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Gary Gruber

American

Anyone could sit on a coffee shop patio for hours, taking pictures on their smart phone of passersby and call it street photography. But, for obvious reasons, that doesn't rise to the level of what Henri Cartier-Bresson pioneered as an art form.

Like the famed French documentarian, Gary Gruber possesses a keen ability to intuitively isolate moments — on film with a "real" camera — of strangers' daily lives. And, like Bresson's, his images rendered in black and white set them apart from what people typically "see" so as to focus attention on the most essential — and not necessarily the flashiest — moments in time. "You walk down the street and all of the sudden all these elements come together and unconsciously you raise the camera," Gary says. "Things happen when they're supposed to."

The concept of things happening when they are supposed to could explain what set Gary on the photography pathway. When he was just 6 years old on vacation with his parents and they were lunching with friends, he spent an afternoon taking photos from a hotel patio with their Rolleicord twin lens reflex camera. His father subsequently bought him a Canonet rangefinder camera, which he took with him to premed school at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pa. It was there that a friend whom he describes as a "very lively, buoyant spirit," spontaneously jumped on the hood of an E6 Jaguar and said, "Let's pretend I'm a fashion model and you're a photographer." Ultimately, Gary ended up in the journalism program at New York's Syracuse University.

Gary shot most of his street photography, from the mid-'60s to mid-'90s, on the East Coast and in Europe. Unfortunately, two years' worth of work no longer exists: He was living in Pennsylvania, where he grew up, when Hurricane Agnes struck in 1972. "I had all of my negatives and prints from 1967 through 1969 stored in the basement of our home, which was flooded," he recalls.

In recent years, Gary has turned his attention to series of images that, while still a mirror of ordinary life, have resulted in a considerably more studied approach. One of his recent subjects is a common sight in Southern California's Coachella Valley, where Gary lives: pool-cleaning hoses snaking across the surface of the water. "You watch them and see the way the

light reflects, the effect of wind and time of day, and it creates a harmony different from everything else you observe," he explains of his fascination with an object that others overlook.

Though Gary used a digital camera for the series of 150 pool-hose photos, he primarily shoots on film. His talents beyond photography include building motorcycles and cars, plumbing, and carpentry. "I have a machine shop in my garage," he says. "I fiddle with a lot of things. I have even designed jewelry for myself." And just as he spreads his ability to work with his hands to everything from fixing appliances to rebuilding engines, Gary says he doesn't like to "pigeonhole" himself with regard to photography. "The things I have been doing recently are very different from what's gone before," he says. "As you grow, you find new ways of relating to the people or things you photograph because of the way you have been affected by the life you have lived."

Artist Statement 2022

In my early years as a photographer, it was disconcerting to me that I could not both participate and observe life as it unfolded in front of my camera. I was coming of age with my friends and the notion of spontaneously enjoying oneself took a back seat to capturing the defining moment here and there so that those around me could revel in what they had missed because they had been too busy experiencing the events as they proceeded from minute to minute.

All this changed when I came to the Coachella Valley in the mid 70's. My first client (The Cliff Brown Agency) thrust me into the vortex of a cultural phenomenon I had not participated in before, and I recognized the significance of my part in this new (to me) segment of society immediately. I had been propelled directly into the world of the movers and shakers that had a direct influence over how the valley was developing.

What struck me immediately was the humility associated with the 'old' wealth I was submerged in. To a one, they were gracious individuals who never regarded me any differently than their friends and colleagues. I was treated with respect and dignity -- never was I considered the 'hired help'.

However, what I perceived was a surrealistic aspect to the events I was photographing -- an otherworldliness where the people and events I was recording took on a patina somewhere between unreality and hyper reality. All at once, I was both observer and participant – and the duality of my new role was both refreshing and invigorating.

Each time I snapped the shutter I saw a slice-of-life that had a comedic or satirical bent to it that defied the reality of that instant. My wife echoed my perceptions, so I realized that I was not coloring the event with my own prejudices. We both intensely enjoyed these moments as each image magically appeared in the tray of developer.

After several years I had enough of a portfolio of these surrealistic moments that I thought it best to try and have these images recognized. Galleries in New York City rejected them immediately – perhaps they were uncertain what they were looking at.

The director of the Palm Springs Art Museum went a step further. She disparaged my work as little more than 'photos you would see in the newspaper'. None of this discouraged me. We knew the images were powerful on multiple fronts – they chronicled the life and times of many of the wealthy patrons of the desert, and they opened a portal to moments in time that seemed to tell multiple intimate stories simultaneously.

The artist has an easier job – they must make something out of nothing. The photographer on the other hand has a much more difficult road to travel, for they must make something out of something.

Gary