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LENS

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

48 Years Up (and Down) at the Geographic

By DAVID ALAN HARVEY



“William Albert Allard: Five Decades,” showcasing the work of a pioneering contributor to National Geographic — 4.8 decades actually, but why quibble at this point? — is to open Thursday at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Manhattan. A retrospective monograph has also been published, written by Mr. Allard, under the same title. On this occasion, he was interviewed for Lens by David Alan Harvey, a Magnum photographer who worked with him at National Geographic. Their conversation has been condensed.

“I was forced to work all in color, which I didn’t like at first and then fell in love with,” Mr. Allard recalled early in his conversation with Mr. Harvey. “I had all that time to finger paint: ‘Here’s film. Go do something with it.’ One of the best things about working for that magazine was time to go out and do whatever it is you wanted to do.”

Q. Is “Five Decades” a compilation of your assignments at the Geographic?

A. Most come from Geographic assignments, but not all. I don’t think of them so much as assignments as I think of them as subjects.

Q. I always looked at an assignment from the National Geographic as the equivalent of a little mini-Guggenheim grant.

A. It’s a door opener: ‘Here’s money. Go to Sicily.’ Recently somebody asked me, ‘Do you have any fear when you start a project or an assignment?’ I said, ‘Yeah, I guess I do.’ It’s more subconscious than not, but I worry about doing it well enough for the people

who have let me into their lives. So many of those pictures were given to us because people allowed us into their space, accepted us.

Q. Did National Geographic give you that freedom? Or did you take it?

A. I never went out with, 'I have to have this, I have to have that.' I am very dependent on serendipity. They gave me the opportunity. I took the opportunity to go out and — in a very free manner — pursue the subject.

Q. But there must have been 15 other guys that had the same opportunity. You carved something out of a block of stone that was a little different than what the others did.

A. The core of it is that I went out for myself. I went out there to satisfy me. Because I felt if I can satisfy myself, the magazine is going to benefit. I made a lot of mistakes. But I wasn't afraid to fail. You can't be afraid to fail and grow and get better. You've got to be willing to risk.

Q. I say this with all due respect to National Geographic, but when you came there, Bill, it was people wearing red sweaters in photos pointing to Niagara Falls. It was travel-postcard photography. You made the magazine look different. The magazine did not really exist — in the way it does now — until you got there.

A. Well, I had the benefit of naïveté. I hadn't been anywhere. I hadn't done anything. I hadn't worked for anybody else. I came out of the university, married with four kids. I wanted to be a magazine photographer. I didn't realize you just don't start at a magazine.

Q. It was actually your work and Sam Abell's work that I saw when I was in college at the University of Missouri. At the time, Life and Look died. And there was seminar after seminar: 'Photojournalism is dead.' You turned National Geographic into a resource. And I tried to be your wing man.

National Geographic never got the recognition that we thought it should. Even when we were in the middle of it, we knew it wouldn't, because we weren't in New York, we were Americans and we were in color.

A. When the new photojournalism came out, it made us feel that those photographers must never look at Geographic. But did you lose any sleep over it? Did I? Not a wink. You can't worry about it. It's academic. Do the work. If it's good enough, it will last. Something that I *am* getting from this book is feedback from younger photographers that I didn't think were aware of the work, saying how much it meant to them. I feel immensely grateful for that.

Q. Some would say, how could you possibly be that creative? You're separated from your family. You got fired. I quit. So you and I both lived on the edge with the editors of National Geographic.

A. The difference being: you quit, but continued to work for them. I got fired and for three-and-a-half years, they didn't hire me.

Q. Yeah, but some people told me, ‘Harvey, you just fired yourself, because they’re not going to hire you again.’ Anyway, through all of this conflict, we ended our careers officially at National Geographic. I mean, we were still going to work for them, but you just retired.

A. No, I didn’t retire. They just cancelled my job. Jodi [Cobb] and I, we had our jobs eliminated, David. There’s a difference between that and retiring.

Q. But there are a lot of photographers, they come to the end of the line at National Geographic and they don’t ever want to set foot in the building again.

A. That’s something that has bothered me — photographers and writers.

Q. You know what I think the difference is? You and I played it completely differently. All those guys saluted the flag every time they came in the building. We bucked the system the whole time, one way or another, and somehow we stayed productive longer. I feel that I have a very positive relationship. You must also.

A. Oh, definitely. I just finished an assignment.

Q. Let’s just say we’ve both had unorthodox careers at the National Geographic. Peaks and valleys.

A. Peaks and valleys, that’s right. Like I’ve said in public: I’ve had ups and I’ve had downs with that magazine. My ups were — for the most part — more often and better than the downs. I think we both made some very good contributions to that place. And I hope it goes on forever, in whatever form.

