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the eye



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Still Life: An artist's attempt to capture a city in motion

By Nora Hirshman

Most New Yorkers are caught up in the city's constant buzz, but Christopher Thomas is obsessed with capturing its hidden tranquility. Thomas' photo collection New York Sleeps was released last fall and his exhibit was recently shown at the Steven Kasher Gallery. In an e-mail interview, Thomas describes his creative process.

How did you become interested in photography? Do you remember the first camera you used?

I have always been interested in photography since I won a little plastic camera as a child at a fair in our village. The first camera I really used was a Zeiss Ikon Contessamat. I studied photography at Berkshire High School ... I moved to Germany and had to support myself. That was when I started working for a father of a friend who was a photographer. He then inspired me to apply at a very good photography school in Germany and I immediately got accepted ... photography definitely is my way of expressing myself—I used to be sad that I wasn't a better musician but now I'm very happy that my media turned out to be photography.

You've worked in both the USA and Germany. Which country is more nurturing to artists?

These comparisons I cannot make because there are advantages in both countries, each different. Which country you prefer living in is a very personal taste and depends on many

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aspects such as individual wealth (when you don't have money you, for sure, are better off in Germany), political climate (I know Americans who were not very happy in the US during the Bush administration), profession, mentality and so on. In Europe you have a very dense cultural variety in a comparable small area, in the States you have, for example, fantastic landscapes. I personally am very happy to have the change, love both continents.

How did you come to photograph New York? Do you have an affinity for, or memories of it?

I love New York: its energy, denseness, variety. I had an apartment for several years in New York. I had finished a book about my hometown, Munich, and it became an exhibition in a museum when gallerists asked me about my next city portrait. I said I only had a couple of New York images and they wanted to see them ... I had no idea that there would be interest in a New York book since there are thousands existing already. As it seems, there is an interest since the book has sold out within the first months and won awards, too. My main interest was to present a view onto this lively city ... to have a quiet eye onto the city structure itself. This you can do either very early, at night, at very bad weather, or you take long exposures.

Why do you use the specific large-format camera which produces such seemingly worn or dated images? Does this camera only allow you to shoot in black and white, or is this by choice? Why did you shoot your photos during twilight, when the light is effectually changing?

I used this Linhof large format camera because it forces me to take my time. It is a slow working process, and I love the Polaroid black and white film. You can, of course, use other film like slide or color negative too or even attach digital backs. The main reason why I shot in twilight is the fact that there are least people. But I also love the light. Of course it changes fast and you have to adapt, but that makes it interesting, and with some experience you can cope with it.

How do you decide exactly how to execute a photo?

First of all you don't want the same image that has been taken a million times, so you look for another angle. And then very important to me is that you have some depth in the image, lines that draw you in. A graphic composition and clearness is important, too. Last but not least, you want it to be unusual, special, different so the person who looks at the image says something like, "I have passed this spot a million times but I have never seen it this way."

Do you work differently on assigned, commercial projects—such as those you've done for BMW—versus projects of your own choosing?

Yes, very differently—as if it was two different professions. At assigned jobs like car shoots, you have a big team and little time, and you are, as a photographer, only giving directions to everyone except the client and the agency who try to tell you what to do. At the free projects you have no team, no one who brings you coffee, you have to carry everything yourself, but you have all the time in the world and no one tells you what to do.

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What advice do you have for students who want to be professional photographers?

There is extremely strong competition like in every interesting profession. So if you decide to choose this profession, be extremely passionate about it, focused and enduring. Remember that success is 10% inspiration and 90% transpiration. Stay focused at your goal. Stay flexible. Techniques are changing fast, ways of vision underlie fashions which are important to know when working for clients. For assigned work, provide good service when working for other people. Try to understand your client, put yourself into his position. You have to love what you do from your deepest heart. Be true to yourself. Keep asking yourself from time to time if you are still on the track you want to be on.