

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

September 23, 2007

This post is not about sex machines

Filed under: artists, artists & family, editorial photo, education, the sentence — alecsothblog @ 12:57 pm

Not every photographer finds his or her subject through moody introspection. One of the goals of my recent SFAI class ('*Finding Your Subject*') was to show students the possibilities of assignment photography. While I would never say it is right for everyone, editorial work can be useful in exposing photographers to new subjects. I often use the example of Larry Sultan. After he made his brilliant book *Pictures From Home*, Sultan did an assignment for Maxim Magazine that led to his book, *The Valley*.

One of the photographers I invited to my SFAI class was Timothy Archibald. Archibald makes his living almost exclusively through commercial and editorial photography. Perhaps because he is removed from academia, Archibald spoke to the class with a rare mix of honesty and enthusiasm.



Archibald explained that a lot of his editorial work focused on middle-class, domestic life. Inspired by one assignment that had him photographing a man in his garage who'd invented a new kind of foosball table, Archibald began looking for other kinds of inventors. This led Archibald to the subject of his book, *Sex Machines*.

After publishing this provocative book, Archibald's "sentence" was pretty much carved in stone. This seems to be one of the side effects of photographing something especially juicy. ("He's the guy who photographed Christ

in piss," etc). Don't get me wrong. Sex Machines is a remarkable book. I urge you to learn more about it (here, here, here). But this isn't the only thing you should know about Timothy Archibald.

I'm pretty sure that Archibald agrees. If you go to his website, you won't find a single reference to Sex Machines. But then, Archibald's website seems pretty much geared to getting jobs. While the pictures on his site are well produced, it all feels pretty slick. To get the good stuff, I recommend going to Archibald's blog. In an inversion of Sultan's trajectory, Archibald's new work is about his family.

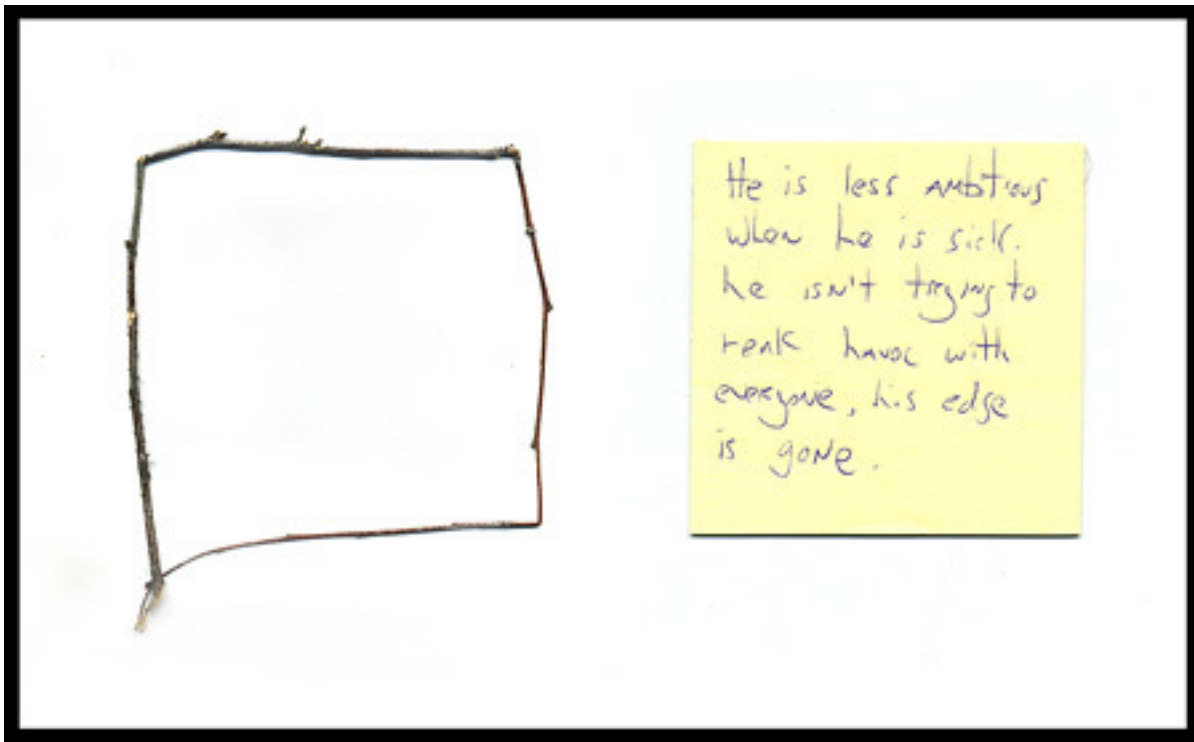


As with his class presentation, Archibald writes about his work with honesty:

So what is with all these weird images of my kid?

I'm not sure myself. I do feel like I'm trying to create, with photographs, a map, a diagram, a sentence that somehow communicates all the stuff that arises when dealing with my 5 year old boy. Wonder, discovery, emotional chaos, and a feral sense of physical randomness are the words I use when trying to describe the project to myself or others. The pictures may be communicating something else...I just don't know yet.

Archibald is clearly in the early, experimental stages of this work. But he is getting some interesting results:



With this image, Archibald writes: "My eldest son was sick last week for 48 hours. He found a stick and bent it in three places, making a perfect square. Yesterday I found a message I wrote to my wife on a post it note."

Again, there is something thrilling in this honesty. Archibald isn't afraid to explore the emotional ambivalence involved in mixing photography and parenting. In a post that I definitely relate to, Archibald recently wrote:

It's kind of tricky to switch gears from days in which my only obligation is to take photographs and stick a fork with food in my mouth, to these days at home that involve waking up with the kids, getting them what they need emotionally and physically, having a relationship with Cheri, with the kids, and dealing with all the real relationships that exist outside of the bubble of the long, on-the-road photo shoot. It's an adjustment, and I find myself anxious for the simplicity of the photo shoot: someone is there to work out the details, food is always around, the subjects are new and we are all fascinated with each other....we are all in love with each other for the bubble of the shoot, and then it's time to go. Then home, the adjustment starts. It takes a few days home for the pleasures and satisfactions of all the rich stuff, the complex emotions that are what home is about to really sink in.

The reason I brought Timothy Archibald to my class was to promote the possibilities of assignment work. I believe it can be a good source of inspiration. But Archibald taught me something else. As the cliché goes, genius is 1% inspiration. It really doesn't matter what you do for a living. Whether you teach, sell furniture or produce commercials, the important part of making art is digging into "all the rich stuff, the complex emotions."

13 Comments

1. I like very much the way you addressing the various angles of art and living and living with art in your blog, that I discovered only recently – but..never too late I guess.... Very inspiring! Thank you!

Comment by Stavro — September 23, 2007 @ 2:11 pm

2. Yeah, thanks Mr. Soth. As a likely student of photography it's amazing for me to have access to the thoughts of many working photographers on the internet – and then to have you actually "blog" from the perspective of a teacher and in that guise... is just great. I have a year to make a decision and a year of this blog is likely to make a generous contribution to that decision.

Comment by William — September 23, 2007 @ 5:14 pm

3. I agree with William. It's inspiring to see that you are not only carrying out a successful career in photography, but you are also taking time out of your day to educate others about your opinions and experiences.

Comment by Ted Levine — September 23, 2007 @ 7:11 pm

4. Great post. Wish I could have heard Archibald speak to the class with my own ears. I seem to be constantly struggling with the thought that doing too much assignment work might kill the passion of creating art. Or maybe its more about the fear of somehow confusing the two, and consequently losing some of the honesty and integrity. Holding a camera and capturing vs. holding a camera and constructing.

Comment by Chad Muthard — September 24, 2007 @ 12:16 am

5. Alec Soth writes:

"Perhaps because he is removed from academia, Archibald spoke to the class with a rare mix of honesty and enthusiasm."

What is underneath this sentence?

Comment by Mark Tucker — September 24, 2007 @ 6:33 am

6. interesting about working with one's children, if you've got them then you have a world to explore, my 3 year old now take pretty damned good pictures, but i got there first:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/adriantylor/sets/72157600381276933/>

Comment by adrian tyler — September 24, 2007 @ 7:17 am

7. It's very creepy how your posts seem to follow my own thoughts. When you were on the bunny circles I was thinking of portholes. Recently you posted on education as I consider what happens after my BA. Today you talk about "complex emotions" after my weekend of fear to go there. However, I must say that "jump the sandwich" took me completely by surprise. I was never, ever thinking about Fonzie and the death-throes of sitcoms.

It is difficult for me to deal with "all the rich stuff, the complex emotions." That may be why I've been drawn to art. As a way to confront all that with a purpose.

Comment by Glenn — September 24, 2007 @ 8:31 am

8. Thanks again Alec...
i agree too
Nothing inspires more than your real and closest world. where only exists the real "honesty and enthusiasm" and then the art becomes true for your self.

Comment by ruben vega — September 24, 2007 @ 8:40 am

9. Mark Tucker Says:

September 24th, 2007 at 6:33 am
Alec Soth writes:

"Perhaps because he is removed from academia, Archibald spoke to the class with a rare mix of honesty and enthusiasm."

What is underneath this sentence?

Mark- I think that Alec suspected I was "high", and was searching for a legitimate explanation for what he perceived as honesty and enthusiasm. Just a guess, though.

Comment by Timothy Archibald — September 24, 2007 @ 10:56 am

10. tim – i thought the phoenix new times did its best work when both you and david holthouse were still on staff... every wednesday i'd look forward to seeing your photos and reading his stories. i was pleasantly surprised to see you turn up here on this blog.

Comment by mannydiller — September 24, 2007 @ 1:08 pm

11. I would have thought that very few photographers find their subject through moody introspection. Working alone maybe, but moody? introspected? I think it requires the absolute opposite of those things.

is introspected a word?

Comment by Amy — September 24, 2007 @ 5:10 pm

12. Mark Tucker Says:

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Alec Soth writes:

"Perhaps because he is removed from academia, Archibald spoke to the class with a rare mix of honesty and enthusiasm."

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Mark- I think that Alec suspected I was "high", and was searching for a legitimate explanation for what he perceived as honesty and enthusiasm. Just a guess, though.

I Think he means since you actually make a living taking pictures, rather than teaching you are free to say what you want without having to follow the party line, and that to people in the academic photo world is enlightening. Then again maybe you where high.

Comment by doug mcgoldrick — September 24, 2007 @ 7:28 pm

13. Thanks for posting the reference to assignment photography, specified by you as editorial, but should also include corporate and advertising work.

If approached judiciously one can very well inform the other through techniques used, situations observed and people one meets.

For me the two are intertwined and allow me to accept assignments based on the fact that commercial buyers of photography see my personal work, where seasoned eyes are able to apply my vision to their needs.

Look no further than Penn, Avedon, Watson (add your own list here).
See PDN (9/07) to see Shore, Hido, Mermelstein and their dual-track careers.

Comment by Max Hirshfeld — September 27, 2007 @ 10:18 am