



INTERNATIONAL STREET PHOTOGRAPHER

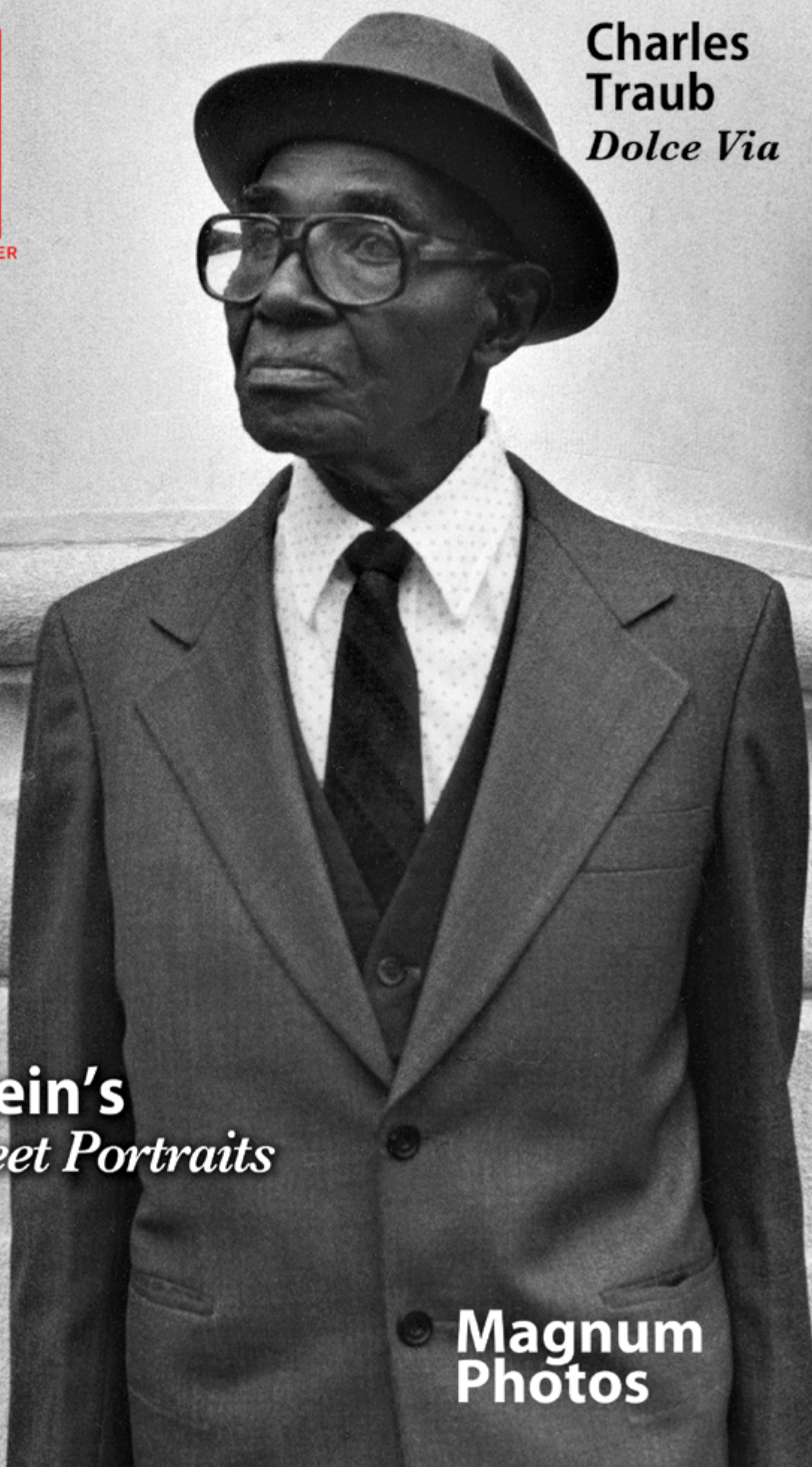
**Charles
Traub**
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Harvey Stein's
Harlem Street Portraits

Minimalism

**Magnum
Photos**

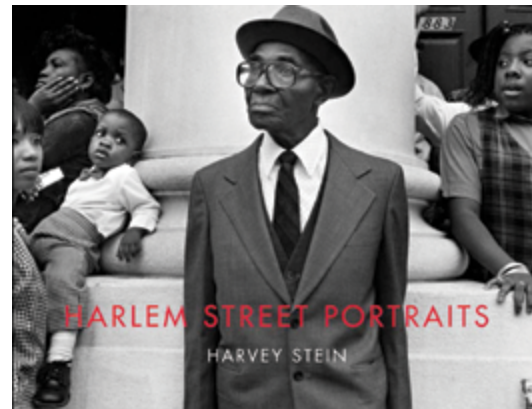


ISP EXCLUSIVE **HARVEY STEIN**



HARVEY STEIN

by Billy Joe Hoyle



Q&A

Street photographer Harvey Stein discusses his influences, his work, and the making of his book *Harlem Street Portraits*.

International Street Photographer Thank you for joining us here at ISP. I'd like to start with your recent book *Harlem Street Portraits*. You started this book in 1990 and it didn't conclude until 2013, 23 years later. How did you know it was time to stop, that the project was complete?

Harvey Stein It finished when I found a publisher and had a due date to have everything in. I'm still shooting in Harlem so I don't really feel it's finished - and the same with Coney Island. I've done two books on Coney Island. One was published in '98, which covered twenty-seven years, and one was published in 2011 covering forty years. I've still been shooting there and I plan to do another book, *Coney Island: 50 Years* in 2020.

ISP So we'll have another book on Coney Island?

HS For Coney Island, definitely. For Harlem, probably not. I've said what I can say. I work on real long-term projects, as you can see, and often they're never complete - even if I publish some or a lot of the work. I keep going back to the same places because



I enjoy them and feel there are still plenty of good pictures to be made. Some of my projects do end. I did a book on identical twins over a six year period and I did a book on artists that took another six years. So I don't go around looking for identical twins or [going into] artists' studios to photograph anymore. They seemed finite and complete. My street photography just seems so ongoing because the street is so much in flux and that's one of my attractions to it. It's always different, always new people, even the same neighborhoods - especially in New York which, as you probably know, changes all the time. I photographed Coney Island and Harlem at times when they were in deep transition. Harlem changed into a more gentrified neighborhood with a lot of white people moving in, good restaurants, and new buildings. [President Bill Clinton] moved in with his office so it's getting very nice; the same with Coney Island.

ISP Do you find the reactions of your subjects [when photographing the streets] have changed much from the 70's to today?

HS I would say the only difference is the internet. People are more wary and they might be less accommodating to me or other street photographers. They're worried more about how the photograph will be used. So they're definitely a little more cautious. Generally, my approach hasn't changed and I'm still able to get them to respond positively to me. I think it's a little harder but the basic human nature remains the same. I think it's often one's approach and how you handle the situation [that determines their response]. Again, the only difference I see is the mentioning of the internet; Facebook, etc... the "what are you going to do with the photographs?" remarks.

ISP Being from Pittsburgh, did W. Eugene Smith's photographs influence your interest in being a photographer?

HS [Laughs] I was growing up when he was shooting there, I guess. No, I started photography when I went into the Army and was stationed in Germa-



ny in the late 60's. I had some time on my hands so I picked up a camera and I really liked it. They had a darkroom on the base where I was stationed. I taught myself how to photograph and how to develop film. I had wanted to write as a teenager and was interested in painting in my early twenties. In college I tried to do ceramics. I studied engineering but didn't love it. By the third year I knew I wouldn't be an engineer even though I graduated with a degree. I took several art classes, trying different things. Then I picked up a camera and knew immediately that this was for me.

ISP Was it in the military that you felt you made your biggest leap in regards to developing an eye for making a good photograph?

HS Well, I got a camera while I was stationed in Germany and did some travel photography. But I can't say that I developed my eye until I moved to New York and took a class with Ben Fernandez. I started photographing the streets of New York and it was at this time that I started getting very interested in photography. Before that it was just a hobby. New York allowed me to be a photographer. Not that there were a lot of photographers then but there was art all around. It was so visual and stimulating, especially in the 70's. It was funky, decrepit, and almost bankrupt. I was drawn to many of the poor neighborhoods because of their visual nature and quality. With art all around, including the music and architecture, it gave me permission to be myself. If I'd lived in Pittsburgh I probably couldn't have been a photographer. It's just too small of a town and people didn't understand that kind of art, at least back then, though now there are good photographers in Pittsburgh. I don't want to knock Pittsburgh. It's a terrific town.

ISP Can you point to one specific experience or one person that made a huge impact in your career?

HS I attribute it to my first teacher Ben Fernandez. Ben had really strong work and a pretty well-known street photographer at the time. I took my first class with him in 1973. There weren't many classes. [International Center of Photography] didn't exist at the time. There were photographers teaching private classes. Diane Arbus was teaching a class and Ken Heyman had a class. I took [Heyman's] class. Ben Fernandez suggested that I get a Leica, an M4 at the time, and a 21mm wide angle lens and go to Coney Island and start shooting. And I did. I never stopped. I shoot with Leicas, M4s. I shoot with a 21mm and 35mm lens. I'd say he has had a lasting impression on me. We became friends and I used his darkroom for at least six months to a year. He was very generous. His shooting style was very aggressive and I think I picked up on that too - getting close with a wide angle, getting in people's faces. I got my interest in people from being in New York I think. It's teeming with all kinds of people.

ISP Much of your work has that really nice combination of portraiture and street photography. Do you have the mindset when you're out taking photos that it's not about one or the other? That you take the photograph, it being a portrait or a candid, as it's presented to you?

HS I never use the word portrait. I don't go out and say that I'm going to do portraits. I say that I'm going to go out and photograph people. It happens that with the way I shoot I want them to acknowledge me and my presence. Maybe it validates me as an individual and my existence; I kind of think that in a funny way. I'm not satisfied to shoot a building, a scenic or trees in a park. I want to go where there are people. Indeed, they are mostly portraits; I don't do candid photography that much. I want to talk to people and get close with a wide angle lens. I never use a long lens. My long lens is a 35mm. So it's interesting that you say that. I do go out thinking that I'm going to photograph people. I go



I want to make another point: I do other photography than street photography. My first two books were mostly indoors and not on the streets. The *Twins* book was often in their homes and the *Artists* book was totally in their studios. Again, I'm shooting people and portraits so no matter what I'm shooting or where I'm shooting I'm trying to shoot people. I think it's the most challenging subject matter. I think the hardest thing to shoot is strangers on the streets. Having to approach people that you don't know and then... now you know them somewhat. I can't know them well or in a deep way. But at least for a minute or ten seconds we have an exchange.

ISP The majority of your work is black-and-white with very little color. Is color something you began later in your career? And what role does color play in your work today?

HS I totally feel that I'm a black-and-white photographer. I just bought a Leica Monochrom and I have a Canon 5D that I shoot color with. I don't alter color images into black-and-white. I got the Monochrom a couple of weeks ago so I'm going to shoot that, it's a digital camera that shoots black-and-white. I have shot color slides in the past. My color work has been published, but not a lot of it. I don't push it. I'm more interested in the black-and-white. These days I shoot black-and-white with the two M4's and the Monochrom, and color with the 5D. If I go up to Harlem I will not bring the digital camera. It's too much. I want to concentrate on film so I'll bring two or three Leicas. If I go to Coney Island I'll bring the Leicas and the 5D for color. If I see something to shoot I'll go in shooting the film first and the 5D second. My first impulse is to always shoot black-and-white.

ISP Are there any plans to publish your color work?

HS I'm doing a lot of work in New Mexico. I go there every year and I'm shooting both black-and-white and color but I'm concentrating on the color. So that could be a book. I'm going to India in ten days and I was in India last March. I really love my color work from India. So I'll shoot more color there so [that might be published]. They're still people but for some reason both of these places are pretty exotic to me, living in New York City. My next book is definitely a black-and-white book, another book on New York. I see that I'm producing a trilogy on New York City from different neighborhoods. The first book was Coney Island, the second book was Harlem, and the third book [is finished as well] but I don't want to bring it out yet because I want the Harlem book to live a little. It covers Midtown/Downtown. It's going to be published by the same publisher, Schiffer, and be similar in design as the other two books. Then I'll probably let go of New York and do other things.



out to where there's a lot of people like a parade, a block party, or a demonstration and go from there. I don't go out and say that I'm going to photograph a certain kind of person. I'm open to children, to old people, every ethnic group, etc. I just want to make meaningful photographs and people are what I choose to populate my images with.

ISP You've mentioned that you like talking to people. Does this interaction happen before you take their photo or does the photo create the conversation?

HS Mostly, I go up to them first and then shoot. I don't say "can I take your picture?" because it's too easy for them to say no. I go in, usually complimenting them first, "I like your shoes", "I like your tattoos", and then it's "I'd like to take your photograph". Fifty percent of the time in Manhattan they say no and in Brooklyn maybe twenty-five percent of the people I approach say no. If I think they're going to say no then I may take their picture before I approach them. And once in a while I'll just shoot and walk on. I'd like to shoot five or ten frames of a person that I'm interested in than just do one and move on. I want to spend a little bit of time with someone. I don't want to spend ten minutes or a half-hour with someone. If I'm drawn to them I try to articulate what draws me to them. [Of course] I don't say things like "I like your wrinkled face and I want to photograph you", but I'll try to say something positive.

ISP I'd like to ask you about a project of yours that's very different from the rest of your work because it doesn't involve people. Tell me about your pinhole series *Bodies of Water*.

HS I was always interested in pinhole photography. I get restless and I don't always want to just shoot my Leica and do street photography. I think as an artist you need to change a little bit and grow. I met a guy in Texas who specializes in pinhole and makes his own cameras. I can't even remember his name now, this was in the late 80's. I think it was at Fotofest in Houston. I asked him to make me a pinhole camera. It took him about six months but he did. I just started using it. Again, as an antidote to the streets. I started doing parks and water. I experimented with vegetation. For me, it's serious. I'm not doing it now since I'm concentrating on my street work. It's a 4x5 pinhole and I used Polaroid 4x5 film to preview what I was getting. This film has gone away so I don't have that available to me anymore. I've been less interested in the pinhole work in the last four or five years.

I've also done a lot of Holga work. On my website there's a series of trees for instance. I'll bring the Holga with me to India or Coney Island and I'll shoot a roll every once in a while. I have what I think are one-hundred terrific Holga photographs. I've been in a lot of Holga shows and juried those kind of shows, but it's sort of a sideline. I feel that I don't have time to do everything. I use it more like a breather from the intensity of the streets, but it's still serious. Like the water with the pinhole, I work on themes with the Holga. I have a series of street shots that I really like. They're different. They're a little blurred and out of focus. It's just a different look and approach. The last two years my focus has been on street photography and the books.

ISP You must have had some amazing experiences while traveling the world in both the military and as a photographer. Can you share one story with us?

HS The one story that I share with my class happened right in New York. I was photographing a model in the early 70's. He needed some photographs and I knew him from the neighborhood we lived in. We were in Central Park and I was photographing him. We saw two women, two young ladies, very pretty, and he said let's get them in the photograph - but make sure they're way in the background. I don't want them to upstage me. I went up to them and talked to them, and they said yes. I did some photos and got their numbers. Eventually, I called one of them and we started dating. And I married her. It didn't last forever but it was good while it lasted. I've made a lot of friends on the streets. Just going up to people and talking with them. The power of photography. I owe everything to photography. I feel very confident and in control on the streets. I don't go to bad areas or look for trouble. I've never been mugged or robbed. I've had students that have gotten mugged. I've done a lot of traveling for workshops: I'm going to India; I've been to Mexico ten or twelve times; Ecuador five times; I'm going to Peru this year for the third time. I love traveling. It's not that I only shoot in New York. I'm based here so I'm here eight or nine months out of the year. I want to shoot every third or fourth day at least. I go out on the street and this is the place to do it.

ISP You're currently teaching at the International Center of Photography. What do you enjoy most about teaching?

HS That's a good question. I like students. I like sharing my work





HS I'm teaching a workshop in April in Peru at Machu Picchu. I'm doing a workshop in Tuscany and Lucca in June. I'm doing a three day workshop up in Boston and a three day workshop at Duke in Durham. That's in September. I might do Brazil. Next year I'm going to do Myanmar and Greece. When I do these workshops I always have a partner either in that city or country who's very knowledgeable about the country. I don't want to go somewhere that I don't know and bring people.

As far as books, Mexico is high on my list. And I have a body of work on animals, and on children, but in different ways than what we would think of as traditional. I have a body of work on photographers photographing. I'm always around photographers and I'm always photographing people photographing. That's more of a fun, less serious, book. So I don't know if they'll all see the light of the day. For me doing a

book is a culmination, it's a climax, it's the peak of what I can do. It gets out to other countries and it lasts for years. It tells me that I have the endurance, the patience, and maybe the intelligence to complete a long term project that hopefully says something about some aspect of the world. Look, I'm just plowing ahead and seeing what happens. ■

and my career with them. I like giving back. I've had lots of help from people like my first teacher, Ben Fernandez, and other photographers. I like being in touch with people. Photography can be a very lonely endeavor. I'm around a lot of young people so it keeps me young at heart. I've always liked school and the classroom environment. When my students tell me that I've helped them, that I've inspired them, and that I've encouraged them to go on it's a great feeling. I think I'm fair but not harsh. I've made a lot friends with the faculty over the years. That's significant. ICP is my second home. I've taught there since 1976. I only missed one year when I taught at RIT. I probably have the second longest tenure there and I teach about 10 or 12 different classes.

ISP Do you ever get back to Pittsburgh?

HS I haven't been there in about five years. I do like it. It's an old city. It has many ethnic neighborhoods and I've photographed there. I have many friends in Pittsburgh. I go back there if I have a show or lecture. I wish I could get back more. I feel very busy all the time and always behind. I have maybe 500 rolls of film to still develop. Winogrand is one of my heroes because he always had a backlog of film to work with. It's just never ending. With the teaching, the traveling, and the shooting I just never seem to have time. But I love it. I'm not complaining. And that's all I ever wanted to do. It's a great profession and a great life.

ISP Do you have a darkroom?

HS Yes, I have a darkroom in Midtown that I share with two other photographers. I have a room next to my office where I develop the film. Our darkroom is a funky darkroom in the basement of a building so I go there once or twice a week and print. I develop film almost every morning but I'm still way behind. And then when I travel I'm away for three weeks, like in India, shooting eighty rolls of film putting me even further behind. But I do try to keep up. My important projects jump to the head of the line. If I'm working on a book or a project I'll try to work on that stuff first.

ISP What's coming up for Harvey Stein? What can we look forward to in the very near future?

- Where You Can Find Harvey Stein -

WORKSHOPS

Peru	April 12-20	Tuscany, Italy	June 14-22
New York City	April 25-27	Taos, NM	August 16-24
Winchester, MA	June 6-8		

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