel my images are very specific.

I start with hundreds of photographs. If one seems to fit, I can deal with the idea visually much better than I can in words, perhaps because it "seems" safer. In the beginning, the problem was with photographing, itself. I ended up with so many photographs which I didn't know how to use. Eventually this became an asset rather than a problem. Finally, when I had thousands of photographs of different sizes, there was enough to work with so I could allow things to happen. I am sure that my "policeman" is still working. I know I haven't reached that point where I don't cover things up. I think at the time that I do arrive at such a point where I can be perfectly candid, I won't need to photograph. I must put these things together now. It's a compulsion. When I resolve it, my psyche will allow me to stop.

Q. So, once you got to the point where you could make that image yourself, there was no problem in letting somebody else see it?

A. In the beginning, there was. In this regard, I'm sure I'm not unique. How many times we do a photograph and put it away, afraid to let anyone see it. Our favorite excuse is usually, "it's not a very good photograph," or something of the sort. However, you don't want to throw it away. You want to keep it hidden - just like the thoughts that made it in the first place. I think the next step is when you force yourself to finally drag it out and show it to someone. You don't like to hear them say, "you're sick, you're really sick," or some other comment which indicates disapproval or disgust. I honestly feel that if people react to my images violently, it is touching in them an area they want to keep hidden. On occasion, I have had several people admit that my photographs bothered them - really bothered them. Karen Truax told me recently, when we were reminiscing, that my images really got to her - she wouldn't even look at them. She said, "The first time I saw them, I walked out of the room and refused to deal with them."

The first step is when the "policeman" won't let us get involved with something by not even

allowing us to photograph it. In the next step we take the picture and then we don't show it to anybody because we are not supposed to do this sort of thing. Next, we show it to someone with the greatest hesitation. We worry about people's responses to it. We tend to regress and put that image away again because it causes so much consternation and too much criticism. Finally, we can get to that point where we must say, "that's the way it is." I don't pretend that I am truly free. There are some things I still find very difficult to photograph. I'll make almost any excuse for not working in these areas. I make a date to go out to photograph a certain model and then regret it. I know myself well enough to realize I must make a firm commitment or I will avoid it. If you really dislike it, you know you are getting close. So I must force myself into some things and still there are some situations I avoid. The work is not done but the realization goads me on. I am saying that it is continual struggle.

When you are into investigating your own hang-ups and your own psyche, you probably are investigating a sort of universal psyche without knowing it. We have a great commonality of experience. I honestly feel, as I said before, once I am really free and can say this is everything in me - these are all my repressions, there they are, look at them - then I feel I would not need to photograph and certainly would not need to photograph in this way. You have to be careful because you can reach that point and switch off and do another kind of image. This means you are getting so damned close to the things that are really at the basis of a lot of your personality and at your life adjustment - for your hostilities - yes, the well springs that put you into motion and that makes you what you are. When you really get close to these (the Sufis call them your Naphs) you want to shut it down. You say - I've done it all or this isn't important, or make any kind of promise to yourself - anything to get off the hook. If you've had therapy , you know that when you hate your therapist, it is because the son-of-a-bitch keeps pushing you to this kind of thing - where the problem lies. He is forcing you to see yourself and you resist! We don't like to uncover these things so oftentimes I am sure I vow to do another kind of photography. The reason I'm doing this is to avoid meeting myself.

Now, when I started my new series of nudes in the desert, it grew out of my desire to avoid the issue. I could heave a big sigh of relief. Not doing composites was a relief. If I wasn't careful, I could say, "I've carried these composites as far as they will go, now I'm repeating myself." It was with a sense of freedom that I began to do something else. A perfectly enlightened man wouldn't need art. I just think he could let it all go. He wouldn't feel the need to work things out. It doesn't mean he couldn't enjoy art but I'm convinced he would find a great deal of it painfully banal. The reasons humans become involved in art, either as producers or viewers, is very complex, however, a great motivation is ego satisfaction. We want to be noticed. We must feel unique - of some special worth. There is nothing humans love quite so much as applause. We will do almost anything to receive some sort of

accolade.

Q. Many of your composites contain humor. Is the humor one of the things you want to uncover, or is that an attempt to make it more palatable for an audience?

A. I am very serious about many concerns and I deal with them best when I employ humor. It is almost an analgesic. Humor allows you to get it out with diminished pain. If you are deadly serious, it oftentimes stops the whole process. If you arrive at the point where you can admit "here's where I am, it's ludicrous," it allows you to deal with it a little easier. But I don't think I'm humorous to many. They laugh, but merely to hide their deeper concerns.

Q. Do you feel that the humor can also be acting as another form of covering up?

A. So much is nervous laughter. People don't know how to react so it is the safest, most acceptable response. Laughter often makes objectionable things more palatable. It allows one to say, "here's where I really am - my life is a farce." "Here are my real concerns - what an ass I am...ah, but I'm just kidding!" At least it's out. Often if you don't have the humor, you will never get it into the open.

Q. Does that humor enter your process at the time you are making the composite, or does it also exist at the time you are actually shooting the individual things you will be putting together later on?

A. I hardly make a distinction. It is all a process from the time I take the camera in my hand until I have finished the image and am looking at it. One of the hardest things for me to do is to sit down with some of my images and study them. I still want to put them away and not allow anyone to see them. It is awfully hard for me to deal with them at any length because once I have, I have second thoughts about them. It helps if other people are looking at them. I can deal with them a little easier, for I see they have many of the same problems I have. If they laugh too, it helps. I don't think anybody can, without some levity, get very deep inside of themselves without doing the ultimate logical act-suicide. I don't think we like what we find. This is very difficult to say, "I accept myself without any reservation. This is the way I am;" assuming of course, such knowledge is possible.

Q. It would be very interesting to have your attitudes on whether you feel that the way you use photography as a way of stripping off veneer or pretense is the most important way of using photography, or are there other areas of photography that you would acknowledge are just as important and if so, what are they?

A. I suppose we all do what we are capable of doing. I assume Minor [White] believed he

was doing this. We have had some long discussions and I suspect that through the Gurdjieffian approach and through his photography, we have had rather similar experiences. I feel it's easy to become, in a sense, rather one-sided. This is why the Sufi way seems to be more complete. Spiritual development can only go so far. If we are hung up with psychological problems, it can create so much interference that we cannot grow. We benefit from a more complete development. Many become so involved in spiritual training they neglect very important areas of growth. Modern psychology can help. The Sufi understands this. I think there has been certain training throughout history where there has been spiritual and a concomitant psychological development. I would like to make this distinction because you can have spiritual experience and yet may have some real unresolved psychological problems that can stop your further progress. You can also have a great surge in your psychological understanding and not have a corresponding development in your spiritual. Spiritual is not quite the word. Both should be like steps on a ladder.

I feel that a few have used photography as a mechanism to propel themselves into greater spiritual understanding, or awareness. Other people have used art or photography to increase their self-awareness. I think *both* approaches distinguish the seeking person.

Q. There are other attitudes that are more pragmatic or more prosaic - !like seeing how things look, making documents of the age today for the benefit of future generations. Surely you would recognize their power and validity?

A. I agree. I don't find that approach very interesting for me, however I have a great admiration for Gary Winogrand and Robert Frank and Walker Evans. Perhaps I admire them because I can't do this type of imagery. This other concern of mine always invades whatever I photograph. Even the desert series with the nudes. Whenever I attempt documents, they fall flat. They simply are not documents.

Q. Are there any trends in contemporary photography that you feel are very negative, or that you dislike very much or feel not very worthwhile?

A. I think much that is done is rather inane. It always has been this way. I don't know what some of it is for other than the photographers examining their own belly buttons. I am not quite sure the picture was taken except to say, "look at me." I have a great appreciation for the document although I am not sure a real document can be made. Everything is seen in such personal terms. We must make a choice and as soon as we do, it loses validity as a document because it has become subjective. I suppose I admire Winogrand as much as any photographer working today, but I don't get any particular insight out of his images. I do recognize that he has achieved an immediacy that the 35 mm camera makes possible. You

might say he is showing us the potential of the small camera. I think all art forms hark back to an aesthetic which predated them. For instance, when oil painting was developed, it was very much like mosaics. Painting had to reflect mosaics because they were the prevailing aesthetic. It took a long time before artists found a style to fit the new technique of oil. Yes, every time artists developed a new means, they always harked back to the previous aesthetic. As the camera became more mobile, the imagery tended to lag behind the instrument. We have had to wait nearly 40 years since the advent of the 35 mm camera, until photographers such as Winogrand, Frank and Friedlander began to find and develop an aesthetic which reflects the new instrument. There is always a residue of an earlier aesthetic. When I first saw Gary Winogrand's and Robert Frank's work, I was applying the older standards. These people brought the realization to me that the 35 is an instantaneous thing - as fast as the eye. This, of course, does not preclude using a modern camera to work in an earlier style. There is nothing the matter with that. I am saying that I appreciate Winogrand for the immediacy of his imagery - for helping develop a new aesthetic.

Q. How important are your dreams in the sense that your images occur in your mind, and then you say, "That's an idea for a photograph," and you go out and try to reconstruct it?

A. I never try to reconstruct a dream. I try to hold in mind its imagery, not its content - the visual essence of a dream; in short, the photographic quality of a dream. But a dream is entirely spontaneous. You have little or no control over this. Should I try to recreate it with photography, it would become a very laborious and probably an inaccurate representation. If I can be spontaneous, take pictures and have it *feel* right, okay. I want to record impulses at the time I use the camera although I don't know how I'm going to use them. Nevertheless, what the product will be, I don't know. I have no assurance it will ever find its way in a composite or not. When I begin a composite, I spread hundreds of images out so I can see most of them easily. One will seem right. I don't question whether it fits. Sometimes I will work on four or five composites at a time. One or two may never gel. They have to seem right. It may appear to be a contradiction of terms, but it's not. I pay a great deal of attention to my dreams, only as far as the imagery is concerned. My work has to look like my dreams. But I want the specific things involved to be spontaneous. I am trying to tap my subconscious, just as dreams tap the subconscious. To attempt to record a dream would be indirect and invalid.

Q. I understand, and it does seem to work very well for you, but this is not a teachable process. How do you explain this to a student who wants to be a photographer?

A. I wouldn't feel right in promoting this approach in the classroom. It is far from the mainstream and quite possibly a blind alley. Should I do this, it would be a disservice to students in my class. If I were part of a large faculty, it would be different. I might get

involved with this because students would have many other experiences to counterbalance it. But where there are so few faculty (we have three people now) and I'm still the principle person in day school, I could not justify it. I therefore must attempt to teach from a more general point of view.

Q. What is that point from which you operate as an educator?

A. I emphasize the aesthetic of the 35 mm camera. I encourage experiences with a 4 x 5 camera with its unique ability to record. I ask them to explore the 2 1/4. I encourage them to develop the contemporary aesthetic of the 35. If I were in a different situation, I would probably involve them with a plumbing job on their own psyches.

Q. What about the division between your private interests in the medium and the experiences you feel necessary for your students?

A. I try to keep these separate. I can't justify getting them involved with composites. Certainly my interests can't help but come through when dealing with students, but I have to act as my own policeman so it doesn't utilize the entire time. I feel obliged to be a little broader and eclectic under these conditions. Perhaps I overemphasize the importance of a teacher. Actually, I find the natural inclination and the receptivity of students is at a level of discovering their visual environment with the camera. That is the thing they enjoy. I continually admonish myself with a saying of an old professor of mine who said, "What are you going to do - make the overalls to fit the boy or starve the boy to fit the overalls." When you face a class you have to ask, "Where are they?" Now, let's take them from where they are if we possibly can.

Q. What is it that you owe the student? What do you feel is the most important thing you can give a student of photography?

A. I don't know that you can give students anything. You may encourage them to experience the results of using a camera. I like what Dorothea Lange said: "A camera simply teaches one how to see without a camera." Most people are nearly unaware of their visual environment. Certainly had I not become involved in hunting, I would have remained unaware of many physical aspects of animals and environment. The act of hunting made me more aware. Visual stimulation and understanding can never be an end in themselves - rather they are always used for something else. Photography simply helps to sensitize people to their visual surroundings. When it does this, it is time well spent. The sense of discovery is important. To realize what backlight or angular light does is important - as is the discovery of textures. All of these things enrich us. If one has been in photography long, he may have forgotten what a tremendous revelation angular light on an old concrete wall can

be. A painter must create his textures. He has to fake it. He makes a new texture with paint. The camera is the only tool that can, in a fraction of a second, record infinite detail. It can whet a tremendous visual appetite for looking-for seeing materials revealed in minutest detail.

Q. So the prime function of photographic education as far as you are concerned is to open the eyes of the person a little wider. There is no sense of obligation to prepare them for a career. There is no sense that they are going to be trained or pushed towards being committed as an artist, or so on and so on.

A. If the student experiences a sense of discovery, the rest may follow naturally. I don't think you can encourage that. If students genuinely begin to dig the sensation of their visual environment, they will make that commitment.

Q. This is very different from what you were saying about yourself. Now you are saying: 'discover the world out there.'

A. This is my interest now but I can remember what a great response I had to my physical environment. I went through that years ago and still do, although I feel no need to record it with a camera now. In retrospect, it was a very exciting period. My purpose has changed although has not diminished the visual experience for me. I simply don't feel so compelled to record it in silver. I didn't mention this in the beginning because it was too far in the past. It is done. The other is still for me to do.

Q. What are the limitations of still photography that make you want to produce movies, write a novel, keep cows, birds, snakes and grow fruit trees?

A. Photography is not a be-all and end-all. I cannot limit myself to it alone. Who can? A superficial view of Weston would make one think that was all he ever did. But he did get involved with other things. I started out as a painter and not a very good one at that, but I was addicted to the things that could be done with paint, some of the people I admire most in art were painters. I have a tremendous regard for Cezanne although he was not involved in my bag - surrealism. I really dig his sculptural color and cold analysis of form. I can't limit myself to one thing. It's exciting to add motion to imagery. The movies I have been involved with have exactly the same thrust as my still photographs. They are very, very similar. There is also improvisation. I have tried to keep it as clear of thought as I can. I edit - not on logic but on feel. Movement must go together this way. I find movies extremely exciting because they are sequential. The still photograph, in most instances, doesn't work like this. Duane Michals gets nominally involved in the sequential as do a few other still photographers, but they are not exploiting a sequential medium. Why don't they consider cinema? It's a natural for this purpose. Still photographers can never be truly sequential

because you could lay out and perceive them at once. A movie must happen in the framework of time.

Q. How do you feel then about going back and forth between those two media? There is no dissatisfaction in going back to still photography after you have been making films?

A. You explore one thing until you can say, 'I am repeating myself.' Then, something happens and you bring something new to another thing. I haven't had a desire recently to do more 8 x 10s because I've been so involved in movies. I know, however, I'll come back to the view camera.

Q. Meanwhile, while all this is happening, you are very much into literature, poetry and religion. What are they satisfying that photography doesn't satisfy?

A. They are all different ways of investigating the same thing. Remember the story of the blind men and the elephant? A number felt its sides, others felt different parts. The man who felt its legs said an elephant was very much like a tree. Another who felt the trunk said it was like a snake. One who felt its ear said an elephant was like a fan. The one who felt the tail said the elephant was like a rope. This is an old, old story which has been used for esoteric teaching. What it is saying is: You bring our own unique and very narrow viewpoint to anything which you contact. Perhaps most of us cannot be all the men that felt the elephant in the different ways, however, we might get a better sense of the elephant if we feel at least his trunk and his legs and his ears. Perhaps we can have a little better idea than when we were content to feel only one part. I get a great response by working in my garden. The effort quiets my mind. I concentrate on pulling weeds and don't think about anything except weeds. Soon I find I am not thinking about yesterday or tomorrow; what I intend to do or what I have done. If I am fortunate when I garden, once in a while I drop into the present. At that moment there is no future and no past. I am in the moment. This is a very valuable experience. I have had it when using a camera. I cease to think of how I am going to use the photograph and where it comes from. It is a free act. When I am there in the present, I seem released. It is a great experience if I can hold it for even so much as a minute, but then I become so aware of the accomplishment, it slips away. These moments enrich me as much as any experience.

Q. You have all this experience from a very wide range. You have all these insights that come from a great deal of reading, looking, thinking, feeling, and so on. And here you are, stuck in Arizona at a community college, often teaching a load of kids who are just doing it for the credit and could care less. Don't you feel a need to share all this with a wider audience?

A. No. You cannot share an experience. If I were independent; if I didn't have to make a living, I wouldn't teach. As it is, however, I enjoy absolute beginners because I love to see

the enthusiasm of their first discoveries. I don't have the desire to be in a four-year institution for I feel that I have given all I have to give in a matter of two years. Sometimes two years is too long. A good student can drain me in less time than this. To summarize: I don't like to work but if I must, then I prefer to teach.

Q. So what would be the ideal situation?

A. The ideal situation would be to do exactly what I wanted to do and let teaching go. Unfortunately, I have to make a living. This place (my home) is very fulfilling to me. Building my tractor is very fulfilling. Frustrating? True, but fulfilling. When I finish it and start the motor, it is going to be a great experience to ride on the damn thing that has taken 40 hours to put together. I was telling you that I had to modify a pair of pliers to put a collar on. Although I didn't like having to spend an hour modifying a tool so it could be used for the job, I felt good after doing it. It was an ego trip. Nevertheless, I found myself in the present several times as I worked. I like to see things grow. I hate the death of a plant. I'll nurture almost any kind of shrub, even when it would be more convenient to dig it up. I have some trash trees coming up in the yard but I can't bring myself to cut them down. I have a volunteer tree over there. If I don't do something with it, it's going to completely crowd out my aviary. I'll have to relocate it for I can't bring myself to chop it down. If I must make a choice, I can shoot a cat easier than I can chop down a tree. I really dig plants - they make great friends. They respond and are valuable entities. The same thing that animates plants, animates me. Your question was, 'why am I at Phoenix College?'

I look back to years ago. Had I been counseled, I would probably have progressed further along the academic ladder, but a wise man is never known by his official position.

Q. After having obtained the degree of awareness you have discussed, isn't there any desire to share that with a larger audience?

A. I think most teaching is onerous. I don't care what the subject or how it is done. To a great extent it becomes an ego trip and is counterproductive at that point. You may say you are sharing, but really what you want is an audience. If this is the case, it is not sharing - it is getting. On an ego trip there isn't very much growing - at least by the person who is on the trip. I got underway rather late because there were a lot of false starts. Perhaps that is the way it would have been anyway. I don't remember ever having a discussion with my parents about what I thought was worthwhile. In my formative years, I never had that kind of discussion with anyone in school. What I am saying is I probably got in a rut and eventually found myself in Phoenix College. If I moved now, it would cost me twenty-five or thirty percent of my salary. Now I have roots here. Bill, you asked me one time if I would consider coming to A.S.U. I told you I couldn't because I would have to give up my

sabbatical. Even if I had done that, A.S.U. couldn't have matched my salary. I feel that teaching is about the same, regardless of where you are. Jerry Uelsmann feels much the same way. He told me he let Todd Walker do all the advanced classes for he enjoyed teaching beginning classes. If I had my druthers, I would teach basic photography - 101 all the way through. It is the most exciting. Spare me from graduate students. There is little real enthusiasm left - it's disheartening. In comparison to that, the naive enthusiasm of beginners is preferable. It rubs off on you. There can be the same naive enthusiasm on the part of a graduate student but it is usually about other things. I have heard more faculty grouse about graduate students. They are jaundiced about the whole damned graduate experience. When I hear them talk about it, I think about where I was at that age and in that position. I must say I wouldn't want to experience me in those circumstances.

Q. It seems to me that what you are saying to us is that the college system or university system is your patron - owes you a decent salary to do the minimum of what you can get away with. You say you can teach in order to support a lifestyle that you enjoy and give you enough time to do your own work. Is that fair?

A. Why else does anyone work at any job? Artists are all faced, one way or another, with finding a patron. Perhaps Ansel Adams can make a living selling his photographs, but I don't know of many people who can. Commercialism does not seem to have been repugnant to him. One way or another, most photographers end up teaching. We could go through a list of people we know, and who among them are not involved in the college or university system? I suspect most do a hell of a lot more than they are required to do. To be certain, they take a few shortcuts because they are involved in doing their own work. This is true of anybody who has ever had a patron. Artists of any period were forced to find patrons who they had to keep satisfied. They have always complained about it. Michelangelo said he didn't want to do the Sistine Chapel ceiling because it was commercial, although he did a good job of it. He gave the Church its money's worth. He probably was vilified by disgruntled artists the whole while.

Q. Are you giving Phoenix College its money's worth?

A. Most assuredly.

Q. We have previously discussed that a lot of your work has lashings of humor attached to it. A previous question was whether this was in order to make your work palatable to your audience, and you halfway agreed with that.

A. You said I halfway agreed with that.

Q. I said you agreed part-way with that point. Do you feel there is any real hope of understanding Allen Dutton in a one-to-one situation? A person is never quite sure where you stand because he can't tell whether your words are truth or fiction. We have had a very good example over lunch today - your claim to a degree in Coptic Theosophy from the University of Djibouti. Is this humor an expression of the real you, or is it a mask that you are throwing up to deflect knowing the real you?

A. Part of both. A most meaningful device is the Mullah Nasrudin. Although his stories zing reality, they also make it more palatable. They bring understanding through humor. For instance, the Mullah Nasrudin got a very good recipe for meat pie. On the way home from the butcher shop, a raven swooped down and stole the meat. The bird perched with it in a tree. The Mullah shook his recipe at the bird and yelled, "That's all very well, but I still have the recipe."

Q. What would be the point of that?

A. Think about it. It was to the point. I picked that story because I think it is a direct response to the question.

Q. You are saying that once I think about the anecdote, this will answer my question about your own humor - whether it is a deflecting screen or an entrance into...

A. Our point of view determines our understanding. All situations have a Ying and a Yang. Often it requires humor to see this. Humanity seems to be built upon pathos until the other side is recognized - its humorous under girding. Man does have the capacity for laughter and tears. He should be encouraged to utilize both. Real understanding must come in this way. Never discount the seriousness of humor.

Q. What is the pathos side, then, of having your driving license photograph taken in a clerical garb?

A. The fact that I'm not a preacher. Isn't it obvious this is something I would like to be if I will go to the time and expense to buy clerical garb? I'm also interested in the change in people toward me when I wear it. How important visible signs are! Then too, I may circumvent the law. My wife's uncle is a preacher. He is an abominable driver but never gets a ticket. He makes it a point to let the officer know his calling. I'll see if it works.

Q. If you want to preach, that presumes a wider audience. You don't need much effort to promote your ideas, attitudes or images to an audience, even in the limited ways that you do it at Phoenix College. In terms of galleries and publications, you have pushed a little but

you are not active in earnestly promoting yourself photographically.

A. I agree, but to promote myself is uncomfortable. It's selling myself. I can sell somebody else much easier than I can myself. Perhaps it is the result of a deep-seating feeling of insecurity or of unworthiness. Most things are contradictory.

Q. I want to touch upon the comfort of your existence. You are sitting in a beautiful garden, you can see cows in the background, the doves are cooing - you've built a fine studio that I can see through the French windows - a nice house, pretty and very relaxing. So you have a comfortable life. We read about the artist having to suffer in order to produce art - derelict artists' syndrome, if you like. Do you ever feel that the comfort of your existence is dulling your creative edge?

A. Probably. But it is always a tradeoff. I sure as hell don't want penury. I like the creature comforts. I have no guarantee that if I gave all this up, it would make me more creative. There is a human trait for survival. We protect our flanks. We suffer difficulties and inconvenience because they function as an escape hatch. I used to complain about my primitive facilities at Phoenix College but they were a protection. I could blame any of my shortcomings on them. Now that we have a fine new darkroom and studio, this excuse is gone. I've had to find another. Once you commit everything to "art," and you don't produce, what saving grace is there? You can see that the yard needs mowing. It's a great excuse. Dorothea Lange said, "We keep ourselves darn busy to keep from working." Perhaps that's why I have a yard and other things. I can't just sit on my ass and say, 'I'm not going to do a thing.' My father gave me a work ethic - If I have grass to cut I can keep from working and be very busy doing it.

Back to your question: A lot of fine artists have had it pretty good. I don't think Somerset Maugham hurt very much; I know that John Masefield didn't, nor Kipling. da Vinci didn't suffer either. Ansel Adams has not undergone privation. Most of our contemporaries don't suffer a hell of a lot. They have a good life, including Bill Jay. Most have found a way to have a cushy sort of thing. Why shouldn't they? I suspect a lot of the people who are in a state of privation would be very happy to trade. I don't think people consciously give up the good things in life. Gauguin comes to mind. Gauguin really thought he could make it as an artist. I don't think he felt he would suffer privation when he gave up his job in banking. He felt that after a few years, he would really be successful. Van Gogh was a sad sack - you know this - and I don't think he thought he had ever made it at anytime, whether he gave up anything or not. He was the type of person that was never going to have anything in the first place. Even after he shot himself, he said, "I have even made a failure of this! I can't even kill myself." In a way, he is notable because he is an exception. Like a plot from an

Italian opera. What a pervasive influence these have been. Carot did very well. Go down the list. A lot of them were fat cats. Cezanne wouldn't alienate his father. He was on a healthy allowance and never got married until his father died. He was afraid he would disapprove of his mistress. I would say, the artists who had it the worst as far as privation was concerned, tended to have the kind of personalities that dictated their condition. It had little to do with their art.

Q. Then you would say privation is not a prerequisite for being a good artist?

A. Absolutely not. Poverty probably dilutes any effort. I find that I work very intensely for a while and then have to give it up anyway. There is only a certain level of devotion to art in me. I then need time to regenerate. It is the same, certainly, in religion. This place is a great relaxation for me. I have been working like hell on these movies and putting a tractor together. Both are great relaxation. I could buy an assembled tractor. The few hundred dollars wouldn't mean that much but work is great therapy. This whole place is therapy. I bitch because it takes so much time but I'm really thankful it is here at other times. I justify it by saying it is necessary for recharging my creative battery. I don't think anything is a clear-cut advantage. Sometimes I would like to sell this place and get a townhouse where I could devote all my time to art but I know myself well enough to realize there would be times I would need this diversion.

Q. I would imagine that there would be two main areas of criticism leveled at your photomontages of the big women. One would be that they are merely a play in photography - that serious ideas are not being dealt with, and secondly, there is something very antifeminist in your work. How would you deal with those two criticisms?

A. Humor is a very serious vehicle - don't discount its effectiveness.

Q. Well, you've answered that side, I guess. What about the other one - which is about disrespect to women?

A. Disrespect? Women as well as men have feet of clay. To point this out is not disrespectful. Perhaps I overdo it but remember, our culture has tended to ignore some glaring feminine foibles. Home and mother have been unassailable. Women have vilified men for centuries with near immunity from rebuttal. I recognize their legitimate fight for equal rights and many of the wrongs done them should be redressed, but I will not temper what I say about them because of past wrongs they have endured. Equal rights carries with it willingness to accept careful scrutiny. I challenge my harshest feminine critic to read my new book, the Compendium, and then make the charge that I am a male chauvinist. I poke a lot of fun at art criticism, for instance, but I think art criticism needs fun poked at it. Often it is very

pompous. I have enough room in the Compendium to poke fun and yet to deal with things I feel very serious about.

Q. The images, themselves, don't have that duality. Most of the images are very funny pictures.

A. I don't think so. As you read the Compendium you will see there is always an underlying seriousness. Look at the way some people respond to the photographs. They don't act as though they thought them funny. You just got through telling me that a lot of them feel I am an antifeminist or a man who is sick. The responses are strong. Many people don't think some of my images are even slightly funny. In addition to what I have just said, may I add: Women have given men a gigantic con job. In addition to this, they contend they have been discriminated against in areas where they have not. I deal with this in the Compendium. Just take the fact of relationships between men and women and if you really examine them you will see that there is a myth of femininity. I remember my great unlearning - when I discovered that women are really human, too. If they don't wash their feet, they stink just like mine do. One reason women criticize my images as being antifeminist is because they want to maintain the feminine myth. I am a product of an era where women were conned as completely as men. They believed they were destined to be pursued. If they joined a relationship it was more for the gratification of the man than for any pleasure they might derive. The situation was akin to submission rather than equal participation. From this flowed guilt, remorse, anxiety and distrust between the sexes. Thank God it is changing. The process of change is always painful - there is bound to be overreaction and recrimination on both sides. Women have, and often unwittingly, done great damage to men - at least as devastating as men have done to them. The wounds are still sensitive. Women touch a few of mine and I touch a few of theirs. As we mature, we can laugh at the excess of youth. Until then, feelings will run high.

Q. Most of the women in your pictures are very fleshy, very big, and you married a very slim, sophisticated lady. You did not marry a fantasy.

A. You should have seen my first wife. She weighed 270 pounds. I didn't marry Mary Ann because she's petite and pretty. I discovered a body has little to do with making a marriage happy. Mary Ann is a fine person. I enjoy - yes, relish her good looks, but that's not why I love her. I tried living out a fantasy once. I hope I'm over it.

Q. What is your relationship with your models? Do you photograph people that you just like visually, or must you have some sort of spiritual rapport with them.? Are you using the camera as a substitute sex organ to live out your fantasy?

A. You seem to want to put things into an either/or category. I would be a little more willing

to say, yes, it's a little of both. I am not trying to avoid the question. I think it may be a tad simplistic. True, if you make your approach behind a camera, you can avoid getting a direct rejection. On the other hand, I photograph some people, Karen Truax,* for instance, and get a tremendous sense of their spiritual side. I don't know if she senses she has it, but I do when I photograph this woman. I feel it. I think she's great. She is great for me in that she elevates my awareness. When I look at the photographs of her, they are times of revelation. I never use her. I never employ her in a composite the same way I do most people - if you have noticed. No image with her in it is 'funny.' I just stopped to think about that now.

People are explanation-oriented. You asked about humor in my work. Much of it is aimed at this human trait. I enjoy using it. People are so gullible in this regard. The statement to which you refer was made in response to a question about my proclivity for fat, nude women. I have a fixation for heavy women. The reasons I want to see them nude are perhaps many and complex. I don't know that I will ever understand why I like to see them. There are many more mysteries in life that to me seem vastly more germane. To reiterate: I am of the opinion that we humans demand answers to many things which are impossible to answer or which are relatively inconsequential. Too much introspection is as destructive of creative activity as too little. I attempt to photograph and make my images with a minimum of conscious selection. If pressed for a rationale, I will generally respond in as preposterous a fashion as I can devise. Am I perverse? Hardly. I'm simply protecting the process which I feel to be most important.

Q. How much truth is there in a previous statement that you are very much a puritan at heart and that by photographing such mounds of human flesh you are trying to bring people back to the righteous, straight-and-narrow path?

A. You must be referring to a tape I made some years ago. As I recall, I was responding to a question about large, nude women that 'seem to dominate my imagery.' I devised the most preposterous answer I could. However, this is a dangerous pastime for truth keeps creeping into what you say, regardless of how determined you are to exclude it.

Q. Have you deliberately avoided that question or am I just misunderstanding your answer? Are you basically very puritan, morally speaking, in terms of your relationships with women?

A. I thought I was getting to the question. I don't try to moralize and although I do feel that I am something of a puritan, I wouldn't openly try to become involved in a moral argument because I don't know of anybody that does that very well. It becomes laborious in a hurry. It actually would be away from the point of allowing my subconscious to work. I must admit,

however, I did get quite a dose of morality when I was growing up.

Q. The interesting thing is that you are not trying to deny it - you are trying to strengthen it. You are not apologizing for that dose of morality at an early age.

A. Apologize! As though I had a choice as to whether it would be given to me or not! My parents and the community where I grew up were not of my choosing. Although I do feel that a disincarnate soul has a compulsion to find a developing fetus to inhabit, it generally is so unaware that it makes very few fine distinctions. In this sense, we *do* pick our parents. Our early training cannot be discarded; the values derived from it remain with us. We must learn to live with them. No, I am not ashamed or resentful for the morality I was given. It has caused me pain and frustration. It has found its way into my art as well as my personal life. The best we can do is to make a reasonable working relationship with it. The only reassurance we have is that this would be necessary regardless of the training we received. Any moral training - and we all get it - creates conflicts and frustration. Socrates relished pointing this out. Certainly I'm not the person I was at 20, but what I was at 20, to a large extent dictated what I am at 55. No, no. Once you've got it, there is not much you can do about it. You've got to learn to live with it.

Q. Any last sentence of wisdom?

A. I would like to end with another Mullah Nasrudin story. The Mullah was approached by deputation from the local mosque. They asked if he would talk to them on the Sabbath. He agreed. On the appointed day he asked the congregation, "Do any of you here know what I'm going to say?" They all shook their heads, no. "With people so uninformed as you, there is no point in talking to you." He turned around and left. The deputation came again. He agreed he would talk on the next Sabbath. When he arrived he asked, "Do any of you know what I'm going to say?" Everyone nodded, yes. "In that case, I don't have to tell you." He left. The deputation came again and again he agreed to speak on the next Sabbath. On that day he asked "Do any of you know what I'm going to say?" They thought they had him this time. Some nodded yes and some nodded no. The Mullah said, "Good, the ones that know tell the ones that don't." He left.

That story is in response to this entire interview this afternoon. I think it most appropriate.

* Karen Truax, achieved considerable acclaim for her hand-tinted photographs in the early 1970s; she was a frequent model in Allen Dutton's nude imagery.

Allen Dutton referred to his Compendium. The full title is: A. A. Dutton's Compendium of Relevant but Unreported 20th Century Phenomena, Ray Buse Publishing, Arizona.

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