Everyday

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EVERYDAY

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In
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by
Jill Moore
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Abstract

In our everyday lives we are bombarded with thousands, even millions, of images. Suffering information overload, we filter out the vast majority of these impressions – the person we pass on the street or sitting in the car next to us at a stop light. We only ‘see’ those people, places and things that ‘matter’, all else becomes ‘noise’; filtered into the background of consciousness – vaguely familiar, yet simultaneously foreign, creating a ‘manageable paradigm’ or construct of the world we inhabit.

I take photographic portraits every day. Not of the ‘important’ in my life, but the nondescript, often overlooked and unknown individuals we each encounter daily. These portraits may not be newsworthy, but are tributes to those steering their lives through the everyday, the ignored moments, and the places they pass. What I present invites the viewer to take an interest, to notice, and ultimately to acknowledge the people depicted.

Photography has afforded me a reason and the luxury to approach complete strangers which I find interesting and ask if they would allow me to take their portraits, and while doing so, tell me a little about their lives. Most of these encounters last for a relatively short time, the memories, however, surpass what is caught on film.
Everyday

“At our best and most fortunate we make pictures because of what stands in front of the camera, to honor what is greater and more interesting than we are. We never accomplish this perfectly, though in return we are given something perfect - a sense of inclusion. Our subject thus redefines us, and is part of the biography by which we want to be known.”

-Robert Adams, Why People Photograph, 1994

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Portraits are different from other kinds of images because of the inherent relationship between the artist and the sitter, and photographic portraits are even more
exceptional. As social animals, we seem to have a hidden primal response - half fear, half attraction - at the moment when someone takes our photograph (Figure 1). In the common language of the photographic portrait, facing the camera signifies solemnity, frankness, and the discovery of the subject’s essence (Figure 2). A key aspect of photographing people is not to intervene in their lives, only to visit them. “The photographer is the super tourist, an extension of the anthropologist, visiting natives and bringing back news of exotic doings and strange gear.”

Figure 1: Jill Moore, *Eric, 8-24-08*  
Figure 2: Jill Moore, *Mildred, Earlene, and John 9-25-08*  

Traditional portraiture often concentrated on the highest and sometimes the lowest levels of society. If the traditional portrait gains strength from resemblance, photography’s invention in the nineteenth-century gave portraiture new imitative possibilities. Photography’s relative affordability and ease allowed the middle classes to participate in this enterprise with exuberance and then was duly ascribed its place as the medium of choice. But its capacity for pictorial description, suffered the fate of working too well: poolside Polaroids, family vacations ‘snaps’ and our high school

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yearbook portraits, have only amplified a habitual anxiety that photography is capable of revealing more than we want to know about ourselves - and not enough of who we think we are.

Of the many distinguished photographers I have studied, and have been influenced by are three in particular; August Sander, Robert Frank and Joel Sternfeld, each inspiring a key element in my work: a lens that is not piercing but democratic. None of these photographers ever claimed to have set new standards for seeing, but accomplished, nonetheless, by making the ordinary interesting.

August Sander, a German photographer of the early 20th century, began a monumental, lifelong photographic project to document the people of his native Westerwald. *Man of the Twentieth Century* was the name given to Sander’s work, in which he photographed subjects from all walks of life and created a typological catalogue of more than six hundred Germans. Stating that “[w]e know that people are formed by the light and air, by their inherited traits, and their actions. We can tell from appearance the work someone does or does not do; we can read in his face whether he is happy or troubled.” Sander’s simple and straightforward approach allows us to read not the generalities of the person implied by his classification, but their individualities. Sander’s portraits, whether half or full-length, are always set in a simple environment. He provided intentional clues as to the origin and profession of the sitter through background and clothing, hairstyle and gesture (Figure 3, 4, and 5). Professionals and the rich tend to be photographed indoors and laborers and outcasts are usually

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3 Sander, 19.
photographed in a setting which locates them and which speaks for them (Figure 6, 7, and 8). Sanders says, “It is not my intention either to criticize or describe these people.”

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4 Sander, 20.
In 1955, Robert Frank, a Swiss born photographer, received a Guggenheim fellowship and headed out in a used Ford to create an “observation and record of what one ‘naturalized’ American finds to see in the United States.” Subsequently, *The Americans* was the seminal result of this investigation. *The Americans* showed a different America than the wholesome, nonconfrontational photo essays offered in some popular magazines. His subjects were not necessarily living the American dream of the 1950’s. They were factory workers in Detroit, transvestites in New York, black passengers on a segregated trolley in New Orleans (Figure 9, 10 and 11). His photographs, however, eventually struck an emotional chord and Americans began to see his photographs as relevant – even prophetic. Though the book was becoming popular with younger people, it took years to recognize that the book went far beyond diary and document. By rejecting the mannered and predictable style of photojournalism of the period, Frank produced a radical critique of photography itself – it

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returned photography to the vernacular of vision. In 1959, none of the images in *The Americans* adhere to recognizable stereotypes – the images were not familiar, and at the same time they were all too familiar. Now, *The Americans* is seen as one of the few works that changed the direction of photography, for it dramatically altered how photographers would look through their viewfinders and the way Americans saw themselves (Figure 12).

Figure 9: Robert Frank, Contact Sheet for *The Americans*

Figure 10: Robert Frank, *New York City, 1955*

Figure 11: Robert Frank, *Trolley, New Orleans, 1955*

Figure 12: Robert Frank, *Canal Street, 1955*
One of the most widely regarded and influential color photographers in the world, noted for his large format documentary photographs, is Joel Sternfeld. When Sternfeld became a photographer in the late 1960’s, Frank’s book, *The Americans*, was already a landmark and Sternfeld realized that “…this body of work changed the course of the river of photography in a way that it could never take the old course again.”

Sternfeld will say when he was first starting out he would sleep with this book every night and return to its pages over and over to decode its secrets.

In Sternfeld’s *Stranger Passing*, the subjects come to the foreground as America sits for its portrait (Figure 13 and 14). Sternfeld’s work evokes that of August Sander, but questions the validity of conventional portraiture as documentary practice. His portraits cause the viewer to look closely – and then look again. Who are these people and what has brought them to this particular landscape at this precise moment (Figure 15)? What does their dress signify, if anything, and what can be decoded from a closer look of the things they carry (Figure 16)? Sternfeld throws the question at the viewer, asking us to decide what we are willing to assume, on the basis of outward appearance, about the person standing next to us in the elevator (Figure 17). When we look at Sternfeld’s photographs we can find some temporary solutions to the problem of remaining human. We fear and are attracted to these people. We respond to an emotional human dynamic as they are staring at us; we take pleasure in the opportunity to stare back, and may even find ourselves moved. We never feel that he has sought out the richest or the poorest, the most striking or the most exotic subjects. What makes photography a wonderful medium is that when we see Sternfeld’s photographs, Robert

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6 Cole, NPR
Frank is there, embedded in his own photographic language (Figure 18). Sternfeld simply sees what is to be seen and asks us to consider the notion that everybody is worthy of a photograph.

Figure 13: Joel Sternfeld, *Queen of the Prom*, the Range Nightclub, Slab City, California, March 2005

Figure 14: Joel Sternfeld, *A Lawyer with Laundry*, 1988

Figure 15: Joel Sternfeld, *Homeless Man with His Bedding*, New York, July 1994

Figure 16: Joel Sternfeld, *A Woman Out Shopping with Her Pet Rabbit*, Santa Monica, California, August 1988
Why would we look at portraits of people who have no claim on us (Figure 19)? Often we don’t - there are plenty of boring people right around the corner and even more boring photographs - we do not need to search for more. I have pondered that thought in my own photographs as well as when I study the work of Sander, Frank and Sternfeld; but occasionally anonymous portraits tell us something significant about what it means to be human. (Figure 20).
In my photographs I want the viewer to contemplate, as well as reflect upon, what he/she sees, but doesn’t look at, every day. (Figure 21 and 22). I am a photographer that is in love with looking. I search for the brief encounter, and in that process there is that fleeting moment when a stranger opens up to me and consequently, to the viewer (Figure 23). My belief in the descriptive and empathic ability of the camera supports the context that Sander, Frank and Sternfeld achieved in their work. Can we gain insight into the person in front of the lens simply by staring fixedly into her face (Figure 24)? Does a photograph raise questions about their lives (Figure 25)? In my images, I try to answer these questions by making the subject more important than the documentary values that are already present, and through small pieces of information that are embedded in the photograph, which help describe and reveal clues into the life of that individual (Figure 26). These qualities can only be captured by selecting the moment when the shutter is released, when the subject is looking at the photographer with a willingness to engage that stems from his own interest in the other (Figure 27).

Figure 21: Jill Moore, *Jacob, September 25, 2008*  
Figure 22: Jill Moore, *Ben, November, 12, 2008*
Figure 23: Jill Moore, *Ernest*, February 8, 2009

Figure 24: Jill Moore, *Eudora*, May 20, 2008

Figure 25: Jill Moore, *Perry and Belle*, August 30, 2009

Figure 26: Jill Moore, *Peggy and Leslie*, May 16, 2008

Figure 27: Jill Moore, *Ray*, July 2, 2009
Observing what is in front of you requires discipline, tact, circumspection, and even tolerance; in portraits, it’s the acceptance of a person’s unlimited possibilities.

Photographic portraits, to which we ascribe so much truth, do not necessarily reveal the inner character or spiritual life of that individual. We really don’t know anything about them, so there lies an argument about the nature of photographic portraiture all together. I suggest this is because portraits enact a contradiction: that each human being is unique, flawed and at the same time similar. There is no such thing as a “typical person.” Despite the information contained in how we look, we could be almost anybody (Figure 28). We’re grateful when someone sees us accurately without making assumptions. I try to ‘see’ the subjects in my photographs, but leave the conclusions up to others (Figure 29).

![Figure 28: Jill Moore, Joe, March 15, 2009](image1)

![Figure 29: Jill Moore, Mark, July 9, 2008](image2)

A person’s physical presence must be recognized, even if we don’t know that person. My images create a similar experience. There may be no particular reason to
look at this stranger’s portrait; but once we have seen it, we are forced to acknowledge, however briefly, that person’s claim to have an importance equal to our own (Figure 30).

Figure 30:  Jill Moore, Ronald, August 30, 2009

Photography has afforded me a reason and the luxury, to be able to approach complete strangers which I find interesting and ask if they would allow me to take their portraits, and while doing so, tell me a little about their lives. Most of these encounters last for a relatively short time, the memories, however, surpass what is caught on film.
Bibliography


Vita

Jill Moore was born in Dallas, Texas, but raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. After high school she moved to Idaho and then to California where she earned her bachelor’s degree at the University of California in Los Angeles in anthropology. She has also lived in Tennessee where she started her photographic studies in 1996 at the University of Memphis, which led her to the University of Texas in Austin and New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico. She has three outstanding children, Alexandra, Peter and Todd that are her heart and soul. Presently, she lives in St. Francisville, Louisiana, with her best friend and love, Adrian Percy and her two dogs, Henry and Avery.