

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

November 28, 2006

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Filed under: [artists, lists](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:24 am

I'm a sucker for year-end lists. Meaningless, sure, but they give you something to chew on besides fruitcake. The Online Photographer has a pretty entertaining list of the [Ten Best Living Photographers](#). Number two on their list is James Nachtwey.

Last year I was inspecting some prints at [Laumont](#) in New York. On the wall I had a few of my Niagara images when Nachtwey walked in. Because I had a ton of prints to review, I suggested that he use the wall first. Before I had a chance to take down my prints, Nachtwey's printer pinned up a large 9/11 image right on top of mine. It was revealing to watch my self-indulgent little poems being eclipsed by serious journalism.

Nachtwey's recent work in Iraq is featured in an excellent digital slideshow [here](#). The download times are long but definitely worth the wait.

24 Comments

1. Natchwey is great, but now there is a new generation photojournalist that will go far away, Christopher Anderson, Alex Majoli, Paolo Pellegrin, Tomas Munita, Joachim Lagefod, Matias Costa, Pep Bonet, Stanley Green.
My particular list not in order
Mary Ellen Mark
Eugene Richards
Joel Sternfeld
Richard Misrach
James Natchwey
Kratochvil
Raymond Depardon
Bruce Davidson
Avedon (yes i know he passed away but you can see Avedon legacy every day)
Not the great, but look at Ambroise tezenas last work in Pekin.

Comment by [jesus](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [12:16 pm](#)

2. Sorry, Natchwey is not great is the greatest photojournalist today.

Comment by [jesus](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [12:35 pm](#)

3. missed a bunch of people. Eggleston, R. Adams, Misrach, Shore, Friedlander...

Comment by [j zorn](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [2:02 pm](#)

4. Thanks Alec for posting the link to the multimedia presentation. I saw Natchwey's War Photographer DVD last year and it blew me away.

The photographs in the presentation are amazing, somehow in any given photograph you see his signature style.

More importantly though, I was reminded of the ordeal that such young men and women are going through everyday. So many of these soldiers are kids, can't even order a beer but they are now missing arms and legs – their youthful faces disfigured beyond recognition. Personally I am very opposed to the war. In fact I am opposed to war in general. My opposition does not diminish my wish for these troops to return home; in fact seeing presentations like this strengthen my conviction that much more.

Well in any regard, thanks for the information. I've gotten alot from your blog postings. Keep it up.

Happy holidays to you and yours.

-Sherman-

Comment by [Sherman](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [2:37 pm](#)

5. hey alec, i hear ya on the "self-indulgent little poems being eclipsed by the serious photojournalism" – and natchwey is the best of the best (man he is good) – i think about that everytime i take a picture of a nice landscape instead of a life-altering warzone, but – we all do what we can. part of it is knowing who you are and how you can best contribute, no? xa

Comment by [alia](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [4:00 pm](#)

6. Weird list. Apart from that, this is just a ludicrous anyway:

"She understands that it's not an intermediary, a way of distancing: it's a way of getting closer, of showing what's worth seeing, of telling what needs to be told. Because there's nothing in between Jill

Freedman's pictures and what's important—and nothing in between her and her art, and that's the way it's supposed to be."

Comment by zbs — November 28, 2006 @ [4:02 pm](#)

7. The new issue of national geographic has a great series by Nactway from a us military hospital in iraq.

sally mann, louis gonzales palma, fazal skeik, starns, hiroshi sugimoti,takihiro sato, lorna simpson, carrie mae weems, adam fuss, kahn and selsnick, christian boltanski, maria magdalena campos-pons

Comment by [doug mcgoldrick](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [4:28 pm](#)

8. I guess I should clicked before typing anyway it's great in print too

Comment by [doug mcgoldrick](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [4:33 pm](#)

9. that's a seriously flawed list, but what list of ten photographers wouldn't be? no eggleston, shore, sternfeld, misrach, epstein, koudelka, on and on. and james nachtwey, for anyone who hasn't heard yet, is an ego maniac and self-promoter of the highest order – he'll knock your grandmother to the ground to get a picture and then hang it on top of someone else's in a gallery.

Comment by john kerren — November 28, 2006 @ [4:42 pm](#)

10. Hello, Alec. I can relate to your reaction to Nachtwey's work and the reflection on your own work. I struggle with uninvited mind swerves like that all the time. I realize, though, that there are people cut out for that kind of work and that I am not in that group. To me, if the only stories being told were the "big" ones, then that is how we would see our lives—always waiting for the big moments and overlooking the big stories that exist for each of us but on a smaller scale. I can appreciate the amazing work of Nachtwey and other photojournalists, but I find more personal meaning in the stories told visually by people like you and Eugene Richards. These are the stories that would go untold if we were all waiting for the "big one."

Comment by Gordon Harkins — November 28, 2006 @ [5:12 pm](#)

11. Can I use the two mentions of Shore as a thin excuse to talk about him ?

What's the deal. His work since the 70s hasn't been at all interesting except, maybe, for some advertising work and a couple of spreads in a W magazine from a few years ago? I think?

(Of course the Uncommon Places era stuff is fantastic.)

Comment by zbs — November 28, 2006 @ [5:19 pm](#)

12. Yes but in 2030 his 2005 work will be all the rage.

Comment by rob — November 28, 2006 @ [6:10 pm](#)

13. Hi Alec, I found your site a few weeks ago and I'm glad that I did! I think top ten lists are ridiculous since art's so subjective. Last I checked Robert Frank's still alive...

Comment by [Matt](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [6:20 pm](#)

14. Hi John Kerren,

I don't know where you got your information, although I've heard that accusation before. I crossed paths with Nachtwey in the main American military hospital in Baghdad for several days this past July, where I was also taking pictures. Although the ER is a fast moving and very confined environment, he was a perfect gentleman, both to me and to the hospital staff, who were generally very wary of the

behavior of journalists coming through. Just my own experience, anyhow, although I'd be surprised if he turned out to be some sort of Jekyll and Hyde.

Comment by Peter van Agtmael — November 28, 2006 @ [7:40 pm](#)

15. I don't think you can compare what you do and what Nachtwey does. Apples and oranges. It is just two different types of work and because one is of the "human condition" and it's unfortunate suffering does not make it anymore relevant than other visual content. Its heart wrenching and very significant and important that that work is being made but I'm very happy little poems are being made as well. We need both.

Comment by [stewart](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [7:41 pm](#)

16. I forgot to say I think Nachtwey is amazing!...but maybe you need one to be able to keep looking at the other..? Lists are silly.

Comment by [stewart](#) — November 28, 2006 @ [7:55 pm](#)

17. Peter,

I believe your story, and don't know the guy myself, but a friend watched him elbow out some funeral procession grieverers in the middle east to get his spot for a good picture. But aside from that, haven't you seen War Photographer? There's few photojournalists in the world who think themselves as important as Nachtwey, and if you've seen him speak, he really has an air of arrogance (in my humble opinion, of course).

Comment by john kerren — November 28, 2006 @ [8:42 pm](#)

18. "he really has an air of arrogance (in my humble opinion, of course)"

Thales: "All things are full of gods."

Comment by lavell — November 29, 2006 @ [1:36 pm](#)

19. I question the point of taking harrowing pictures of war zones in these times, we've all seen them over and over again to the point of being immune.

Martin Parr makes an interesting comment in "Magnum in Motion" about his earlier pictures being seen as controversial and photos of a family's torment at the loss of a member, not... Look around the real battle field is our own back yard, our own consuming societies, each of us serving our own little agendas. "war is an extension of our society" Bukowski.

Now that for me is the place to photograph.

Comment by [Paul](#) — November 29, 2006 @ [5:39 pm](#)

20. and I'd argue Alec that "self-indulgent little poems" are a thousand times more useful than more images to remind us of the horrors of humanity.

Comment by [Paul](#) — November 29, 2006 @ [5:47 pm](#)

21. I have to say— having shot some of everything, domestically and abroad— I think it is a hell of a lot easier to shoot pictures overseas than it is domestically. With news events and conflict scenarios there is inherent drama— the harder part of making pictures in conflict situations is dealing with the physicality of the place. On the flip side, try shooting pictures of a competitive Scrabble tournament in Erie, PA. I'm far more impressed by amazing images of mundane and static situations than images from situations

where there is a war going on— I'd take "conceptual" over "capturing" any day of the week and twice on Sunday.

Translation— I'd take "Niagra" over "Inferno" any day.

Comment by John — November 29, 2006 @ [5:56 pm](#)

22. i had the chance to work with nachtwey on a a commercial job....which he probably does a couple times a year....i enjoyed watching him work...he has an amazing eye....and i found him to be very humble...

Comment by brent — November 30, 2006 @ [8:54 am](#)

23. I agree with the Sally Mann, but only because her husband is so freakin' hot. Alec, you're cute too.

Comment by dave — November 30, 2006 @ [10:28 am](#)

24. Nachtwey makes beautiful photographs, as do a lot of other brave and hard-working photojournalists. It's a shame too few people really see their work, in a media culture obsessed with celebrity and pop culture.

It always gives me pause when I step into a fancy Chelsea gallery and see journalistic images of death and destruction and poverty. Ideally, I feel the purpose of photojournalism is to bring the truth to the masses. Most of the masses never set foot in a gallery. While I don't begrudge journalists who find another outlet (and source of funding) for their work in galleries, I feel important journalistic work should be distributed in a more democratic manner.

I agree with John, it is more challenging to photograph in your backyard than on some big global story. I've photographed the war in Iraq and stories in Africa and Latin America, and done 8x10 portraits of high school kids in New Jersey, and I find the latter more challenging.

I used to find great interest in hard core photojournalism. Lately, I've grown numb to that kind of work. Not that I don't care what's going on in the world, it's more important than ever to follow events here and overseas. But the images have lost some power. I don't know if it's from being constantly bombarded with them, or because I make them as I've been a working photojournalist for almost ten years. In any event, I have a growing appreciation for more conceptual and interpretive work. Subtle work like yours, Alec, or that of the dusseldorf school or others, can say more than yet another war image, even if it is beautifully composed and hanging on a gallery wall.

Comment by [Noah Addis](#) — December 6, 2006 @ [9:12 pm](#)