Against the wall

Arthur Hynes

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Against the Wall
by
Arthur Hynes

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirement for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA PHOTOGRAPHY PROGRAM
SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ARTS AND SCIENCES
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
APRIL 25, 1986

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Charles Traub
Photographer
New York, New York
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Signature Arthur Hynes (z) Date 21 July 56
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BACKGROUND

Ever since I first began photographing, during the summer of 1967 in Bruges, Belgium, I have been drawn to people and the man-made environment. It was at the Saturday morning flea market in Bruges where I first became excited about taking pictures. I went every week to mingle with the people and photograph them. I shot candidly and the three images that stand out in my mind from that summer (see slides) caught a particular expression of the people that was the essence of my impression of them. Their gestures are strong and the space and environment around each one add to the impact which centers on the figure. It is very interesting to me that in some of those early photographs taken in Bruges were the seeds of some of the things that I have been working on ever since that time.

When I returned from Europe to attend college for the first time in the fall of 1967, I learned how to develop film and print. Gradually, over a period of years, I became more and more involved with photography. In the beginning I was excited about photographing anything and everything. However, I soon became less interested in nature and landscape subject matter and more interested in people and urban subject matter. In the man-made environment, I made images which were more satisfying to me and more closely related to my concerns than the images I made in nature. I was, and still am excited about everything concerning people - the way they look, think and live.

The first course I took that dealt with developing a personal approach to communicating through photography was with Paul Petricone at Imageworks in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Technique was secondary to image quality and we did not concern ourselves with trying to take pleasing pictures. In other words, we
moved beyond snapshots, in the amateur sense of the word, and began to get an understanding of the concept of photography as language. I remember Paul talking about Sunday morning - what is unique about it? Why is it different? He used Sunday morning as an example to try to get us to tune into the uniqueness of every moment and place. He said if you remain open and look and keep looking, something will pop out at you and you will know what you need to photograph.

At that time, I, along with most of the other people in that class, were excited about photographing many different things in all kinds of ways and had very little idea of what constituted a "body of work" or how to go about putting one together. As I drove across the United States and Canada to Vancouver, British Columbia the following summer, I took Paul's words to heart, trying to keep an open and receptive mind and do a lot of intense looking.

In a small town in Manitoba or Saskatchewan, I experienced something that changed my visual awareness and approach to photography. It was not what I saw that struck me, but how I felt as I walked through that town carrying my camera. I suddenly became aware of the edges of the frame and the relationship between the space and all the objects within the frame. I began to see the frame in the context of the surrounding space instead of as an isolated area. I had the experience of being an integral part of the place I was in, rather than an outside observer. I began relating to places on a gut emotional level and I began taking photographs when they felt right instead of when I thought they looked right. My instincts and feelings became the triggering mechanism, and objects, images and spaces developed into relationships that I had been unaware of before.
I returned from the West to attend a two week workshop with Nathan Lyons at the Visual Studies Workshop. Some of my notes from that class seemed particularly significant at the time and continue to have importance for me. I would like to include some of these notes.

"Childlikeness: reacting with the camera to a response before thinking it if is a good picture; reacting to your emotions as opposed to composing a good picture."

"Intersect what you photograph! Don't be removed from it!"

"What you do becomes at once a progression and a critique of your past."

That workshop made me think about photography in ways I never had before. I was influenced by Nathan's ideas on sequencing. I also learned that progress does not come from thinking about what to photograph. Photography is a visual medium and development and refinement only come from hard work, taking many, many photographs, and doing lots of looking - both at the photographs and at the world. I decided to work the next year on assembling a portfolio to apply to attend the Visual Studies Workshop full time.

The series I put together to apply was shot mainly in Boston and New York City while I was living in a small town in New Hampshire. I could not find what I wanted to photograph in the woods to I went to urban areas of New Hampshire and to Boston and New York City. I put together a series entitled the "Atomic" series. It had a lot to do with alienation. From the beginning, my photography was a form of therapy - dealing with my own loneliness and isolation by trying to show it in people and the world around me. Very few of my photographs in my
various portfolios have been happy or light-hearted. This is my so-called "serious" photography. I have been able to have a sense of humor with photography but I never considered that my "serious" work.

I have always put together my portfolios with a deadline for completion and with a good idea of the kinds of feelings and ideas I wanted to convey. Assembling a portfolio of photographs with no particular concept or project in mind ahead of time would be quite a different way of working. It would probably be a good way to help see new relationships by breaking down restrictions and preconceptions. One example of something produced this way is a photo assemblage I made called "Non-flammable Anhydrous Ammonia Color Test." Each step was spontaneous and transformed the piece into something different from what I had planned.

As I continued working, the concept of time and space began to have more and more meaning for me. Working into, through and around time and space is one of the important concerns in Nathan Lyons' teaching. I began seeing relationships in my work between the present and the past, literal space and mythic or imagined space, and seemingly unrelated people, objects and places. "How do you clarify a response?" became a significant question for me. My concerns began building and further refining responses, and considering context and juxtaposition.

My objective in this thesis was to culminate a body of photographs that I have been working on for about three years. I produced five groups of color photographs during this time which all dealt with a very direct approach to photographing people. Up to the point I began that work, I had become less and less interested in photographing people candidly. I began asking people's permission to take their picture and then directing them where to sit or stand.
Since that time, I have moved progressively closer to my subjects and approached them in a confrontational manner. I became obsessed with figures and then with heads to the exclusion of everything else. In this thesis I intended to carry this particular approach and format of photographing people to some kind of conclusion. In the process I hoped to clarify at least some of the questions and problems that I have raised with this work.

The first group of portraits I produced working in this manner were triptychs, each with three shots of one person's head in different positions. This was my first time working with color and with multiple image pieces. Most of the triptychs were symmetrical, with a frontal shot in the center, and a side shot of the head looking out from the center on each side. There were variations, but all of them were similar to that format. That first series was shot with a Polaroid SX-70 camera, and the triptychs were made from 5" X 5" copies of the SX-70's. The images are quite formal in approach. One of the issues I began dealing with was the subtleties and infinite variations in posing and directing people. I will talk more about that later.

The next series I put together was again composed of head triptychs but larger, sharper and more symmetrical than the first group. They were somewhat like police mug shots. During the summer of 1981, I put together a group of photos of couples and families shot mainly at Seabreeze Park. These portraits continued in the frontal, formal manner of the earlier series. I was becoming somewhat obsessed with confronting my subjects head-on, like a showdown. I wanted to eliminate all pretenses, facades and gimmicks that are often found in commercial portraiture and get down to bare essentials of the person being photographed. Detail was very important to me. I wanted to register every hair and pore and every wrinkle in their clothing. I was interested in people's flaws and oddities.
When the summer ended I began going every Saturday to the Rochester public market and once again photographing heads. This time I was working with single shots photographed with a 2 1/4 x 2 1/4 camera and making prints about 15" x 15" - larger than life. I was taking photos of the faces of ordinary looking people and enlarging them to a scale that lent a great importance to them. I was getting as close to the faces as the camera would permit in order to completely fill the frame with their faces.

An artist with whom I identified in this series was Chuck Close. He, of course, works on a much larger scale, literally turning faces into maps. That is what I wanted also. If I had been able to make the images much larger, still keeping them sharp and detailed, I would have. But my purpose and goal were different than Close's. He is primarily interested in the surface of the painting or photograph, and the topography of the face. The large scale turns the face literally into a relief map. On the other hand, I was interested in the person behind the face and increasing the presence of that person by increasing the scale.

In November, 1981, I showed my latest heads to my thesis group. The general response was, "They look just like Charles Traub's work." I knew all along there were obvious similarities - both were large, frontal, color heads - but I felt our approaches and what we were concerned with about the faces were different. One key difference is that Traub's heads were candid, taken before the people could pose, whereas mine were posed, with the people fully prepared to present themselves to the camera. The two groups have different objectives and attitudes and show different things about the subjects. I already knew the images were in a transitional stage and I had to take them to the next level. At that time, however, I did not know what that was. I just felt the format had to change.
Charles Traub at that time was already on my thesis board and I had met with him once. I had seen a large group of photographs of heads by him at the Visual Studies Workshop. I liked them a great deal and Nathan had recommended him to me. In our first meeting, he made some helpful suggestions about how to approach the thesis project.

**THESIS WORK**

Originally my thesis date was set for January 23, 1982. However, I soon realized that date was too early for me, so I moved the date back to April 24. At that point, all I knew was that my thesis would be concerned with heads and figures. Using that limited subject matter as the primary material, there are so many possible approaches and directions to go. I was starting to feel very restricted with the head photos. I had limited myself to filling every frame with a head. I needed to loosen up and include other material in the frame and even shoot other subject matter. For a long time I kept in the back of my head notions and ideas of ways to combine portraits with other images in multiple print pieces. I have long been interested in religious triptychs and the triptych format in particular. At that time I was still considering working with the triptychs for my thesis. I continued to experiment with different ways of combining portraits; various formats of presentation, juxtaposing portraits that clashed with each other in some way, and using portraits in combination with non-portraits.

I felt I needed to extend my portraits into another dimension through the use of multiples. I was fixated on the concept of the "extended portrait" because that is the direction I thought my portraits would take. Although I am facinated by the shifts that take place between photographs in multiple print
pieces, I finally realized that that was not the direction my work was taking. I was trying to force something that was not going to happen at that time. Accepting that fact, my work began to flow more easily.

One of the factors I had to confront in planning to shoot a series of portraits between January and March was the advent of winter. All summer and fall I had been photographing at the public market and various outdoor locations. Now I was forced to move indoors. The question was where to find the people that I wanted to photograph and then where to photograph them. I had never had any trouble finding sources of people and suitable backgrounds outdoors, but moving indoors presented a new set of problems.

One evening, while sitting in a neighborhood bar on Monroe Avenue with a friend, it occurred to me where to find people to photograph; in corner bars just like the one I was in! I could always find people in bars and there was certainly no limit on the number of bars available. It seemed the perfect choice. This being decided, the next question was how and where to pose people in the bars. I had for some time been interested in posing people in front of bright, colorful, patterned wallpaper. My interest was partly in exploring alternatives to traditional portraiture. With this in mind, I set out to work in neighborhood bars carrying my own backgrounds with me.

After getting permission from the bartender, I would set up my camera and light in an out of the way place in the bar, then choose a man or woman I wanted to photograph. If they agreed, I would bring them to the pre-arranged spot, set up a background of wallpaper which I selected for them, and take several photographs of them.
An interesting accident occurred while doing this. I wanted to have the entire face and the background in perfect focus. That was an important element in my conception of the project. However, with the very limited depth of field from shooting so close to the subjects with the amount of light I was using, I discovered I was not able to get everything from the tip of their nose to the background in focus. So I began to compensate for the insufficient light by flashing the strobe two or three times during each exposure. The slight distortion in the faces that resulted was not what I expected. Nevertheless, the effect fit in well with the impression I desired.

As I continued to work with this technique, I realized it was limiting. As a result, I began eyeing the interesting decor in the bars as possible backgrounds. The bar environment was a valuable resource at my disposal. More than providing an interesting backdrop for the portraits, it established a different context and supplied additional information to the portraits.

After much experimentation, I met with Charles Traub for the second time. I was unsure at that point if I should put more energy into supplying my own backgrounds or if I should concentrate on using the backgrounds I found. The approaches seemed in conflict with each other. Charles convinced me that the "found" backdrops had much more potential. He felt the photos of that type that I showed him were more interesting and effective than the ones using the patterns I supplied. I decided to abandon my first background idea and instead take advantage of the rich material in the bars. At first, I thought that the two types of backgrounds were too different to include in the same group. When I saw them all together at the end, however, I changed my mind. I feel that the two approaches nicely compliment each other.
In addition to the background shift in these two approaches, there was also a big change in scale and proximity to the subject. More significant was the inclusion of details of the environment in the latter group. This aspect took them out of the realm of studio backdrops and into a specific public place. The people were familiar with and comfortable in these environments. Most of the individuals I photographed were regular customers who generally spent a fair amount of time in their particular bar. I also photographed in people's homes.

The most important aspect of this group of photographs is not the places I photographed in or the "type" or social strata of the people, but my direct confrontational approach to dealing with these people and the interaction between them and objects, signs and patterns around them. I became interested in what happened when they were overpowered by the background and objects in the frame. I experienced the subjects as actually becoming subordinate to their surroundings. The result is similar when people blend into the background so well that they become camouflaged.

With all the work that has been done in the realm of portraiture in photography (and other mediums going back many centuries), there is still a tremendous amount to explore. It seems an infinite source of material. In the end, my thesis photographs are just a further exploration of that subject matter which contain seeds of future possibilities, rather than a culmination of past work.

As to my influences, in the area of portraiture I have been particularly impressed by the work of Diane Arbus, Emmet Gowin, Mike Disfarmer, Harry Callahan and Richard Avedon. Some other visual artists that have effected my visual awareness include Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, Joseph Beuys and John Wood.
When I began asking my friends to let me photograph them, I was making a significant shift in my perspective and the central concern of my photographs. Up to this point I had always shot candidly and spontaneously. My primary interest, as far as subject matter, was the urban environment with and without people. In the photographs I made then, people were only another element in a complex landscape. People had created the environments they inhabited, but I felt that most people had become just another object in a cold environment, and not even the most important object.

In deciding to pose people and concentrate on portraits, I was zeroing in on what all along had been my main concern. I was and am interested in revealing something about people and society. In the earliest "street photos", the main variable I was working with was the relationship between people and the environment. The portraits I began to make had no real environment in that sense, only a very plain or even blank background. At the same time I began taking portraits, I also began the use of multiple print format, specifically triptychs. In part I used this technique simply to show more of a person than one photograph is capable of showing.

One of the interesting aspects of this format for me is the immediate associations that triptych portraits have with religious triptychs and police mug shots. I played off both of these associations by the way I posed my subjects. I like to think that my head triptychs were somewhere between those two very different types of images. Although I believe they were actually much closer to mug shots. I have yet to develop the religious motif.
My approach to posing in those first portraits and ever since then, is to direct my sitters as little as possible. I rarely tell them to smile or not to smile or what to do with their hands. I only tell them where to look. In the single "head" shots I usually told people where to stand and to look at the camera. I wanted to let them pose themselves and I also wanted to keep an element of spontaneity in the portraits. When a photographer completely controls a sitter's pose, as in Irving Penn's work, as well as in all traditional portrait studios, he or she loses virtually all spontaneity. That type of heavy posing is concerned with presenting the sitter in the most flattering way, according to established, predetermined criteria, or fitting the sitter into a particular look or style. The results are often predictable and generic portraits.

Rather than showing the most flattering side of a person, I was interested in approaching the portraits in a different way. I chose locations and backdrops which actually competed for attention with the sitter. This concept is closely related to my approach in the earlier "street shots" in which people blend in with the background or environment or are overpowered by it and lose their individuality and importance. By shooting strong and unflattering backgrounds instead of the soft, muted backdrops which are used in traditional portrait studios, I was setting up an active interchange between the background and sitter.

My approach to photographing people is confrontational. I wish to confront the sitter head-on in the most direct way possible. All the people in my thesis photographs are standing or sitting square to the camera, and almost all are looking straight into the lense. I literally backed them into a corner or
against a wall. My intention with this approach is to confront viewers in the same way I confront the people I photograph. I want to challenge their expectations and preconceptions of what portraits should look like, which tend to be quite limited in most people. If viewers are startled and challenged by looking at my photographs, I consider it a good sign.

Most of my subjects were comfortable in their surroundings and willing to be photographed anywhere I chose. I usually told the people I approached that I was working on a school project photographing people and I would like to photograph them. Often they would accept without asking anything more. When someone did question me, what they usually asked was, "Why me?". My reply was usually something innocuous like, "You have an interesting face". I wanted to appear harmless and at the same time avoid answering lots of time consuming questions. People would sometimes approach me and ask to have their pictures taken, which I would always accept. However, I chose most of the people and my choice was very subjectively based on their appearance and manner. Sometimes I would choose people I thought would fit in well with a background I had selected. Other times I would choose a background for a person I had already selected.

On one hand, my technique of overpowering or camouflaging the subjects with the background emphasizes their lack of distinction. The relatively large scale of the photographs, however, adds importance and significance to their presence. This juxtaposition is one of the aspects of this work which I will continue to explore in future work.
When I first decided to shoot my thesis in bars and people's homes, I didn't know how I was going to light my subjects. I had worked very little with strobes and did not know how much light I would need or what the best arrangement would be without spending a great deal of money on professional strobe equipment. I needed a lighting set-up that would be light in weight, portable, easily maneuverable, and would give even light over an area up to approximately six feet by eight feet. Since a small umbrella was not suitable, I purchased a 42" wide umbrella. Upon testing it I found that my one Vivitar strobe did not give me enough light so I rigged up a second strobe next to the first. This set-up covered the size area I had hoped for and provided just enough light for my film with the aperture almost wide open. I had been using Kodacolor 100 ASA film for some time and I was very satisfied with it. I did not want to change to a faster film because of quality loss. Except for extremely contrasty scenes and low light, I always overexpose this film one stop for increased color saturation. I did this in shooting my thesis. When I discovered this technique, I was surprised to find that in this way at least, color negative film actually has more latitude than most black and white films.

The light from the umbrella was even but harsh since I had no fill light. Occasionally I used a large white board as a fill but the harsh light suited my purposes. I was not interested in flattering portraits and pleasing likenesses. My lighting unit was fairly compact and portable when folded up, and also easily maneuverable when set up. In most of the places I photographed space was tight and I needed to be able to move the light quickly, so maneuverability was important.
When I first started planning my thesis, I began looking for a medium format camera. I had been borrowing a friend's 2 1/4 x 2 1/4 Bronica and the 2 1/4" format was a good size for me. I wanted to be able to make prints 16" x 20" and still maintain great detail. For the way I photograph people, a 4 x 5 camera is too slow and awkward. I chose a 6 x 7 Pentax as a good compromise between a 35mm camera and a large format camera. I am happy with the quality I get from the negatives. Some of my thesis prints are 20" x 24" and there is no apparent loss of detail.

When I began making my final prints for the thesis show, I did not totally trust my eye for color balancing because I had not done a great deal of color printing. I sought help from Tim Callahan, a dye transfer printing instructor at R.I.T. with an excellent eye for color balance. With Tim's help, I soon discovered that it was just a matter of training my eyes. During the last two weeks of intensive printing, I was able to hit the correct filtration on the nose with one or two test. Color balance is especially critical when dealing with skin tone. There is a very small degree of latitude for interpretation. Even more difficult than that however, was making the different images match in color balance. Just two or three points of color shift can be very noticeable when large prints are hanging side by side on a gallery wall.
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