

In Conversation with Leonard Neumann

by Philip Gray

Lifelong Leica enthusiast Leonard ('Lennie') Neumann has spent over fifty years observing and photographing everyday life in South Africa, the United States, France and England. During that time he has admired the work of many photographers, both famous and relatively unknown, but at the same time he has adopted a distinctive personal style. His work has featured in numerous exhibitions held in many countries: *Observing the Ordinary* was the title of his successful 2016 London Leica Store City exhibition.

● A passion for photography dates back to your early life in South Africa. What set you off on that path?

I was brought up in Cape Town, South Africa where we had many great photographers, notably David Goldblatt. I also enjoyed the work of numerous documentary press

photographers, especially Paul Alberts who worked for a number of newspapers - along with many other local photographers. Another important early influence was my late father's copy of *The Family of Man* book, based on Edward Steichen's famous 1955 Museum of Modern Art touring exhibition.



Photograph by Andrew Shaylor

It features the work of many of the greats of the day, such as Margaret Bourke-White and Robert Frank, but also includes contributions from many unknown and even anonymous photographers. I found that book something of a wake-up call to what photography really was. Incidentally, although



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originally published over sixty years ago, *The Family of Man* is still in print today, and has sold millions of copies over the years.

● **Did your move to the United States in 1980 bring a new influences to your photography?**

I lived in Dallas and also in Boston where I soon discovered the work of the ‘New York school’ photographers in these two very different urban landscapes. Garry Winogrand became a huge influence on me at that time, as did so many of the other great documentary photographers and photojournalists working then, including Eugene Smith, Elliott Erwitt, Robert Frank, Mary Ellen Mark, Eugene Richards, Lee Friedlander, Leonard Freed and so many more. Toby Old whom I met around twelve years ago has also had a huge influence on how I see. Then in addition to all the famous names there have also been plenty of

unknown photographers whose work has knocked me out over the years.

During my time in the United States I also took the opportunity to study photography by managing to combine a day job with evening courses at the New England School of Photography. In addition I started to teach some printing skills.

● **When you moved to England ten years ago did your photographic influences change again?**

Yes, I have no doubt that my perspective on photography changed after moving to England. At first I may not have been aware of the change but friends from my Dallas days all commented that my work had become far ‘softer’ in visual approach. James Ravilious soon became one of my gurus, along with Tony Ray-Jones and John Bulmer. I also admire Martin Parr’s early black & white work.

● **Do you think that place has been a greater influence**

on your photography than inspiration drawn from the work of others?

I think it has to be a combination of the two. Light seems stronger in America and the attitude is somehow a little ‘harder’. I find the English much gentler, the light much softer and the architecture so much more varied. The light may appear different but I have never been one to limit my shooting to that so-called ‘magic hour’: bright sunny days or overcast skies are all the same to me when it comes to my photography.

● **Have you been an enthusiastic Leica user throughout your photographic career?**

I inherited my father’s Leica III which I used in South Africa, then when I moved to the United States I bought a second-hand double-stroke M3, with a 35mm Summicron. I still have that lens, but after damaging the camera body in a Boston cycle accident



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I moved on to an M6, and that is still my main camera today. I have dabbled with some of the early digital Leicas, and do some digital work today, but I haven't saved enough to buy a full-frame body yet: perhaps a well worn M9 might just do the trick for me!

I still use a great deal of film because I like the magic of the whole process. I have always worked with the same film, Tri-X, and the same developer. Goodness knows how many rolls of Tri-X I must have used over the years, probably thousands, and how many packs of D76 developer - plus all that Dektol for the paper. Film is no longer a dollar a roll but I think that expense helps to make you less 'sloppy' in your shooting.

The other day I went out with my M6 and took just four shots. How many would I have taken with a digital camera?

I am not one of those guys who shoots wide open, so as often as I can I will be shooting at f5.6 or f8, and I have never been a fan of working with long or very wide lenses: the M6 with a 35 'cron, or possibly a 50 'cron, has to be my favourite outfit.

● ***Observing the Ordinary* was the title of your recent London Leica Store City exhibition. Is this phrase a better description of your style of work than Street Photography?**

I hope so. I am certainly not a fan of that over-used street

photographer moniker, and I have become tired of seeing the endless visual puns that many of them so often create. Nor am I particularly taken with the current trend for the wide angle, 'slap in your face', style of street portraiture.

Does that make me just a little old fashioned? Possibly. For me taking a photograph is just a case of picking up my M6, putting it to my eye, composing the shot and pressing the shutter. As Elliott Erwitt once said: 'It's not what you see, but how you see it': for me that means observing the ordinary.



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All photographs courtesy of Leonard Neumann