

Interview by Russell Joslin for SHOTS Magazine

Who was the most significant person that was responsible for you becoming a photographer?

That would have been my father. I've watched him take photos since I was a child, often down on his belly in the grass. He devoted himself to photography in his spare time. In addition to documenting his young family, he also concentrated on nature. He was fascinated by wild orchids, and during our vacations on the beautiful Dutch island of Terschelling, he would go looking for what were frequently rare flowers and photograph them. I recently made a book for him from the slides he took between 1972 and 1982.

Looking at these photos, I was struck by the wonderful way in which his photography developed during those years. Every year his photos of orchids became more interesting, going from a sharply focused image of a flower, to a colorful whole in which he used a shallow depth of field and made use of other colorful flowers and grasses around the orchid to make the entire photo more appealing. They became small works of art.

As a child, seeing him take photographs or watching him sort and mount slides was to me the most normal thing in the world. For a long time, I thought this was something all fathers did. He gave my older brother a Russian Lubitel once, and I remember being quite jealous of it. I also remember I was always looking at his light meter. I was fascinated by all those little numbers. I remember thinking that someday I wanted to know what they meant and learn how to measure light. I must have been around fifteen when my father gave me some black-and-white film and his Minolta reflex camera. He explained to me how the camera worked. By the time my first roll of film was full, I was hooked.

How did the *Prelude* series first come about, and what have you learned as since it began?

As I already said, the trigger for me was remembering what it was like to be a child. And the children were so beautiful! I also started shooting more and more still lifes of things or places that reminded me of how I felt when I was a child myself. My son would often give me little bouquets of flowers he'd picked. He would hand them to me with so much love that I just had to photograph them.

I always keep the case with my Pentax 6x7 in the corner of our living room so I can grab it if I see something I'd like to take a photo's of. At one point, I would stage certain scenes. For example, I once went with my daughter to a weeping willow in our neighborhood and had her pose for me in among the hanging branches. But I quickly noticed that coming up with an idea and doing the actual staging wasn't the best way for me to work. Anna might not feel like doing it, or the branches would poke her, or she'd start clowning around. The dynamic wasn't right. So, if you ask me what I've learned, what works for me, I'd say: think and organize things as little as possible – just wait until you see it and then respond.

Would you say this work represents a reflection or impression of your own childhood more than it's a documentation of Anna and Ilija's lives?

It's both a document of their childhood and a representation of my reflections on my own childhood. I think that when they've grown into adults, my children will certainly recognize themselves in the photos, precisely because I do very little staging and prefer to leave things up to the children themselves. And I think the moments I choose are often universal, experiences every child can have and that many adults can recognize and identify with. How it is – and how it was – to be a child. When time is not yet important. When seeing is believing, and what we hear, smell, taste and touch create lasting memories that we carry with us for the rest of our lives.

What aspects of photography do you like the most? Which ones do you struggle with the most?

What I love most is taking the photos themselves. Then I'm so completely in the moment that everything else falls away. I love the concentration, the act of focusing on my subject, and the thrill of excitement this gives me. I can lose myself completely in the seeing and doing.

What I find hardest is the moment I first see the photographs. Things can happen very quickly, especially when you're photographing children. Then you might miss something, some disruptive factor in the background, or you didn't quite manage to capture the right moment. It's not always easy for me to let go of how I thought the photographs would be and to accept the way they actually are. It often takes time before I

know whether or not a photo is of value to me. I think many photographers will recognize this process.

What is your process technically? Also, what is your process for editing your work?

For the *Prelude* series, I chose to work with black-and-white film and to print the negatives in the darkroom. I think that black and white is a good fit for this series. To me, color fits better with the present, and black and white makes things more timeless. When I work with film, I work more deliberately, and am better able to concentrate on what I'm doing. After all, I've only got ten shots before I have to change the film, and each shot costs money. I'm fairly impatient by nature, and for me, working with film means I really have to concentrate on the subject, and as a result I'm more in touch with it. I'm convinced this comes across in the photograph.

I love working in the darkroom. It's very intensive, and once again, it calls for focus and concentration. When you're in the darkroom, everything else falls away.

I'm also very enthusiastic about the quality of analog prints. I see a difference with digital. It's hard to explain, but for me an analog black-and-white print feels more authentic. Digital might be more precise, but because of this it does something to the content, and that's not always what I'm after in my work. It's not a perfect world, and for me a perfect photograph can easily feel artificial, which makes it more difficult to relate to.

With *Prelude*, I edited my work before I made prints, but certainly afterwards as well. I make my choices from my contact sheets. After I make the prints I move them around, and when I do this I often discover interesting combinations. For the final selection, I ask a couple of friends to look along with me. Sometimes it's just too hard to kill your own darlings.

Beyond modeling for you, do your children take interest in other aspects of your photographic process? Also, what do they have to say about your photographs?

My daughter is nine now, and for the past couple of years she's been going into the darkroom with me from time to time. She helps me develop films and make contact sheets. My son is now six, and he sometimes points out things he sees. Then he'll come

to me all excited and say, “Mama, come quick, I see a photo for you!” So, while they’re both involved, they also think of it as something very ordinary, just like I did with my father when I was a child.

I often show them photographs and ask them which ones they like and which ones they don’t. They can usually give me an answer and also tell me why, and the reasons they give are often things I hadn’t noticed at all.

Now that my daughter is a little older, I notice that I’m more restrained and take fewer photos of her. She’s also becoming more self-conscious, and if she tells me one day that she doesn’t want me to photograph her in the way I was able to do with *Prelude*, I’ll understand it and respect her choice. I also notice a shift in what I’m interested in as well, and that seems to be something that happens in a very natural way.

The project I’m working on now is of an entirely different order – although the children still make the occasional appearance, they’re no longer the main subject. With this project, I’ve landed completely back in the present, which is why I’m now working mainly digitally and also in color.

If you could choose one photographer (living or dead) to shoot a portrait of you, who would you choose?

To be honest, I’m not all that interested in having a portrait of myself. A while back, Hans de Kort – a Dutch photographer who works with collodion – asked if he could shoot my portrait. I was thrilled by the prospect, not because of the portrait itself, but because I’d be able to see the process of making a tintype from up close.

In the same vein, I could imagine it would be very interesting to be photographed by Sally Mann. I know she works very differently than I do, and because of this it would be fascinating to watch her at work

In summary, what does being a photographer bring to your life?

Since I started taking photographs again, I feel a constant need to record my amazement at what I see. Just like a poet, I try to capture a feeling or an atmosphere in my work. I find photography ideally suited to this because while it’s directly related to reality, it also offers so many opportunities for representing my own personal reality. For me,

photography has become an important means of expression – it allows me to reflect, and also grounds and comforts me.

Madeleine Kukic