

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

November 12, 2006

More on Denis Cameron

Filed under: [artists](#), [interviews](#) — alecsothblog @ 11:13 pm



Liverpool Railway Station, ©Denis Cameron

Last month I wrote [a post](#) about the photographer Denis Cameron. I'd come across Cameron's obituary (he died on October 6, 2006) and was unfamiliar with his work. In response to this post I received an email from

Denis's son, Marc Cameron. Along with providing jpegs, Marc sent [an additional obituary](#) and an essay written by his father [[Notes on a Continuing Life](#), Leica Magazine, Issue 3, 1980]. Lastly, Marc was gracious enough to answer a few of my questions:

Alec Soth: It would be terrific if you could provide some background info about yourself. Can you tell me a little about your family?

Marc Cameron: My dad had my sister and I later in life. I am 32 years old and she is ten years younger. Although we have different mothers and did not grow up in the same household, we have a good relationship. I live in London and work in publishing. Amber recently graduated from college and now lives in New York.

Alec Soth: In the obituary in The Independent, your father's work is described as "the common denominator of the Prague Spring, the fall of the Berlin Wall, Ayatollah Khomeini, Sophia Loren and Errol Flynn in a casket." How aware were you of all of these different facets of his biography while you were growing up?

Marc Cameron: My awareness of his career began to develop in my early teens. Ilford boxes filled with contact sheets and negatives were spread around the flat and I spent hours poring over the images as a kid. He constantly read the papers and followed the news on the radio and TV. He was often able to cite personal experience with respect to conflicts and major political events around the world. Films we watched together often involved an actor or director he had known or photographed.



Buster Keaton, ©Denis Cameron

Alec Soth: Was your father proud of his achievements?

Marc Cameron: I would not say that he was proud of his accomplishments. He was aware that he led an interesting life but he was always humble about it.

Alec Soth: The same article describes your father as a 'real-life Zelig.' Beyond his presence at all of these major events, that description seems to suggest something about his personality (modesty or secrecy). Why do you think your father's name is not as well known as some of his colleagues?

Marc Cameron: My dad was not interested in making a name for himself. As far as I know he never tried to promote himself by putting on exhibitions of his Hollywood photographs and the only exhibitions he ever organized involved his photographs from Indochina, with Cambodia usually being the focus. It was the story, doing something about the injustice that mattered to him, not what he stood to gain. He genuinely felt this way.



Cambodian Girl, ©Denis Cameron

Alec Soth: In [Notes on a Continuing Life](#), your father writes about his ambivalence toward war photography. He wrote, "In truth, I have become uneasy about the reportage of wars. What is its effect on those who see the pictures in cozy homes thousands of miles from the scene? `Do they instruct, edify?" I'm wondering if your father ever shared this ambivalence with you?

Marc Cameron: We never discussed this subject. He did what he did because he had a sympathy for soldiers and the civilians caught in conflict. The thought that his work was making no impact on public opinion must have troubled him.

Alec Soth: In the same essay, your father writes, "Photographing large-scale violence imprints permanent scars on the photographer's psyche...The wounds are hidden and deep and reappear without warning." How aware were you of these wounds?

Marc Cameron: I remember that when I was young he often had nightmares and would clench his fists and shout obscenities in his sleep. The first time I experienced this was some twelve years after he had left Cambodia and a few years since he was last in a war zone. The nightmares stayed with him for the rest of his life.

He lost a number of friends and colleagues in Indochina. The result was that he dedicated much of his time trying to save people from war zones and succeeded on several occasions.

Alec Soth: Throughout his life your father returned to the fantasy world of Hollywood. This is such a contrast to his work as a war photographer. I'm wondering how your father felt about show business. Was his attraction financial or something deeper?

Marc Cameron: He earned a good living working as a stills photographer and coming from a humble background he was always appreciative of the opportunities this afforded him. The other side of it – he loved a good story. He wrote a couple of screenplays that, to his disappointment, never went anywhere.

Alec Soth: Along with his work in Hollywood, you father produced several documentaries for Iranian television and at one point began to work on a film for United Artists. How much do you know about his aspirations as a filmmaker?

Marc Cameron: I have seen two documentaries he made the late 1980s with the help of Dutch television. One is on euthanasia in the Netherlands ("Fear of Living") and the other documents his return to Cambodia ("The Return").

Alec Soth: On my blog there has been a lot of discussion about managing the difficult mix of parenting, travel and photography. I'm wondering if you would be able to share some thoughts on the topic.

Marc Cameron: In my case other factors were involved – it was not simply a matter of him being on the road. My feeling is that it's difficult to be a good parent when you're not around but meaningful interaction with your kids is equally important. There were periods when I didn't see my dad at all but he is present in many of my fondest childhood memories.

Alec Soth: In [Notes on a Continuing Life](#), your father writes, "Our work is to record our world and history will judge us from what we leave behind. Pictures will be our epitaph." Do you know which photographs are your father's favorites?

Marc Cameron: The photos that accompanied the article for Leica magazine and those he kept in view around the flat would make up his favorites. A few of his pictures made the cover of Life magazine. The most well-known of these was the picture of the Israeli soldier in the Suez Canal at the conclusion of the Six Day War.

LIFE

WRAP-UP OF THE
ASTOUNDING
WAR

*Israeli soldier cools
off in the Suez Canal*



JUNE 23 • 1967 • 35¢

- to view more of Cameron's work, click [here](#)

7 Comments

1. Did Marc say if a book is planned?

Comment by Luke — November 13, 2006 @ [3:30 am](#)

2. I believe Marc mentioned an interest in creating a website. I'm not sure about a book.

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — November 13, 2006 @ [8:12 am](#)

3. Would love to see more. Very interesting fellow. I inquired and Rex won't allow viewers the opportunity to see his images larger unless you're a commercial client.

Thanks for the wonderful report. If there is something more published online, please let us know!

Sean Cayton

Comment by [Sean Cayton](#) — November 13, 2006 @ [10:36 am](#)

4. So Marc owns the copyright to some of his father's work? One hopes Rex doesn't own it all or we'll probably never see anything beyond the current thumbnails.

Comment by Luke — November 13, 2006 @ [8:01 pm](#)

5. Soth you are the picture maker and now also , quite good, interviewer! Cheers

Comment by [William Greiner](#) — November 13, 2006 @ [8:24 pm](#)

6. Alec, here's to you for finding the time to pursue your blog, along with all the other elements of your life. My wife and I write a blob (no, not a blog, a Blob!) though she writes much more on it than I do, and finding the time to commit is always the toughest part. I knew Denis Cameron in Cambodia and Vietnam in 70-72, and always enjoyed the insouciance he seemed to bring to a very heavy subject. You knew Denis was thinking all the time... just the way he would look around during a conversation, the kind of wandering eyes which let you know that at any second this conversation might abruptly end while he grabs his Leica and resumes his mission. He was a wonderful steady guy to hang around with. I was never someone very comfy with being a 'war photographer' and I think that the chance of just hanging out in his presence probably aided me in seeing things calmly. Like so many others, sadly, his loss this year is one of a large group of very good photographers (in the last year, 6 former LIFE staffers have died) who are leaving today's world. One of the things I fear of the 'digital age' is that as photographers, especially younger ones who have basically never known 'film' and its issues and joys, seem to think that photography started about five years ago. The navel-gazing habit of chimping on the back of your camera, seeing your images on your screen immediately all reinforce the feelings that nothing has gone before. This is a rather sad trend, and in many ways robs especially younger photographers of knowing the joys of imagery that preceded them. Having been part of the "me" generation, though mostly unaware of it at the time (me? you mean ME?...) I see the ongoing patterns of supra-self indulgence threatening the new generations from knowing how good those people were ahead of them. Denis was one of those guys. As Marc (his son) said, for Denis the story was always the Story, and it wasn't really about him, except that he needed to be there to see it. TV has done terrible damage to our society by feeding the WHOreportsIT beast (Anderson Cooper.. better known than Ed Murrow? Ouch!) John Durniak, the legendary TIME photo editor in the early 70s and who worked with Denis, used to say that "the still photographer is, pound for pound, the most efficient reporting machine there is..." and I think it's still true today. It would be great if we could find a Denis Cameron book by next year's Christmas, as even the little bit I know of his work was more than deserving.

Comment by [David Burnett](#) — November 29, 2006 @ [9:18 am](#)

7. Yes, but Anderson Cooper (who is the son of Gloria Vanderbilt no less) was [photographed as a baby](#) by Diane Arbus, so I give him a break,

Comment by cnn — November 30, 2006 @ [10:58 am](#)