

## **David Edwards, photographer**

### **1a. What does photography mean to you on a personal level?**

I feel photography works as a kind of personal religion for me. It is a way to connect to the mystery of the world more meaningfully. I'm sure a lot of artists feel this way. We all want to feel a part of something important. Otto Rank often spoke of the artist expressing a personal, mythic language of their own.

When I first became a photographer, I found you would be accepted in almost any situation if you had a camera with you. Like having a calling card to anywhere. And I have experienced incredibly profound moments because of photography. When I was at Carolina in the late 80's, I shot a lot of images on Main Street in downtown Columbia S.C. One day, I went to the Oliver Gospel Mission, a homeless shelter for men on Taylor Street. I just walked in and asked if I could take pictures. No one questioned my intentions at all. I imagine today this would not be possible. The first person I photographed that day asked me my name. He had blue eyes, light brown skin, was smoking alone at an old metal dining table bathed in strong window light. I told him my name was David Edwards. He looked at me, calmly and said, "so is mine, David Edwards" He showed me his ID to confirm my obvious look of bewilderment. In that improbable moment, I don't think the unlikeliness of such an event really registered. Only later, making prints in the darkroom, did I realize the effect of this occurrence had on me. It felt so profound and personal. I think this is why I have kept at photography for so long. There exists a strong feeling of mythic connection that comes with camera work.

### **1b. How has your understanding or approach to it evolved over the years?**

I think as one gets older you tend to look more inward for inspiration. So, these days I seek out people less as my subject unless it's my own family. And in the past few years, I've worked on a whole series of abstract work reusing old negative combined with digital imagery to create nontraditional photographs. It was very freeing because I could expand on the meaning of a photograph beyond any of the constraints of realism grounded in a dependence on the camera itself.

### **2a. How do you balance the impulse to document reality with the desire to convey an emotional truth? Is there ever tension between the two in your work?**

That is a profound question. I don't really think of myself as a documentary photographer although many of the images in this book work on that level. They are unadorned, unposed subjects captured in a fleeting moment. Photography has been accepted as truth telling for most of its existence. Photographs don't lie kind of thing. Today, that's all changed with AI and the digital manipulation of literally everything we see in media. One could argue that even visual truth itself has become irrelevant. Of course, even in the film era, truth was questionable. Look at the old civil war photographs by O'Sullivan. He would move, or have assistants move dead soldiers' bodies to create more compelling images, a better "drama" of the carnage of war. So, the photographer in this case is directly involved in manipulating reality. But, even framing your subject with the best intentions, is an act of manipulation and of making judgments. To frame life is to tell a lie about it to yourself. But the lie may tell a more profound truth to others.

Thought: Camera work, be it documentary or artistic is an exercise in voyeurism. A preoccupation with looking. We like to watch. We like to create our own endless narrative from visual cues.

Peter Sellers/Chance in the movie Being There". He tells Shirley/Eve he "Likes to watch" She is crying/confused and attracted to him. He says the line again. He wants to participate sexually with her but by watching. He has compartmentalized his reality to a frame, in this case the television.

## **2b. Is there ever tension between the two in your work?**

I don't think so, it's like playing music for a musician. You just play, imitating other artist and styles. It's very innocent at first as you improve technically. You are trying to make interesting images, find your groove as a photographer. And if that diverges from reality, so long as you don't misrepresent the work as the truth, then that is fine artistically speaking.

Thought: Finding the ghost in the machine.

The camera frame acts as a window and therefore document of the subject. However, the act of camera work, placing the frame, is a mirror to the character of the photographer. The soul of the artist. So, that is the conundrum. What is the reality anyway? Photography exaggerates this duality in a unique way because of our attitudes about its role in our everyday lives. And in a future under an avalanche of digital images will defining this reality even matter? Will truthfulness even need to exist?

**3. How do you know when a photograph is “finished” or captures what you intended? Is it a feeling, a technical detail, or something else.**

Often photography is about good editing. It's about the right composition and content. To separate yourself from the subject enough to decide what is the strongest frame. And then you try your best to interpret the color, contrast, if it should be lighter or darker to make the final image work technically. That interpretation can change over time.

I am not sure a work or series is ever finished. I often like to revisit a place or subject matter, even years later and experience what I initially perceived. There are many examples of this throughout the book. Seems it's a bit neurotic and obsessive. An exercise in holding on to the past. Photography can be just that.

**4. Are there particular moments or emotions you aim to invoke when someone views your work? What do you think a good photograph should reveal to its audience?**

These photographs bring honor and sense of equality to people of all economic and social groups. I hope that feeling is apparent.

Emotions covers such a broad spectrum from person to person. I'm not sure that can be the initial goal. To elicit specific emotion. You have your own to consider and hopefully the viewer will go along with you. You hope for that. You hope the viewer may recognize themselves in your work.

A good photograph can reveal a world or point of view or perhaps look at subject not appreciated before. It can be simple, compelling, beautiful, even cliché and still work. Still be good art.

**5. Looking back, do you feel any nostalgia, regret, or longing as you see the Charleston of the 90s in these photographs?**

In the 90's, almost immediately after moving here, I felt like I belonged. These photographs representing youth, my coming of age, and a sense of artistic freedom. Today, thirty-four later, I often feel like a stranger in my own city. I don't enjoy that feeling.

So yes, I feel a great deal of nostalgia. When Mayor Riley had a dream for Charleston to be an international city, I don't think he or anyone could have foreseen how drastically

we would be changed for the negative. I think we have paid the price for economic success as the driving force of that change. I think we lost our way. I see a beautiful place, but no longer the once unique soul of Charleston.

I do wish I had taken a lot more photographs of unique local culture; their communities, churches and places of business which have essentially disappeared.

**6. If you could revisit the city at that time, is there anything you would capture differently, or subjects you would now focus on more deeply. (Similar to question 5)**

A question of melancholy.

What I think:

Probably revisit and photograph the many small businesses that dotted the city that are gone and were not replaced. Visit with those who didn't prosper from the push to transform us into a tourist centric city. Photograph those people more intently.

What I feel:

I would go back and relive the experience of taking every single image again. But this time, I would be sure to thank everyone who let me photograph them. Tell them how much I enjoyed sharing time with them. And then if I could, just exist in each of those moments forever. Just to remember again all that was forgotten. To hold on. To linger just a bit more in eternity.

And tell Michael Conyers how much he meant to me. Tell Em Kate as we walk back from AC's, through the cistern to 44 Pitt Street, how much I love her and look forward to the long life we'll share together.

**7. The city has changed significantly since then. How does that transformation affect the way you feel about these images today?**

These photographs are more poignant and powerful now. The 90's seem so innocent, even quaint. Local people with different ethnic backgrounds lived here, interacted more with each other. Now, there are whole boroughs in Charleston which are solely tourist traffic. I often feel disconnected from this place. I know places change so I'm not just being strictly nostalgic. The changes were so radical and happened so quickly that Charleston is unrecognizable and that is profoundly sad to me.

Memory:

Truman Moore, a photographer friend asked me how it felt to have lived through the film Era. After age fifty, life is about measuring eras.

**8. What parts of Charleston's identity in the 90's, do you think are most crucial for people to remember? How do your photos contribute to preserving that identity?**

We were once a small, quirky, close knit, flawed southern town.

I only know what I experienced. It was primarily the bohemian scene at the time that I found so beautiful. The scene was open, accepting of others and lacking in over self-importance. My first teaching job was at the former Gibbes Studio School at 76 Queen Street. I met so many wonderful local people and artists there. You could take classes in painting, drawing, pottery, and photography. It was a wonderful space for the celebration of art in a lovely old Charleston home. It functioned as an important social hub for the community. The Gibbes Museum of Art has long since closed the Gibbes Studio School to make way for another premier downtown restaurant.

This book is a lament to pay homage to Charleston. And remember what has been lost.

**10. Do you see your photographs as merely representations of a moment in time, or do they act as a bridge to broader themes and stories about the South.**

They can work as both. Especially over time. We talked early on about images I took with Confederate Memorials often being a prominent part of the image. In those early photographs, I was just trying to take well composed, visually interesting images of city landmarks for stock photography. Like the photograph of a boy and his father playing chase around the statue at White Point Gardens. I was thinking of survival, making a living. And I could relate to the boy and his father. So, I was less aware of the significance of these statues. But later, as I learned more about Charleston's major role in the slave trade. My outlook changed, my new knowledge changing how I frame my world. I started to see Confederate Memorials not as just decorative historical object but in the context of racism. So, later I created an image of the same statue interpreting it as a fading and antiquated symbol. A photograph can work on many levels. There will always be a point of view in a photograph and whether it acts as purely decorative, or profound is based on the photographer's self-awareness and sensitivities. In the end the artist role fades away. And the work remains as the artist's struggle persists.

**11. Your images have a certain quietness and depth. How do you achieve that mood in your work? Is it an instinctive or deliberate choice.**

Anyone who puts time into photography will notice they have distinct tendencies in how they frame. I guess you would call that style or in writing you call it one's voice. You can learn to improve this but it's already there in the beginning. I think I gravitate toward a sense of the ordinary, the mundane moments which feel profound. Even though we are surrounded by other people, everyday life can be such a solitary endeavor. Our egos often make us feel other and even at odds with those around us. We feel abnormal. In my photographs, I have noticed I gravitate toward a single figure, maybe posing, possibly not. Or maybe two or three people who are together as one but appear distant. So, maybe the mood you are referring to is just tapping into a feeling of otherness. A feeling of solitude.

Isn't creating dignity the act of making people feel less abnormal? Allowing them to feel like they belong. Most people I photograph just want to tell their story without being judged. The act of taking someone's photograph is an act of human affirmation. A pure way to acknowledge we are here, together as equals and you are worth being recognized.

**12. When you photograph people, how do you approach capturing their essence? Is it more about intuition, conversation, or something unseen?**

Yes, I would say mainly intuitive. All the visual elements coming together in the moment. It also helps to be interested in your subject. If you aren't sincere people will pick up on that. On the street, it might be a scene, or a person that is compelling. Like the cover photograph of the boy and his dog on a chain leash. I found that an interesting juxtaposition of details. And reminds me now of Renaissance paintings. This young man now a Charleston aristocrat of the streets requiring our fealty.

I usually asked people right up front if I can photograph them. That's what I did, I asked them to pose. I took just a few frames. I knew it felt right. I find the best image is usually taken in the beginning before you begin to bore them, and the experience is still new.

I'm reminded of Diane Arbus with this question. She was searching for essence, revealing the soul. She was persistent and would often follow her subject home. Almost like a prolonged interrogation so her subject would eventually let their guard down to reveal themselves. I try to engage with people, listen to them and then if we make an

interesting photograph then great, I'm happy with the serendipity leading up to it. I feel the experience is just as important even if the photograph doesn't always work.

**13. Have there been times when photography challenged you emotionally or ethically? How did you navigate those situations?**

You do question your motivation. Is this just an ego exercise? Are you using people in your photographs as just another means of self-promotion? Using people as decoration but not actually making any difference in the world. I think about these things now. But when you are young, you jump right into life and never consider the why. Why do you photograph and to what end never struck my mind until much later. And maybe that's a good thing. To not edit or question yourself. To see the world honestly like a child.

My photographic heroes worked in the twentieth century. Arbus, Evans, Frank, Model to name a few. I wanted to experience the world the way they did. Photography is very seductive; I don't think any medium has a stronger blurring of life and art as much as photography. That is very exciting to me.

It was easy to become obsessed by the hoarding of images. That's what I have done for most of my life. A photography life is sometimes so intense to the point of being unbearable. You sometimes feel you could break. The beauty of life being a lot to bear.

If I was suicidal, I think I would have left the world early, like Diane. But I am not. I'm more of a let see what happens next person. Basically a happy, neurotic, coward.

**14. How has immersing yourself in Charleston's stories and scenes affected your understanding of yourself, either as an artist or an individual?**

The experience of going through old negatives and slides from over thirty years ago, sometimes for the first time makes you realize how old you are. So, the old geezer factor is very high and according to my kids I lived during the stone age. A cave as my first darkroom.

This book has been a mind-bending trip because your memory is shaken up. The images act like revisiting detailed dreams and it is hard to separate the real from the fragmented parts which are so specific to you, as unique as any other traits you have. I've spoken to friends, some who are in this book, and it is amazing how differently they recall the circumstances in the photographs.

So, I think my experiences were/are highly nuanced, revealing an inner dream as much as the obvious outward reality. It seems we must retain what we need emotionally to survive any given moment and leave out the other sorted details. We all frame our life to better survive it.

**15. If these photographs are the Legacy, you leave behind, what do you hope they say about you and the world you saw?**

I am not too worried about things like Legacy or how I am perceived. In the end, they are just pictures and if people think things are good, find them relatable then I have succeeded. I am proud of them, and I do think the book is a honest vignette of Charleston. I felt a deep connection to this place and the people here. I hope this rings true despite the highly personal and subjective viewpoint of the photographer.

**16. What makes you return to photography again and again after nearly four decades? Is there a single question or pursuit that keeps driving your work forward?**

a) I am sure photography is a religious exercise. As an art form, it just made sense, so it's just become habitual. My enthusiasm may sometimes wain, but I still enjoy using a camera. I always come back to it. Like when my son and daughter were born. I have taken so many photographs of them because I didn't want to forget the experience, that feeling of joy.

b) When we are children, we love to draw. We relate to our world directly, like early cave painting. It is sad most of us lose this artistic interest because it's so natural. My daughter loved to draw. She was always leaving Emily and I drawings, sometimes with a little message signed with a heart. They were lovely, colorful, and often emotionally resonate. You could feel her love of her world. Her amazement to living. Sadly, as she nears the age of 13, she draws far less. I really miss her art.

c) So, I guess your viewpoint changes as you get older. And so, themes in your work will change. For [Title], I think what you see is a naïve photographer embracing everything, all at once. These days I am less social; I enjoy solitude and quieter landscapes. I make images that are more deliberate and allude to this awareness. But I still try make images that appear childlike even if I must fake it.



**17. In a world where images are so disposable and quickly consumed, what role do you believe fine art photography still has? What makes it enduring and valuable?**

I don't really care what role fine art photography has. I am an analog photographer. I think about photography in the twentieth century sense. I loved darkroom work. It was cool to go into this amber lit space and quietly bring a negative to life. It was hypnotic and spiritual in the same way taking photographs could be.

Gunars Strazdins, one of my professors, said photography was the most democratic of the visual arts. He was talking about analogue photography of course. What he meant was in a relatively short amount of time a student could produce technically strong work. Today, that's even more true with digital photography, where you don't need chemicals at all, and you have many more choices to change and interpret a photograph. Software can hide a lot of technical deficiencies. But the drawback is the same for all of today's digital media which comes at us in an avalanche of images, music, movies etc. And it's overwhelming because there is much less editing or discussion about what is good, "good art."