

Jack Mitchell: Photographer of Dance

Bill Jay

After several decades and hundreds of articles on all aspects of photography, I still find it difficult to write about another photographer's work. The reason for this reluctance, I think, is the banality of most critical writings in this area: if I dislike reading the words of contemporary critics on individual artists, then why should I inflict my own words on others? A closer analysis of these critical writings, however, reveals that it is the style of writing to which I have an aversion. Either the critic merely uses the artist's work as a springboard into personal mental wanderings around the labyrinth of his own psyche (which is as tedious, irrelevant and incomprehensible as listening to a stranger's dreams) or he submits to a oh-gosh-gee-whiz-isn't-he/she-just-great type of fawning sycophantism which is enough to make even the most rabid fan into a puker.

I have tried to avoid these excesses in this brief introduction to the photographs of Jack Mitchell. Because I am addressing these words primarily to young photographers I have tried to dismiss my "obligations" to Jack Mitchell (whom I am sure will understand and approve) and ignore the "demands" of my peers for critical/intellectual obscurity. Above all, words about pictures should be useful. So, up front, here's what will follow. First, a few reasons why the photographs of Jack Mitchell deserve special study; second, some information about the photographer's career as a personal context within which to view his work; third, his own attitudes and opinions about various aspects of photography.

Craft, caring and communication:

It is now fashionable among young artists (including photographers) to decry technique or craftsmanship and emphasize innovation, which usually means affectation and gimmickry. This attitude has received support from high places. I recently heard a New York art gallery director insist that the craft of art was irrelevant. But this was the same person who approved of the "artist" who shot his own dog in order to videotape its death throes'. In photography, the same misguided anti-craft attitude is also prevalent. At a photographic conference a few years ago Ansel Adams was introduced to an audience of 300 young photographers and opened with the words: don't ignore the craft of photography. The audience audibly groaned as one! At that point I began to despair... The fact remains that the craft of photography is the fundamental bedrock on which all images are built. A denial of this principle is the opposite of freedom of expression; it is shackling the photographer to be a slavish follower of trends and fashions with the inevitable superficiality which follows.

Jack Mitchell is a true professional, "one who has acquired great skill." If for no other reason, a study of his photographs will engenders respect for fine craftsmanship, a love

for the sheer beauty of any object made with care and hard-won skill. As Jack has said: "a fundamental understanding of what a camera is, what happens in the darkroom, comes first. Aesthetics come after." I cannot name a single topflight photographer, in any area of the medium, who would disagree.

But you are right: craft alone is not enough. And Jack Mitchell's photographs have an equally important lesson for us all. Photograph what you know and love and care about.

It seems so obvious when stated so matter-of-factly, but it is astonishing how many young photographers ignore the self-evident. In my profession I see hundreds of portfolios each year and it never ceases to amaze me that photographers are so reluctant to picture their passions but, instead, perversely pick subjects in which they have no interest or knowledge, under the mistaken impression that some subjects are more "significant" than others. Trash in the desert, corners of garages, bushes flashed at night, industrial wastelands, (to name a few recent examples), might have their advocates for particular reasons, but not once was I convinced that the young photographers who showed me this work had any particular emotional or intellectual investment in their subject matter. Both photographer and viewer were bored.

On the other hand, Jack Mitchell leaves the viewers of his photographs in no doubt whatsoever that he understands and cares for his subjects. His work exudes an exuberance and lustiness which cannot be forced into images. It is very, very difficult to be a phony in such a direct, forceful medium as photography. Jack's work overflows with enthusiasm - an always contagious ingredient. This brings me to a final point, and one which is difficult to express without the risk of misunderstanding. Jack's enthusiasm for his subjects forces me to care about them too. I have no particular knowledge of the dance and theater world but, through these images, I am a little more involved, interested and sympathetic than I might have been. Photography has increased my tolerance, expanded my interests, broadened my knowledge. Now here comes the tricky part: but in order to produce this effect, the photographs needed to engage my attention. Because attention is caught by subjects in which we are interested, it makes sense for young photographers to specialize not only in subject matter which they know and love but which is also appealing to others. This is not compromise but commonsense.

There is no denying the fact that I am more interested in Jack's photographs because I am fascinated by discovering what certain artists, dancers, choreographers, musicians, actors/actresses look like. I would be less interested if the portraits were of people of whom I had never heard. To contradict myself, some subjects are more interesting than others, no matter how cleverly photographed.

Jack Mitchell's photographs, therefore, make ideal teaching aids in a photographic college context. They clearly illustrate three fundamental principles of the medium: master craft, photograph what or who you care about, and remember that an audience must also be interested in the subject, otherwise there is no communication. Craft, caring and communication.

Jack Mitchell:

The average viewer of photographs is far more interested in the subject of the image than in the photographer who made it. And that is both inevitable and laudable. However, biographical information about the photographer serves to place the images in context as well as revealing the uniqueness of the individual experience which led to an identifiable style.

Jack Mitchell was born in Key West, Florida, in 1925. The family moved to New Smyrna Beach in 1932. Shortly thereafter, his sister was presented with a Brownie camera as a Christmas gift. This was still in the Depression years and film processing and printing was a luxury which the family could not afford. So eleven-year old Jack was pushed into a closet darkroom as his sister's laboratory technician. Hence, as Jack says, "I learned how to do darkroom work before I owned my first camera." Soon, however, Jack was not only processing and printing for friends and neighbors but also taking photographs for the Daytona News Journal and the New Smyrna Beach News. His first "scoop" was a news photograph taken when the town ice plant exploded! A local photographer, perhaps galled by the youngster's success, reported to the authorities that Jack was operating a business without a license. In response, Jack took an examination and became the youngest licensed photographer in Florida at the age of 15. His father had to pick him up after school to take him to assignments because Jack could not drive.

After serving in World War II Jack left New Smyrna for the more open-ended challenge of New York City. Already his interests were focusing on portraits and he was particularly influenced by the Hollywood glamor photographers of the 1940s. "I lived in the movies as a kid," he has said, "and I would collect movie stars' portraits. I learned a lot just by studying them."

Another major influence of these early years was Ted Shawn, who has been called the father of American Dance. "He invited me to Jacob's Pillow in Massachusetts to the dance festival he ran," said Jack, "and that's where I started taking dance pictures." It was the beginning of a field of specialization in which Jack Mitchell is now the acknowledged master. He has worked with most of the celebrated dance companies, including the American Ballet Theater, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, the Pennsylvania and Houston ballet companies, Martha Graham Dance Company, New York City Ballet and the Paul Taylor Dance Company, and many others.

His portraits of choreographers and scenic designers, as well as performers, are regularly published in Dance Magazine. His dance photographs have been published in two books: American Dance Portfolio and Dance Scene U.S.A.

Meanwhile his interest in making portraits of celebrities, primarily in the fields of art and entertainment had continued unabated. They, too, have been widely published, in virtually all major national magazines, and exhibited at prestigious galleries and museums throughout the USA. A particularly interesting exhibition was a group of 20 portraits, all of painter Lowell Nesbitt, which accompanied a major showing of Nesbitt's work at The Butler Institute of American Art in 1982. The Baltimore Museum of Art

owns a rich collection of Jack Mitchell photographs, including portraits of Salvador Dali, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Indiana, Claes Oldenburg, Allen Jones, George Segal, Duane Hansen, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Louise Nevelson, as well as Lowell Nesbitt.

Other celebrities who have sat for a Jack Mitchell portrait include Alfred Hitchcock, Meryl Streep, Brooke Shields, Warren Beatty and a host of other movie personalities. Perhaps Jack Mitchell's most famous portrait is of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, taken only three weeks before Lennon was shot and killed at his apartment building in New York City in December 1980. The memorial photograph appeared on the cover of People magazine after Lennon's death and Jack was inundated with requests for photographs. A collection of 12 of his photographs of the famous couple were included in The Summer of '80, for which Jack also wrote the introduction.

Jack Mitchell has never received any formal training in photography. As a youngster he collected and studied movie star portraits. He is now an acknowledged master at making them. Now, we too can study his portraits - and who knows where it may lead.

About Photography:

I intended to close this brief introduction to the photographs of Jack Mitchell with a few deductions about style, attitude, relationship to sitters and other such intangibles inherent in fine photography. But then I reread my bulky file of press cuttings about Jack Mitchell and discovered embedded in these articles a collection of quotations on a wide variety of topics which state, far better than I could have paraphrased, his own attitudes to the medium of photography in general and portraiture in particular. Therefore, in his own words...

Being a photographer on assignment to photograph a celebrity is somewhat like being a hit man. The difference is that the hit man is hired to shoot-to-kill and the photographer is hired to shoot for posterity...

When I was 20 years old I sent my work to the great Phillip Halsman, who had photographed more Life magazine covers than anyone, and asked him to give me his opinion of it. He wrote me back saying: "Dear Mr. Mitchell, you have mastered the basic technique of photography. Now you must surround yourself with good art, good music and absorb all you can from it." I've never forgotten that advice.

I prefer my pictures to be timeless. That's why I don't do fashion photography which is modish and transitory. I'm not afraid not to do something tricky or gimmicky just to sell the pictures. I'd like for people to be able to look at the work 20 years from now and not be amused.

(On why his work is almost exclusively portraits) I find people more interesting than trees.

A good photographer has to be a bit of a chameleon, changing his personality to fit each subject's temperament to get them to respond. But the best expressions tend to come when there's no thought, you get a certain kind of vulnerability, a look of receptiveness.

I never deliberately make a person unattractive just to create an effective picture. Nor am I overly concerned with empty flattery. My aim is to make an honest, compassionate, compositionally beautiful and upbeat picture of a subject.

Careful preparation for a shooting is absolutely necessary for me. I still get a nervousness, second cousin to stage fright, before any shooting. I can appear cool and ready only if I know exactly how I'm going to start the session. I do at least four sketches of picture ideas prior to any session involving two or more subjects. Once comfortably into a shooting session I begin to do variations of these ideas and to invent on the spot. It is necessary to be a director as well as a photographer to produce dramatic pictures.

Beauty is a flexible thing. I'm essentially a purist. I don't utilize tricks or effects, and I would never try to show a subject in a bad light in order to get, to me, an exciting picture. That's a cheap trick, a cheap shot - to make pictures exciting at the expense of the subject. To be able to see quickly - that's the thing. Your eye has to be as fast as a shutter. If it looks good, do it.

I get very surprised by people who really don't respect the basics. There are a lot of camera operators who aren't photographers at all, who have no concern or understanding when it comes to the fundamentals. I always make my own prints - the darkroom to me, is as exciting as taking the actual picture. It's as much of a challenge, and it's as important. There are people who wouldn't think of making prints themselves, who don't know or what to learn how. They think aesthetics came first. I think that a fundamental understanding of what a camera is, what happens in the darkroom, comes first. Aesthetics came after.

Whoever I'm photographing, I have to love [them] for the time they're in front of the camera - that's what it really is, a love affair with a subject, whoever the subject is, that's photography.

Postscript:

I have enormous respect for Jack Mitchell's photographs. They provoke in me the same awe that comes from seeing anything that is made with great care, skill and understanding. In the best sense of the word, they are humbling which is a prerequisite to learning. It is the same feeling when watching a master carpenter at work, or a knife-maker, or boat builder, or any expert in any field. There is a sureness of spirit, a deftness of touch, a respect for materials and tools, which can only come from many years of loving labor.

But is it Art? I do not think so, at least, not as Art is currently defined. At its best, photography is more relevant, socially useful, culturally significant and historically important than Art.

Written c.1985 as an introduction to a portfolio of Jack Mitchell's photographs but I have no idea if it was ever published.