

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

November 6, 2006

Stephen DiRado

Filed under: [artists](#), [interviews](#), [the sentence](#) — alecsothblog @ 8:56 pm



Lights Out, Dinner Table Series, Chilmark MA, July 7, 1998 ©Stephen DiRado

Until last week I wasn't familiar with Stephen DiRado. A couple of folks had mentioned his name in regards to the discussion of [underrated photographers](#). I looked up [his website](#) and was bowled over. While I don't claim to have an encyclopedic knowledge of the medium, it is inconceivable that work of this quality and consistency hadn't penetrated my consciousness sooner. Had I just spaced out or is Stephen DiRado the most underrated photographer in America? Within fifteen minutes of seeing his website I emailed Stephen in hopes of answering this and other questions regarding his remarkable work. Stephen responded with the same generosity of spirit that you can see in his pictures.

**Alec Soth:** My first question is about this issue of being underrated. Do you see yourself, your work, as being underappreciated in art and photographic circles?

**Stephen DiRado:** In my twenties I had the good fortune to show in a number of New England museums and galleries. People in the business of art appreciated my work, added with a few museum acquisitions, all helped

gain me access to start new projects. Over the years however my primary concern has been the making of work rather than the marketing of it; this partially due to the manner in which it has evolved into very long term, ongoing, series, and partially due to my kind of obsessive commitment to my practice. From one perspective, I'd acknowledge having fallen off the circuit of what might be described in curatorial terms as "successful". Thanks however to a few loyal collectors, as well as support from grants and fellowships, and my income from teaching, I have been able to continue producing new work without the constant chasing of gallery shows. In short I have been protective of my work and show infrequently. I will however be having a forthcoming exhibition of my [JUMP](#) series this winter at the [DeCordova Museum](#). A project 6 years in the making that I feel with confidence is finished and ready for prime time.

**Alec Soth:** I'm wondering how much you think about the audience for your work. Is your audience yourself, your friends, Worcester, New England? How much do you care about having a larger audience?

**Stephen DiRado:** For the longest time I felt I was making photos that were accessible for just about any audience; pride myself that they work on many levels, and yes nation wide. There is something for my art historian friends, and something for my neighbor to identify. Today I'm not sure about that, I'm not sure about anything other than there is this obsession to keep making the photos, and along the way ask myself less questions before making the photo. In other words I'm not caring much about any audience, now I'm making photos for me.

**Alec Soth:** I'd like to know more about your obsessive practice.

**Stephen DiRado:** I am so happy when photographing. Making art is like piecing together an endless puzzle. The fun is always getting there. My wife, day one (30 years ago) understood that my projects are my love affairs. ...My wife is very special and an angel to understand.

**Alec Soth:** The [portrait](#) on your website shows you with a group of students. I'm guessing that your role as a teacher is a large part of your identity. Can you talk about how teaching has shaped your development as an artist?

**Stephen DiRado:** I love my students. They keep my practice honest and in many ways they are my teacher. I'm also of proud the fact that they enjoy my practice without finding the need to imitate it. I truly feel if the day comes that I stopped making photographs, I in turn have no business teaching.

**Alec Soth:** In thinking about different approaches to photography, I often create dichotomies (with grayscales). For example, I think there are 'book photographers' and 'wall photographers.' While most photographers function in both realms, they have a tendency toward one approach or the other. Where does your approach fall on this spectrum?

**Stephen DiRado:** I'm very much in agreement with the notion of functioning in both zones. For most of my career I would have to say that I identify myself as a 'wall photographer': sticking firmly to the gallery wall as my primary point of contact with the viewer. Since the advent of digital imaging and (stable) printers, despite a continuing and resolute adherence to the 8 x10, silver gelatin, B&W tradition, I have become very interested in small run artists books. These started out simply as a way of explaining my practice to possible portrait subjects; but have now developed into more formal artist's books which I produce in limited editions and pass onto my collectors. Or in the case of one specific project, [Jacob's House](#), Photographs 1987-1994, I made a limited edition of 250 books, hand bound. It is photo essay in honor of a deceased friend and primitive artist Jacob Knight. The book is broken down into 4 sections; Portraits of Jacob, images of his yard and house, and finally my still lifes using many items he collected throughout his tenure at this house. This was a love ode to a dear friend and I will never take on such a labor intense project again.

**Alec Soth:** Another dichotomy I use is 'travel photographers' vs. 'home photographers.' Clearly your work falls into the latter category. Worcester Magazine said, ""If you had to name only one photographer synonymous with Worcester, it would have to be Stephen DiRado." Did you know early on that you were a 'home photographer?' What is your feeling about this distinction?

**Stephen DiRado:** This is a complex question in my case and not sure I can make a distinction. It is impossible for me to make travel photos. I know, I tried and miserably failed. I come to realize throughout the years that if I'm not part of something then I have no business photographing it. I use my camera as a conduit to connect; to a community, a location or an idea. That can be said for my dual residency on Martha's Vineyard and Worcester, frequent trips to see my father in a nursing home, and wherever dinners are shared with my community.

**Alec Soth:** There has been a good deal of discussion on my blog about dealing with the oft-conflicting commitments of photography and family. While I think travel photography exacerbates the problem, it is certainly not limited to travel photographers. Can you tell me a little about your family and how you've dealt with this issue?

**Stephen DiRado:** My family and wife do not know of a time in our history where my camera is not present. Because I work very quietly with the 8x10 and I'm somewhat invisible. I rarely set up shots but instead pause activities ever so briefly to make the photograph. For years I made photos at dinners at the beginning of the meal. Not a good thing, even a slight pause allowed foods to get cold. So now all my photos are made during and after the main course of a dinner. A long term subject and friend said once, "A dinner without participating in a DiRado photo, is a meal not quite complete. The presence of the camera, DiRado focusing under the cloth, a slight motion to direct a subject to the right, or maybe to the left, DiRado rearranging items on the table, film in, slide out, flashbulbs exploding; all affirm another dinner shared by all. "

In the sad case of my father, residing in an Alzheimer's unit at a [nursing home](#), the camera is the last connection between the two of us. He recognizes the camera and poses for it. But only on good days.

**Alec Soth:** As a medium, photography is very limited. Because it is not time-based like literature or film, it is not good at explaining ideas or telling stories. The strength of photography seems to be its ability to be either scientifically precise or lyrically evocative. This is another dichotomy with yet another spectrum. Documentary work, for example, falls on the scientific side while Pictorialism would suggest a more lyrical approach. Part of the appeal of your work seems to be the seamless mixture of both sensibilities. I'm wondering where you see your work on the spectrum between precise documentation and romantic evocation.

**Stephen DiRado:** To this day elements of my work undoubtedly document the world around me: it's not possible for example for me to direct the position of the celestial bodies I photograph, despite my decision to photograph them as they pass over the region in which I live. It is true that [Bell Pond](#) and [Mall](#) are comfortably within the definition of the documentary; portraits, capturing primarily the youth in the 1980s in a Central New England city. [JUMP](#), was designed day one to be about the appearance of an individual's body (poised or in motion) and expression (void of vanity) during the millisecond before or during a jump off of a bridge into the waters below. Not a documentation in the traditional sense but instead sort of a micro-document of a specific and repeating act.

A part of my narrative in all of my other series are time based. In the case of the [nursing home](#), you can follow my father's physical decline. My point of view; perspective, focus and choice of lighting are all emotionally charged elements reflecting my personal connections, or disconnections, towards my father throughout this time. [Beach People](#) are constructed in a similar fashion but of course resulting in less weighed imagery.

[Dinners](#), the most complex narratives, work on many levels. The cast of characters are my immediate family, my extended and academic family, and people I meet whose appearance interests me in one way or another. Without a doubt this work is time based; styles, foods, aging subjects, changing environments date each image. But that is their only point of contact with any notion of documentary. More than any other project I am playing the role as director. Not only do I watch and react to the events that unfold at each table setting, I'm a participant. If there is one decisive moment (or duration of time) that best expresses the gathering, I will stop all activities to make the photo. I mostly turn towards films, film noir specifically, for inspiration when it comes to lighting. The drama is the easy part, it simply needs to be contained with my frame.

**Alec Soth:** I have a theory that everyone will say one sentence about an artist. "He's the guy that photographs Weimaraners." "She was one of Crewdson's students at Yale." "She took disturbing pictures of her children." Etc. What do you think that one sentence is for you?

**Stephen DiRado:** Probably, "He's the guy who photographed people naked." I know, it is silly. But so many people seem preoccupied by the fact that hundreds and hundreds of people have posed naked for me throughout the years. I would love to be remembered for my dinner series. My hopes are they survive hundreds of years in a museum archive so people can look back at our culture and see how we lived, conversed and ate.

**Alec Soth:** No matter how many great pictures you take, you'll probably only be remembered for one or two. If you died tomorrow, which of your images do you think will be remembered?

**Stephen DiRado:** If you are from Worcester, without a doubt, it is the gallery poster image used for Bell Pond 1983; [three kids](#) posing ankle deep in water at dusk. New England wide, more likely the image on the poster for my show at Worcester Art Museum in 1986. It depicts a young woman putting on make up in a mall setting. Both are early works. But I guess first impressions are indelible. Personally, I don't think I've made that one decisive image as of yet. I can only hope.



Worcester Galleria, Venus, Mall Series, Worcester, MA 1986 ©Stephen DiRado

- see Venus at the Mall 19 years later [here](#)
- visit DiRado's website [here](#)

## 17 Comments

1. Alec,  
I've been following your blog now for a while, and following your photography since I first saw an article on you in Newsweek I believe when they published a review of "Sleeping by the Mississippi". How surprised was I when I saw that tonight you wrote about Stephen DiRado. I came across his website last year and was left with the same experience as you. Incredible images and I could not believe I did not know of him. Anyway, thank you sharing so much with us all.

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

2. [...] Via Alec Soth. Filed Under: Photos Tagged: No Tags \* \* \* [...]

*Pingback by [a.poretic » Blog Archive » Worcester](#) — November 6, 2006 @ [10:38 pm](#)*

3. Stephen DiRado's Camera is like that old single-bladed blender that sits on your counter all year long – waiting. Friends and family forget about it, it seems so natural to have it on the counter – even during breakfast. If we touch it, know one will show up; but if Stephen is mixing it becomes a Fiesta. Stephen's Images bring back honest memories of a personal Fiesta.

*Comment by [David Wilson Burnham](#) — November 7, 2006 @ [9:33 am](#)*

4. This stuff is amazing...goddamn the art world for letting this photographer go unnoticed for so long (esp. the Mall series) . He's like a working man's Winogrand.  
Thanks Alec for brining him to the forefront!

*Comment by [imgiordano](#) — November 7, 2006 @ [10:15 am](#)*

5. Alec, three cheers for your good taste– and generosity. The secret's out– this will hasten the day when DiRado's no longer under the radar.

(Hope you can handle that, Stephen!)

*Comment by [Tom Morrissey](#) — November 7, 2006 @ [10:32 am](#)*

6. Agree, Alex, fine job. But, Tom, knowing the modesty of my fellow faculty member, the radar will probably swing around and hit him in the head before he takes notice.

*Comment by [Frank Armstrong](#) — November 7, 2006 @ [11:43 am](#)*

7. All I can say is, "Wow!". DiRado's work is some of the most interesting work that I've seen in years.

*Comment by [Andy Frazer](#) — November 7, 2006 @ [11:59 am](#)*

8. I suppose it's not unexpected that the mall image sticks, but it seems to be so much thinner than his other stuff.

*Comment by [zbs](#) — November 7, 2006 @ [12:25 pm](#)*

9. I've been looking at DiRado's images for 12 years or so. The thing about them is so many of them seem simple but you keep thinking about them and going back to them. You end up reading them like a complex story with layers of information. On the "keepers," at least for me, I always find some sexual and/or psychological tension going on at some level in the relationships.

I go back and forth between the beach people and the dinners as to which is my favorite. Some years it is one and another year it is the other. This year Stephen was gelling with the beach people. And I like

that the projects are a part of his life, close to home, and ongoing. I feel very lucky to be able to have been able to see the flow over time and it has taught me a lot about making images.

*Comment by [Billie](#) — November 7, 2006 @ [12:42 pm](#)*

10. I guess I could learn to spell your name correctly, ALEC.....sorry about that.

*Comment by [Frank Armstrong](#) — November 7, 2006 @ [12:55 pm](#)*

11. I'm heartened by this.....it means there's a chance.

*Comment by [Don Simon](#) — November 7, 2006 @ [7:17 pm](#)*

12. gives me hope.....thanks!

*Comment by [Don Simon](#) — November 7, 2006 @ [7:24 pm](#)*

13. In my observation, being "discovered" (especially by commercial galleries) can be a mixed blessing, even a curse. At least two well-known UK artist photographers have described the awful pressure to make and show (and sell!) all new but half-baked work every two years, that previously they would have taken many years to make, review/reject, and finally prepare for exhibition.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries"(Shakespeare, Julius Caesar). Really? Well, it ain't necessarily so. How many times have you thought "Whatever happened to X?", only to discover they've returned to being happily creative in the "obscurity" of everyday life ...

*Comment by [Mike C.](#) — November 8, 2006 @ [4:19 am](#)*

14. Another great thing about Stephen is his willingness to help guide other people involved in the arts. I have enjoyed Stephen's work for many years. He is truly one of my photographic heroes.

*Comment by [Robert M Johnson](#) — November 8, 2006 @ [6:58 pm](#)*

15. Aside from being a driven, passionate photographer and artist I have to echo Robert Johnson's comment about Stephen's willingness to guide and share. He has helped me see and understand the path under my feet when I could not see it and the camera felt like so many changes. I always listen carefully to what he has to say.

As far as his work—he is one of those people who sees with a capital "S". I own several of his prints and have appeared in a few photographs. When I look at them I am always struck by the energy in those prints. Thank you Stephen for your fine work and Alec for shining a light on him.

*Comment by [Steve Williams](#) — November 10, 2006 @ [9:16 am](#)*

16. Just came across your blog and was pleasantly surprised by your admiration of Stephen Dirado being that I was a student of his at Clark University. The exposure to his images along with his welcoming attitude about his photographic process still resonates strongly in my subconscious. After learning about all the hot photographers during graduate school in NYC, I have also wondered why his photography never got the hype it deserved....thank you Alec, as I am also a fan of your work.

*Comment by [Michelle](#) — November 15, 2006 @ [5:00 pm](#)*

17. [...] As a side, check out this conversation with DiRadio that Alec shared on his blog back in November. Also, I just came across Frank's blog Pitchertakin'. Hoorah for blogging! [...]

*Pingback by [SHANE LAVALETTE / JOURNAL](#) » [Blog Archive](#) » [in\(habitations\): Frank Armstrong, Stephen DiRado, Laura Letinsky, Alec Soth](#) — May 20, 2007 @ 1:52 pm*