

Douglas R Gilbert Interview

Interviewer's note: *I have known Douglas and his family for over 40 years. While I am not a photographer, Douglas has taught me to appreciate and enjoy the finer points of his work and art. I also have some warm memories. When I lived with him and his family for 9 months before my own marriage, I would stand with him for hours in the dark room and watch him work his magic, usually with a Cubs game on in the background. Later I would sneak back and take the rejects out of the trash and put them in an old Ilford box that I still have. He doesn't know about this and I don't plan on telling him.*

The inspiration for this interview came when I heard him speak briefly, but elegantly at an exhibition of his Italian Light series at Wheaton College in 2012. As I listened to him, I realized there was probably no oral history of Douglas and his life as a photographer, so I made it my mission to get at least some of his story while I still could. —Brad Cathey

BC: How did you end up with a camera in your hand and what attracted you to it?

DG: I got my first camera when I was 4 years old, but I didn't know what I was doing. It was a Dick Tracy camera from a Cheerios cereal box that my grandmother got me. That was it. But what got me really interested was when I was in the 7th or 8th grade, I went to a school with 3 grades in one room—it was kind of a country school, and we would have these show-n-tells. And one kid had come to class who had made some photographic prints from materials that his uncle, who worked at Kodak in Rochester, New York, had sent him—like old out-of-date paper and chemicals for him to just mess with. Well, I was intrigued. We were friends so I asked him if I could see how that worked. So I went home with him that afternoon and he showed me what to do: exposing the paper, then dipping into the developer, then the stop bath, fixer, and finally washing it. Because I was interested, and because he had so much of it, he gave me a bunch of paper and chemicals that I took home that afternoon.

Well, I wasn't planning ahead very well, so I was looking around for something to put all these chemicals in once I mixed them up. I got some old cereal bowls from my mother and I took them into the basement at night, where it was rather dark. One of the first things I did was to hold up a live chicken against the paper while I turned the light on and off really quickly. I developed it and saw this shadow-gram of my hand holding a chicken and thought it was pretty amazing. (laughs)

I started making shadow grams of different things, but then I wanted to make some prints from negatives.

BC: But all this was without a camera, right?

DG: Yes. I did have a relatively inexpensive camera at the time, but I wasn't really doing anything with it. So, I bought a roll of film, shot it and developed it—he had shown me how to do that. I could only make contact sheets because I didn't have an enlarger. My dad was rather intrigued with all of this, but when I asked him about getting one he said I'd have to earn some money for one because they couldn't afford to buy me one. I ended up getting an old used Federal enlarger that would get really hot. I don't know how many negatives I buckled in the heat before I finally got a print made. However, I was learning how to make prints with this primitive equipment that I had cobbled together, and at that point I was really hooked.

Before I got the enlarger, my dad put a piece of plywood up against the stairway opening in our basement, with a little door, and that space under the stairs became my first darkroom. But it was too small for an enlarger, so when I got that, he built a small room with a door in the corner of the basement that was about 8 x 10 feet. So now I had room for my enlarger. He made a very simple wooden table against one wall that I put all my chemicals on. All the prints had to be washed under the faucet near the laundry in the basement, but I worked with that for 3 years, while I was in high school.

BC: So, it sounds like you started out on the technical side, learning how everything worked, but when did you become more interested in the camera itself and what you were photographing? When did it become art?

DG: Well, not right away. The shadow-grams became old after a rather short time and I wanted to do more than that and became interested in actually trying to make prints of images that I had taken. So, after my dad got the darkroom up and all of that was in place, I got film tanks and began to develop film.

I would take pictures of the neighbors, kids, Lake Michigan, interesting skies, and then I would come back and develop them, and look at them. It was that process of finding subjects, going out to take the pictures, returning, developing, looking at them, and thinking, “ah, that’s kind of interesting, but I think there’s more to be done there and I’d go back. That was the process of how I became critical of my own work. And that all happened quite quickly.

BC: So, you were in high school?

DG: No, I was still in the 8th grade, or 13 at that point. Then I went to junior high school, which had a darkroom that students could use, which was incredible to me. So, I learned some more of technical stuff and then began to photograph school events. Rather soon, I began approaching the local newspaper with results, if I liked them, and low and behold the newspaper, at least half the time, would buy my prints and publish them. So, I started covering sporting events, dances...whatever high school events were going on, and all the time trying to make them more interesting, looking for different angles, for example at sporting events where I would try different things (they didn’t always work). I continued to sell stuff, regularly, to the newspaper, so by the time I was in 10th grade, or high school, I was rather active in selling stuff to the newspaper.

BC: Were you the typical school photographer nerd?

DG: I suppose some people might have thought that, but I had lots of friends, athletes, even a few girls, but I never did much with that (laughs). Some of them were just curious and wanted to know “how do you do that?” So, they became friendly because they were curious and I guess realized I wasn’t a total nerd.

When I got to high school I began to work for the school newspaper and the yearbook which really kept me busy doing all kinds of stuff.

BC: So photography took up a large part of your extracurricular time and became a serious interest of yours?

DG: It did. I was also buying photography magazines, like Popular Photography, Modern Photography, which were the two major ones at that time, and studying the technical articles and learning new processing techniques, the different kinds of

papers I could use, and looking at the photographs. In those days most photography magazines would publish small portfolios of really great photographers, like Cartier Bresson. And that's where I was introduced to a whole new level of photography. At first I didn't understand it all, but I really got drawn into it.

BC: I'm still looking for that link between photography as a craft and as art. In high school did you have any formal art education?

DG: No, nothing. But I think in those days I was most concerned with getting the photographs to look good in terms of a print, just the quality of the print. It took me quite a while before I said to myself, "Okay, the prints are good enough, so how can I improve on the photograph, the making of them, and what I am looking for?" I don't think I made that much discovery in high school but I began to learn composition and become involved with more complicated images.

BC: Can you give me an example?

DG: Yes. We had a big rain storm one day and a lot of stuff was flooded at ground level. There was a construction crew that was laying a pipe that came up out of the lake and into the land, I'm not sure how far but it was a new one. And these guys were slogging around in mud and wrestling these big pipes. When I heard about this working going on, I immediately jumped on my bike and went down there and began to photograph them. I got intrigued with the formal quality of these guys with the pipes on their shoulders, big long flexible ones, and dragging them up a small hill. I could stand over to one side and see these pipes snaking down the street and over the edge of this little hill, and these guys working. I began to make the compositions around the pipe shapes.

BC: So, this might have been one of the first times you saw forms within the images, that were not just pipes? but I don't want to put words in your mouth.

DG: Yeah, I think that's right. I think that was true, and as I recall I did sell a whole series of those pictures to the newspaper and they ran them. I even sold one to the Grand Rapids newspaper. And I think it was because they were such interesting photographs.

BC: Would you say then, that was one of your first experiences with photography as an art form?

DG: Well, that's the one that stands out in my mind, but I may have been working at it with pieces of other things, but I don't remember. It was also around that time; in the summers between my sophomore and junior and senior year I began to photograph stage productions at a professional theatre in Saugatuck, Michigan. I went out there strictly on my own to shoot, and then showed someone later what I had done. Eventually the director saw the work and asked me if I would photograph some of their stage productions.

I set the camera up on tripod out in the audience with the whole stage [in the frame] and I then began to see how those forms could almost be choreographed across the image. The actors were really good and knew the places to stand and where the action would be centered—there was often nothing I had to tell them. There was just this beautiful tableau and it was the formal qualities that struck me as I saw it played out.

So, for two years I photographed all their productions. I was also asked to do portraits

of all the actors, which was another great experience in that I began using that formal knowledge to make each one of them different, saying something about that particular person. One of the pictures of the actors ended up winning a 2nd place award in national contest. (laughs) What can I say?!

BC: Was all this black & white and 35 mm?

DG: Yes, everything was black and white because I had to develop it, and I wanted control of the whole thing. But some of it was 4x5 and 2-1/4 square which I discovered when I was a sophomore; I think it was a Mamiyaaflex. I began to use a 4x5 when I was a junior, a used camera that someone had sold me. I used the 4x5 in the theatre a bit, but used the 2-1/4 to photograph girls, among other things, but mostly girls (laughs).

BC: When you were in high school and thinking about college, did you see photography has being part of your college career?

DG: Absolutely! In fact, my first choice, as I explored schools, was Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara. I almost made an application to go there, but I'm glad I didn't, as it turns out, because it would have been the kind of education that inhibited me and kept me from the direction I eventually went. I can't think what changed my mind, at the time—maybe it my older brother going to Michigan State. I used to go visit him there and really liked what I saw on campus, so I ended up making an application to Michigan State and that's where I ended up. I decided to major in journalism so I could do photo journalism and a combination of things: images and words. But that's all there was in those days, you couldn't major in photography anywhere, except maybe University of Missouri, and I didn't even know about them. I spent one term as a journalism major and then switched because I realized it was not helping me.

So, I switched to a liberal arts emphasis, which, at the time, was called Social Sciences Divisional, and I got a whole range of things that I could choose from.

BC: At this point had you any formal training in art or design?

DG: Nope. Eventually I began to take art courses at the school and that led, more or less, a minor in art when I graduated. But I only took 3 or 4 classes and everything else was projects I did with individual faculty members. In class I learned a little bit of formal stuff, but not much.

There was a fellow there who taught design who encouraged me to do some very simple exercises. For example, he told me to lay a piece of tracing paper over my prints, draw the outline of the frame and all the major forms, no details, just the major forms, and study that.

And that was the first time that anyone said to me that one way of learning this was not to look at the details, which in photography you are overwhelmed with, but just look at the shapes—which I found very helpful.

BC: As you think back on those experiences, do you think you had a natural proclivity or ability for composition? In other words, were you pleased with what you had done previously to a formal understanding, or was this making a difference?

DG: I was reasonably pleased, but I knew there was a lot more I needed to learn partly because of the photographers in books and magazines whose work I had been studying. But also because of a guy, Ron James, that I had become close to. He was

a grad student in psychology and an extremely good photographer; I mean he had formalism down like nobody I knew. He was very good! So, he took me under his wing. He was a hard teacher, but a great help. We remained friends for years afterwards. But he moved out to California and I lost track of him. I've tried to find him, but can't.

BC: Did you do all four years at Michigan State?

DG: Yes, and ended up with a degree in Social Sciences Divisional (laughs). And it was during that period that began to get myself into situations that were much more demanding in terms of my photography. For instance, when I was a freshman I was working for the *State News*, which was the campus newspaper, a daily paper, and I got an assignment to go to Lansing, the state capital, to photograph a conference the current governor was conducting, which worked out pretty well. Not long after that an election came up where George Romney was the candidate for governor. They sent me down to cover election night and I had to try to figure out how to make that interesting and not just like all the other guys running around with cameras.

BC: So, how old were you?

DG: Well, I was a sophomore, so 19, I guess. Anyway, I don't know how I pulled this off, but somehow I got into Romney's hotel room and I was with the family watching the returns come in. I remember George and his wife Lenore were in the room, but I don't remember any of the others. So, I did some photographs in the room, but they didn't turn out that well—they weren't very interesting. We went downstairs when it was apparent he was the winner, and I was right with him during all the hoopla. All of those photographs appeared in the newspaper. But in the doing of that, I learned that I had to make it interesting, and that it had to be done well. I paid attention to the formal elements and all of it started playing into a direction.

BC: Was that the first time you photographed someone famous, or notable? Or had you done that before?

DG: I had, but not on assignment, and I hadn't introduced myself to the people I was photographing. I had photographed Brenda Lee in performance—you probably don't even remember her. It was at a county fair and she was on this wooden stage and I was standing right there blasting away.

BC: But the Romney shoot was your first really intimate experience, exclusive, as it were. So, did the photojournalism you had done in high school and studied in college prepare you for what you were doing in that hotel room?

DG: Oh yeah! I photographed a fair number of personalities that came to Michigan State, usually on assignment for the newspaper and other events that got me on the "inside" of situations. And I really had to perform because that stuff had to be good.

At the end of my freshman year, I began to write to a guy who was from Holland, Michigan and on the staff of *Look Magazine*. I wanted to meet him because I wanted to be on the staff of *Look Magazine* (laughs). He didn't answer any for several months, but I just kept writing him telling him what I was doing and that I was very interested in photojournalism, blah, blah, blah. Eventually he answered me and told me he was coming to Holland with his family on vacation and suggested we get together then.

So, he came to town and got a hold of me and we spent quite a lot of time talking—we hit it off well. He looked at my work and encouraged me to make an application

to *Look Magazine* for the one internship in photography which was offered to college students each year. It would be a summer-long internship between my junior and senior years of college. So, I sent in my application—I think he was pushing for me as well—and I got it! The editors invited me to New York.

BC: What was his role at the magazine?

DG: He was a staff photographer and was there his whole career, just about.

BC: Why do you think they selected you?

DG: I think they liked what they saw! Because when I went in for interviews, they were extremely complimentary and said “We really like this and we want to have you here, to give you a chance to see what this is all about, and to offer you the opportunity to do all the photography you want.” That wasn’t for the magazine, but that meant while I was in New York that summer they wanted me to do all the photographing I could. They gave me more film that I could carry, and they processed it, made contact sheets and enlargements made for me. That was the arrangement they had with interns.

BC: So, you weren’t really working for them?

DG: Well, not at first. Formally, I was a “studio assistant.” We had a photography studio there which all the guys hated—nobody wanted to be there—and so it wasn’t used all that much. I got into doing photography for the magazine when one of the guys, who was an FSA photographer, one of my heroes, was assigned to do some lousy studio photographs of plates for the advertising department. And he just groaned whenever he got asked to do this kind of stuff. So we went into the studio and he said to me, “You know how to do this stuff, don’t you?” and I said “Sure!” (laughs) and he said “you do it” and he walked out. So, I did it! Got a big 4x5 out and did it all in color. They ended up loving it, they thought it was great. I did this a *couple* of times for photographers before it was found out that I was the guy actually doing the photographs. (The other guys put their name on it and turned it in). So, I was this “ghost photographer.” And when they found out it was me they said, “Well, we’ll let you do them all then.” So, I began to get these assignments in the studio. They had a column in every issue called *For Women Only* which had photographs of people using unusual items, so I was doing those photographs.

Also, that summer I had a friend and his family working in New York, who had a 4 year-old son. I asked him if he would take his son to the zoo and the merry-go-round in Central Park so I could tag along and take some photographs of him. If they were good I’d offer them to the magazine. So, we did and spent a whole day in Central Park. We got him a balloon, which is in the photographs, and on the merry-go-round. And *Look* loved it, they published it and paid me for it! It was called *Boy and Balloon*.

BC: So, what happened next?

DG: Another photographer was pulled off a story about Peter Sellers and to do another assignment. I was asked to finish the story. I was just naive enough to think, “sure!” (laughs). I liked him as the *Pink Panther*! “I’d be glad to do this.” So, I went with a writer and we spent the day with him, at home, with his little daughter, and had a great time. They ended up using 2 or 3 of them in the story, one was a whole page shot of Sellers.

BC: So, you were still an intern and publishing work in *Look Magazine*? They must

have been pleased. Did you have a mentor or someone watching out for you?

DG: Hmm, I don't think so, but that summer I met a guy named John Gossage who became a long-time friend. He had just dropped out from high school and he was a photographer—he was quite a photographer. And we just started hanging around together. I met him at the Village Camera Club which I went to once or twice to see what it was like. He was there one night, so afterwards we went out to one of those all night food-stands, had something to eat and talked for hours. The friendship took off from there. I was about 4 years older than him. After that summer he did a story for *Esquire Magazine* which was published—quite an amazing story. So between the two of us, we were running around Manhattan reeking havoc.

BC: Did your internship fall under the heading of “photojournalism”?

DG: Oh yeah, but it took me a few years to realize that the way I had approached it was photojournalism “plus” and it was the “plus” I couldn't quite figure out, but I knew that photojournalism, per se, was not enough. But I didn't know how to describe it, I didn't know what it was.

BC: When I think of the work of Cartier Bresson, there was a photojournalistic aspect to it. He was there to capture the moment, like the little boy coming around the corner with the bread, but it was art. Maybe that's what you're talking about?

DG: Yeah, it's that extra—what else is there? That's what I was chasing.

BC: You went back to Michigan State to finish out your senior year, but how did that summer end?

DG: Well, when I left *Look* I had an exit interview. They reiterated with me that I was a senior and going to graduate in the Spring (actually I was going to graduate in early, in March), and that I should come and see them before I graduated. That's all they said. And I said “alright.” So, I went back to Michigan and at Christmas time my friend from Holland, Philip Harrington, the photographer, invited me out to New York, so I stayed with them for a few days. I went into the office [at *Look*], had the interview, and they offered me a job. They said, “You start April 1st.”

BC: Did they pay you by the story, or was it a salary?

DG: It was a salary. It was a real staff position.

BC: When you were back at school for that final year, did you discover this “plus” you were chasing?

DG: I think I was always looking for it. An interesting, and kind of humorous side note: after I said “yes” to *Look* and got back to Michigan, I got a call from the *Life Magazine* office in Chicago from a guy that I had worked with. He wanted me to meet with them about working out of this part of the country for *Life*. And I said, “Really?!” (laughs) and told him what had happened a week before at *Look*.

It wouldn't have been the same kind of relationship, but I did do some work for *Life* later.

BC: Once you got to New York and *Look*, did they have any special kinds of assignments cut out for you?

DG: Well, not at first, I don't even remember what they were, but probably pretty

pedestrian stuff. I do remember one cute little story I did on some twins who were having their first piano recital in New Hampshire, so I photographed them in their pretty little dresses—a two-page fluff piece. And then I was sent to Lorton Prison in Virginia to photograph a priest who worked with the inmates, and who was also an expert on jazz and knew a lot of the jazz personalities in this country, personally. The title of the story was *Swinging Prison Priest!* (laughs) Anyway, that story won the New York Newspaper Guild award for Best Magazine Photography of the year for 1965.

I was just this kid, but I went to this big banquet at the end of the year with my editor and writer. Sitting next to me on one side was my wife Barbara and on the other side was Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick was a staff photographer for a very short time and was the youngest photographer ever hired at *Look*—just out of high school. But he didn't stay long; he had other interests, obviously. I later found out I was the *second* youngest ever hired at *Look*, so it was Kubrick and Gilbert (laughs).

I went to work in April and at the end of that month I went to the editors and proposed a story on Bob Dylan. And I told them that I thought he was going to be a very important figure in music, and though he wasn't very well known now he was going to be and really take off, and I think we should do this story on him. They said, "Okay, we'll let you know." They had their meeting where they decided on a lot of stories, and they came back and said, "Okay, we want you to do it."



They assigned a writer who arranged for me to meet with Dylan and the rest is history. I went to meet with him in Woodstock and spent about a week and a half, altogether. He came to New York and I photographed him in Greenwich Village and then up in Newport Rhode Island at the Newport Folk Music Festival. After the story was all laid out on boards at the *Look* office in New York, Dylan came in to look at the layout. I didn't know he was coming in, but as I was going in to the office, he was coming out with Joan Baez. I asked him if he was up looking at the story, and he said "Yeah." Then I asked him, "What did you think?" And in this sort of Dylanesque way, gave a non-committal grunt and that's all he said. Baez didn't say a word. It was bizarre.

BC: So, did the Dylan story set you up as a specialist?

DG: Well, that's not all I got, but I did have a string of musicians after that: the Loving Spoonfuls, Simon and Garfunkel, Petula Clark, Barbra Streisand, Janis Ian.

BC: How did you prepare for these famous people differently from, let's say, the twins at the piano recital?

DG: Well, I knew their work so it was a matter of taking my understanding into the situation. For example, I knew that Dylan was not fond of the press, so I told him verbally that I didn't want to interfere with him and that I wanted to be an

observer, just a fly on the wall—off stage stuff (there was a lot of on-stage stuff already), and he just said "Alright, that's cool."

BC: Did you discuss the shoots with the artists beforehand.

DG: Yeah, a little.

BC: Was there anything about your personality that helped you in those situations?

DG: Oh, I think so. Absolutely. I don't know what it was that connected Dylan and me but he trusted me pretty rapidly. There were people, later, who were surprised that I able to get as close as I did. I don't think I threatened him in any way and that he sensed my attitude was one of admiration and that I was just out to be an observer. I wasn't out to do him in or hurt him in any way.

BC: But as a photographer trying to get a story, do you have to be bold?

DG: At times, and I did once or twice with him. One time said something to me and I said "Okay" and backed off. I was bold in situations that were emotionally a little tense between him and someone else, and I was right there recording it and knowing that he could turn around at any moment and say, "Get out of here," but he never interrupted my photographing in those situations, ever.

BC: Did you have any bad experiences working with any of these people?

DG: Well not "bad." Simon and Garfunkel was an interesting case. We did the photographs, except for the concert pieces, in Art Garfunkel's apartment. And Paul, who was comparatively short in stature, wanted to make it clear that he was the king pin, like he had a chip on his shoulder. It was so much in the air. He even wore a cape that I photographed him in. And Art was just laid back, a cool guy, and he had no

problems with anything. Later I would see Art on the street, because he lived not far from the magazine offices. I'd be walking to work and he'd be walking to the subway to Columbia, where he was working on a Ph.D., so we'd walk together and just chat, like buddies. And this went on for weeks. He was just a really nice guy.

BC: I'd like to try and get back to this evolution from *Look* to your work as an art photographer, leaving *Look* and heading to Wheaton, for instance. What happened?

DG: I must have a project gene, because even at *Look* I was always wondering off on my own to work on projects that I

was interested in. The first one I remember was Coney Island. John Gossage and I would go out there and photograph whatever was out there. For me it was a fantastic, crazy place like I'd never seen before. I made a few trips out there but then I became more interested in something that was close enough for me to really sink my teeth into which was the financial district in New York. I wasn't even at *Look* for a year when I decided to go down there and just walk the streets and see what I could find. What fascinated me at first was the incredible space, the narrow streets, but the high buildings that would open up into little parks at the end of the Island in Battery Park. And then seeing the people in the space, moving around, working there everyday, but then leaving it on the weekends—it became a ghost town. You literally could hear sounds happening three blocks away because there was nothing going on. And this intrigued



me, so I began to go down there starting in February, very cold days, and just walked the streets and watched the people to see who was there, what they were doing, and how they operated within this huge space.

That led to about seven months of photographing, or until I felt I began repeating myself.

BC: Where you *looking* for a story?

DG: No, I wasn't. And I realized later that this was not photojournalism—that's not how you worked. This was just an open-ended experiment.

BC: So this might have been one of your first forays into photography as art.

DG: Yeah, I think it was. And then the next project, which lasted much longer, like 3 years, on my own time, was photographing Central Park.

BC: What were you photographing?

DG: At first it was the space again—this park in the middle of the New York environment, and I was intrigued by how the people moved through the space and how they used it, what they did there. Even after I left *Look*, and was in seminary, I would go up to the park, often, and just wander through it, photographing what I saw. It was the space, in all kinds of weather, how it changed depending on the season of the year.

BC: Did you ever feel like you were inhibited because you were only doing still photography, and not movies?

DG: No, I never felt that. It was a project, though, that I was never able to get my arms around and come up with a set of photographs [to represent the work]. It seemed so big, so varied, so rambling. It was everything from isolated figures moving through the landscape in the Winter in this huge open space surrounded by these huge buildings, to

photographing protests of the Vietnam War, celebrations of Earth Day in the Spring, in that space. Just this wild variety of human activity in this place.

BC: You mentioned seminary. You were at *Look*, but what happened?

DG: I had done some stories, beginning with the one on Dylan where the response of the editors showed me that they missed completely the dynamics of what was going on in the photographs. And they would take the material and push it, squeeze it, and reshape it into something which I didn't recognize. One of the things that I heard and realized doing the Dylan story—a driving force that could kill the whole story—was advertising. The fear of the magazine editors was that if you put his guy and these grubby people in the magazine you could drive some advertisers away. That was a real eye-opener for me and it festered under the surface all the time I remained at *Look*. And there were some other things I worked on where I realized that they were not going to end up being what I had seen and experienced when it was published.

There came a point in the summer of '66 where it came to a head



and I said to myself, “I’ve got to get out of here, I can’t do this anymore, it’s killing me.” At the same time I was really drawn to studying theology and getting into that kind of work. I don’t know if it was an antidote, or what role that played for me.

We went to England in June to visit friends over there. The husband was preparing for the priesthood in the Anglican Church. There was a priest in the church where he was serving that he really admired, so I arranged to meet with this priest to talk about what I was beginning to see as a whole new direction of me. We spent a couple of hours with me in his study. I told him what I was experiencing and this push in a particular direction. He didn’t tell me, “Yeah, that’s what you have to do” but he encouraged me to keep that open.

BC: Where was your camera all this time?

DG: Well, I was still doing a lot of photography of the landscape, but not in a photojournalistic way at all. It was an outlet for that which I was chasing in my work at *Look*, but I didn’t want to keep working as a photojournalist, but to understand the theology in all of that. What did all that have to do with my faith? How was my work and art connected to my faith?

BC: Okay, you just said “art.” Where did you begin that transition?

DG: I’m using the term “art” in the way I understand it now because I don’t know how much of that was even in my vocabulary at the time. However, I came to realize later that that’s what I was wrestling with, but I didn’t know that at the time. In terms of the faith issue, at that point, I was being driven by my desire to be a minister in a church. I’d had it with this whole business of photography. I wanted out, I wanted something else, and I wanted something that I saw as being more important.

So, when we left England, I was still didn’t know what I wanted to do, but was still very much drawn to study theology and to discover where I fit into all that, if I did. When we returned, I walked into the *Look* offices and told them I was resigning. They said “What?!” I told them I wanted to go to seminary and study more about my faith. And interestingly enough, one of the editors remembered someone else who worked there had done that, and said he really admired that.

BC: So, you probably just walked away from one of the best jobs in photography?

DG: Well, yeah, I did. But it also was seeing and recognizing that a lot of us were in denial about: the picture magazines were living on borrowed time. And this was being talked about more and more in those days—this was late 1966. They were still in business and making money, but nobody knew for how long.

BC: So, you probably were getting out at a good time?

DG: Yes, in retrospect, but I wasn’t looking at it that way at the time. Anyway, a resigned with a few weeks notice and started seminary that Fall.

BC: How long were you in seminary?

DG: Three years, total. 2 years full-time, 1 year part-time. But I knew at the end of the first semester I was not going to be ordained, that’s not where I was going. It really hit me that I was not to be in the church in that capacity, but I really loved the study. I was working at a Baptist church as my field placement that year and that was quite an experience. I was assigned to work with the young adults group, but as I was working

there I realized the pastor was gay, and at least half of the people in the young adult's group were unstable, thrashing around, trying to find out where they were going. At the end of that year I asked the field placement people not to put me in another church like that. I didn't want to do that.

That was about the time that the Reverend Moon came to Manhattan, and one of the kids, one of the least stable ones, really got drawn in and talked us all into going with her to one of the meetings as a group and just listening. It was pretty crazy.

BC: Again, where was your camera during all this?

DG: It was working occasionally. I did an assignment for *Glamour Magazine* on Katherine Hepburn's niece, Katherine Houghton, who was an actress. They had me photograph her in Hepburn's garden, which was across the street from where we were living in seminary housing. Literally across the street, in a beautiful part of Manhattan. And then I got an assignment or two from *Life Magazine*, one was photographing Janis Ian.

My next real job was working the magazine of the United Church of Christ to meet my intern requirement for seminary, and that's when I got asked to do the Dietrich Bonhoeffer book. The editor of that magazine had written a book on Bonhoeffer and he asked me if I would illustrate it, so I said "Sure, why not." So, when I was in my second year of seminary, I went off to Europe for 10 weeks. He had helped arrange for me to work with the World Council of Churches to photograph their big international conference. That year it was in Sweden, so that got me over there. So, the Council and the magazine shared my expenses. *Look* also assigned me a story in Stockholm. So that summer I photographed in Eastern and Western Europe.

At the end of 1968, I still wanted to continue working in theological studies, but knew I wasn't going to do an M. Div., even though I in was in line for that. It just wasn't what I was called to do, but I did want to keep studying some things I hadn't had a chance to. So, that took us into 1969 when we got interested in moving out of New York.

At the end of the time I was working for the World Council of Churches that summer in Europe, they offered me the opportunity to interview and maybe join their staff as a photographer in the World Council and live in Geneva, Switzerland. I thought about it, but really didn't want to get involved with them. It seemed to be a rather rickety proposition and didn't know how secure it was, so ultimately I didn't want to do it.

So, Barbara and I looked at a map and said, "Well, we can't go to Geneva Switzerland, so why don't we go to Geneva, Illinois?" (laughs) So, we went to Illinois to check it out.

BC: But you didn't have a job!

DG: No! No! Barbara was working for IBM in New York and thought she might be able to transfer to Chicago, but I didn't. We found Geneva was too expensive for us so we ended up in St. Charles, and thought, "Yeah, this is good. It's not Geneva, but it's right on the border." (laughs) So, we packed it up headed to St. Charles.

I did get a contract to illustrate some books for Follett Publishing, but we began to explore Wheaton College. We didn't really know anybody there, except Harold Best in the Music department, so we contacted him and told him I was interested in teaching photography. He got me together with the head of the Art department and some others. Not long after, they offered me an Artist-in-Residence position in order to teach

there full-time while they worked on opening up a more permanent arrangement.

BC: When were you at IIT (Illinois Institute of Technology)?

DG: In order to teach at Wheaton, I needed an advanced degree so I started there in 1970 and studied there for 2 years and got my degree (Masters) in '72. And while I was there I was also teaching at Wheaton and Columbia College in Chicago, a whole other type of student—fascinating people—taxi drivers, all kinds of people. Those were my students. And I met some really wonderful people that I'm still friends with. But I was finally offered as position as an Assistant Professor of Art at Wheaton, starting in the Fall of 1972.

BC: Besides all this teaching and schooling, you will still doing projects, right? What was the first one after you arrived in the Midwest?

DG: It was a project for my Master's thesis which was taking a section of a country road in Kane County, a 2 or 3 mile stretch and photographing what happened along it, the space, the structures, the seasons, over a period of 4 or 5 months.

BC: I'm trying to get at the point where you took on more of your personal projects like you had been doing in New York.



DG: The first project that wasn't a school project, was photographing the new housing that was springing up in the prairie West of Chicago, loosely from Glen Ellyn to Bloomingdale on the North and then westward. But more concentrated around Wheaton and then West. It was that sense of the land giving away to housing, that farmland was disappearing and seeing the housing advancing across those fields. But then getting in amongst that housing and showing what happened to that wide-open prairie space. What did it look like or feel like when you were in it? And while doing that, I discovered the Intersections. That

came a bit later, but as I was going over contact sheets there were some interesting things that kept turning up, like the land way the land was divided or chopped up by intersections of streets, and what the land looked like around those intersections. And at first, there was largely nothing there but a street sign that indicated an intersection. And then the houses began to appear.

BC: So, the project evolved, or was more organic?

DG: What happened, and continues to happen, is that one thing leads to another. They kind of flow into one another. *The Housing*, the *Intersections*, and then the *Suburban Landscapes*, and the *American Wilderness*, and then *Suburban Trees*.

BC: When did you work on the Gardens Project?

DG: That was something I started in Massachusetts, but the last thing I worked on in Illinois was the American Wilderness. Once I got to Newburyport, Massachusetts, I did a lot of wandering of the streets with my camera with me, photographing what caught my attention. I was fascinated with the architecture and the newness to me of it all.

I was just exploring what was all around me and then looking at the contacts for any trends, recurring images, and any indications of a direction I wanted to go. But when you move to a new location it usually takes a while because you're trying to figure it all out.

BC: What is that thing inside you that makes you different than the average person, and wants to wander the streets taking photographs?

DG: Interestingly, I think one of the strongest draws from me has been the light. What would really grab me, and I wasn't able to put my finger on it right away, it was the light. **In the light, forms come alive.** And would also affect the landscape, it would give it a depth, and a different look—if it's overcast it looks one way, and you can



look at it from any angle and it looks the same, in a way, because the light is not making any differentiations. In sunlight, things change and I've always been fascinated by that. And I came to realize that more and more after we got to Newburyport, that it was the light that keep drawing me. If it was an overcast day, I wouldn't go out and wander around with my camera, and I recognized I just wasn't interested.

BC: About the time of day?

DG: Well, early morning and later afternoon was the time to be out. It's the most interesting. Overhead lighting does nothing for most subjects, almost nothing.

BC: Talk about the limitations of the film itself when photographing light.

DG: Well, that's always a problem, and over time I learned what I could photograph and the detail I could retain in both shadow and highlight and when I couldn't. One of the ways of doing that is to stick with one film and one developer so you really learn how the two work together and interact. Initially you use different films and developers because you're looking for what you want to see in your prints, the

qualities you want to see. When you find that, you don't keep changing horses, you keep learning more and more how to make that combination work for you.

BC: Where do you make those adjustments? When you take the photograph? develop the film? or make the print?

DG: Yeah! (laughs) All of that. But it really begins with the decision to take the photograph or not. Looking at the light and the range of values that light or situation has. For example, is it possible to get the detail in the shadow of that scene and the highlights as well? Maybe not. As I've worked with print makers, after I had to stop making them myself, I had to try and find printers who were able to get out of it what I saw and knew was possible.

BC: Is it true that each step you take in the process away from the actual scene, you lose a little more?

DG: Yes, you do, but you try and minimize what you lose, and keep it as close to what you originally saw as possible. The reason I take it in the first place is that I liked what I saw, the tonalities let's say, or what I saw in the overall effect of the lighting.

BC: So, as you learn a location, what are you looking for? Just the light?



DG: It has been that in the last number of years! It's the light because the light is the subject. So whatever the light is illuminating is in a way secondary. But if it's not seen well, and realized well in the image, it is no good as a photograph. You've got to have a good supporting cast because without it it's one dimensional.

BC: Talk about the *Italian Light* series. There was not only light, but some wonderful textures.

DG: Right, the textures add quality to the overall photograph, but they are realized by the action of the light. In a way I've been working towards more complexity on purpose. I mean the complexity of the interrelationship of the forms and the effect they had on the feeling of the photograph. It's not just a picture of a strip of sunlight on the wall, which is how I first began to do it in Italy back in '99. I was so overwhelmed by all the light around me I was photographing everything, stuff that would never see the light of day in my work. But I had to do it, I had to go through it, I had to see it, I had to know why it wasn't enough. And there was a lot of stuff that wasn't enough (laughs). But as I honed in on what I wanted, the level of interplay of the light, and shadow and form, and all that I was after and wanted that would

leave mystery, yes, ultimately leave a sense of mystery. When that mystery is in there, that's it.

BC: What do mean by mystery, exactly?

DG: It's wanting the viewer to ask "What else is going on here? I know something else is going on here, but I don't know what it is." Hopefully, the mystery comes out of the whole where everything in the picture is working towards evoking that sense of mystery.

BC: So, when you find that scene that meets those requirements, and you pull the camera up and peer through the viewer, what is the mental and visual process you go through to get a successful picture?

DG: It becomes a question of how much needs to be in this photograph to have it do what I sense it should be doing. Where's the cutoff? Where's the top? the left? the right? how close do I need to be? what is excessive that I'm leaving in the photo that will only lead to confusion and not make clear what I am doing? Or am I so close that it's not giving enough information and it becomes a frustration sort of image? The initial thing is seeing the situation, the light, the forms, the textures that are there. But the next question is, "Yeah I see that, but how do I get across what my sense of that is?" It's not by showing everything, which a lot of photographers will do. They love those wide angle lenses; you don't want to miss anything (laughs) so you show it all but boring because there's no point to it. So you're moving in and cutting out what isn't needed.

BC: How far away is this approach from your origins as a photojournalist?

DG: Ah, quite a ways. [In photojournalism] you always have to figure how near you should be if you're doing any kind of an event. There was one photographer who was very famous for the quote, "If your photographs aren't good, you're not close enough." That's not always the case! If you look at a lot of news photographs, they really are tight, and cropped, and there's not much more there than the basic information. And occasionally, when you see that beautiful, whole-frame image with space and light, you

realize how much we're accustomed to seeing everything cropped to pieces.

BC: Speaking of cropping, I know you don't do it other than in the frame when you click the shutter. Where did that come from?

DG: Cartier-Bresson. Although he didn't always adhere to that, but he talked about the importance of the edges and filling the frame with only what was necessary and nothing more. He would crop every once in a while, but the number of times was so small it's not worth talking about. Every once in a while I might look at a negative of mine and think, "if I'd only had moved this way or that way it would have been really perfect." But I didn't for some reason, so if I only would take this edge off—I find that if I start doing that— then I have to take some more off there to keep the format and I really get this horrid sickening feeling—I really do! It's physical. I say, "No! You blew it. Better luck next time, buddy." (laughs) It's a responsibility to my vision, and if I get sloppy my vision is going to get sloppy.

BC: How many other photographers that you know of that shoot like that? For instance, Lee Friedlander?

DG: Oh, his work is all uncropped. It's all edge-to-edge. And John's (Gossage) is too. Bruce Davidson, someone that I studied with in New York for a while—same way—edge-to-edge. No cropping. And the structure of their photographs is just remarkable, so tight. You look at them and realize you can't touch them without ruining them.

BC: How do you compare that era or type of photography that you describe: everyday scenes, perfectly formatted, properly exposed, and sharp, in focus with some of the experimental being done today?

DG: Experimental is the way to put it. In many cases, it's people trying to find their own way in photography and they're just trying everything to see what might work. And instead of style, I would hope they were more concerned about is what the work can say, which you can't say with words, and therefore the photograph is needed, because if it's not there it's not completely spoken. Which I think is a great short-coming of a lot of contemporary work. It's what I call "verbal." It needs explanation or narrative. It needs a crutch, it's not visual. It's not a visual language. It's using visual elements, but leaning on the words in order to convey any meaning.

And the great challenge of photography is to use it as a completely visual medium. There is enough intrinsic mystery in the world that you don't have to create what you hope is mystery and then lay words on it to make it so. That's an easy way out. I know that a lot of artists would crucify me for saying that, but that's the way I think about it. It needs to stand on it's own [Editorial note: I wonder if this is this the difference between fine art and photojournalism?] YES!

BC: Did any other artists or the study of art history influence your work?

DG: Oh yeah! Abstract Expressionism was important to me, at least of the few artists working in that style. Clyfford Still was a huge help to me in learning how to compose the image and taking extreme care with the edges of the frame. He was a master of it. I used to go to the Art Institute in Chicago and just stare at his work. It just blew my mind, and I learned from that. I also learned from more representational painters, but just formal stuff.

BC: Do painters have any advantage over photographers when it comes to

understanding how light affects the work?

DG: I really think that depends on the individual. I've learned from painters who really have a great understanding of light. But I don't know if others thought about it all that much (laughs).

BC: Do painters have the advantage technically because they do things like paint details into highlights and shadows that film might miss in the same scene?

DG: Well, I don't think photographers should try to be imitating painters. When you're working with photographs, you're working with something else, you're not working with the same problems that painters are. It's a little bit of "apples and oranges."

BC: What's the common thread between a photographer and a painter?

DG: The understanding of formal beauty, the appreciation and enjoyment of it. I think light is, for the most part. Maybe memory. I sometimes think there are painters who are able to get a quality of memory into their work. When they are painting a particular subject there's a quality that comes through, like nostalgia, or anger, or longing. It happens in the line, the shading, or the color, perhaps.

Also, line is important for both painters and photographers. There's a lot of commonality in the appreciation of the quality of line.

BC: Is there anything you are envious about painters?

DG: Yeah, all the money they can make (laughs). They can make a half million from a painting and we're trying to make half a buck from a photograph (laughs). It's true!

BC: But you never regretted that you hadn't picked up a paint brush instead?

DG: No, never have.

BC: So you feel you can stand on your own?

DG: Now, I do, but it took a lot of years to get to that point.

BC: Does photography get the respect it deserves?

DG: In some quarters, but it's certainly not wide spread.

BC: Are art collectors collecting paintings or photographs?

DG: Well, it depends on where their passion is. There are extremely wealthy collectors that only collect photographs. But there are others that collect both. The guy that blows my mind is the one who bought 10 of my Wall Street images right off the wall in Los Angeles, and who has the largest private Warhol collection in the United States. And I'm wondering, "Why did he choose 10 of my photographs?" I have no idea. But I can only assume it's because he liked them! Or he was crazy.

BC: Is there any subject or type of photography that you feel would have made your photographs more desirable?

DG: Yeah, nudes! (laughs). They always drive the prices up and get the sales. But that's pretty limited.

BC: Why have you pretty much stuck to black and white photography through out your career?

DG: Because the kind of work I'm interested in doing and producing needs to be

abstract enough that what I hope to convey in the work is not weakened, or lost, or covered by color. Color, if not used in a way that is particular is a distraction. William Eggleston, for example, uses it because it is color. A lot of people use color because they think it's more realistic—but it's not. I wonder how many people have come up to me days after viewing my photographs and talking about the color in them. But when I say, "But they're not in color." They reply, "They weren't?!" It's curious, I've heard that a lot. I think it's because the color wasn't in the way, they're encountering what's in the photograph. And they're remembering color, which is okay, I guess, but they're always surprised to hear they were in black and white.

BC: What do you say to a person who is looking at one of your photographs for the first time if you could whisper in their ear as they moved around the gallery?

DG: We had an interesting situation where I took that on directly. When we had all of the *Light from Light* photographs on display upstairs in our house, we invited small groups of people to come over and view all them, to look at them, tell us about them, and write their comments. I was extremely careful not to tell them what to look for, but told them my overarching idea was to view that sunlight as incarnational light. "Tell me what you see." I wanted them to get right into what the content was, and not whether they were black and white or color, in Italy or France or Ireland or in Naperville, Illinois. It was surprising—they got right into it.

I try to be careful not to tell people what to look for, to just tell me what you see. How much do you miss if you just *analyze* it? Does your opinion of the piece change? I think sometimes the understanding of the piece comes from your response, which happens as you live with it longer.

BC: Going way back to your photojournalism, how do you compare that to work like *Light from Light*, or what you are doing now?

DG: I've often thought about what all that means, all the involvement I had at *Look* and *Life*, other magazines, living in New York. But I realize it was absolutely invaluable. I matured about ten times faster than if I had stayed in the Midwest. I met a ton of people that I am in awe of: artists, photographers, and just people; and got a concentrated amount of experience that led me to the point of saying, "there's more to this than what I'm experiencing, and I want to go after that." It happened in a surprising short time given how long it takes other people because they're not in that kind of environment. I was right in the middle of it. And as an employee of *Look Magazine*, I had access to all of that, I could flash that [business] card and get into anything. Here's me and Stanley Kubrick having dinner together. How nutty is that?

BC: But you left! Why?

DG: Because I felt that chapter had ended.

BC: And it seems like until you did, you would not have made the break from photojournalism that you did.

DG: Yeah, I'd say that it was the mid-to-late 1970's when I was really starting to find "it." Maybe it took me a long time, at least it feels that way sometimes.

BC: If you could go back and do anything over again, what would that be?

DG: I think I would have looked into more workshop-type classes and getting involved with them when we lived in New York. That's how I got connected to Bruce Davidson,

and I got to look at piles of Henri Cartier-Bresson contact sheets. There were other well-known photographers offering those kinds of workshops. If I would have known about them, I would have tried to get into more of those, because those were a jump start. They contained so much information and experience, in the form of just prints that I got to paw through and look at, talk about, ask questions about—it was once in a lifetime stuff.

Also, I think I would have left *Look* earlier, but I'm not sure.

BC: How do you go about pulling together a show, deciding which 30 images, from let's say a hundred, you are going to feature?

DG: It varies with every project, but it can be a real difficult thing to do. You know you can't have a 100, that's way too many and no one is going to want to show that many in their gallery. No one can stay standing that long to look at them all (laughs). The process starts when I make the initial selections, meaning that when I work on something like *Italian Light*, the initial number of prints that I mark to make work prints of, which are very quick 8 x 10's which let me know what's in the image. I might make 150 of those, but I know I won't want any more than about 40 in the exhibition. So I take these 150, lay them out on the floor and try to find those that are similar, not many differences, and then determine which one is better, that really conveys what I want to show, and then throw out the one that doesn't show it all that well. Repetition is deadly.

Then, in the instance of *Italian Light*, I had some of those work prints that didn't show the light strongly enough to have a presence, they weren't pushing their way forward and so those went out. So, we're down to 80, but I'll wait a day because I don't want to make bad decisions and if I keep looking at them, I'm going to see things that aren't there, or missing things that are there. I'll drag them all out the next day and look at them again, but in the meantime I have been thinking about them and what is still in there and what direction it looks like it's going and which ones stand together. I'll probably find a handful more that aren't meeting the criteria I've formulated, so I pull those out. And it's that kind of process which keeps going on until I've got a selection where I can't take anything else out because it will weaken it. That's when I say, "this is it." And that's when I stop.

There needs to be cohesion within the group, otherwise it confuses the viewer. And the viewer doesn't know what the point it—and that's a very real criticism.

BC: So, the point is to have plenty to choose from?

DG: Well, hopefully you aren't relying on numbers alone.

BC: So, what do you say to the young photographer today?

DG: Don't! (laughs) I do get asked that. For instance, we have some friends who have children that are very interested in photography, and they want me to go talk to little Suzy, because, "She's good! She's really good!" I'm interested, and I will meet with them, but the obstacles today are greater, for instance, I don't know how to talk with people who are doing only digital, or only color, and are working randomly (no coherent body of work, just what interests them). I don't know what to say to them.

I can talk to them about what *I* know, which is to get a camera that takes real film and begin to discipline yourself. Learn the processes because it's extremely hard to find

anybody today who will develop your film for you. You're really on your own.

BC: So, you don't think digital is a viable medium for photography?

DG: I really don't know. There are photographers who are making a very good living who work only with digital. But not many of them are making art photographs, it's mainly commercial. There is a great advantage in using digital, heavens, you cut your costs incredibly.

BC: Would you say the great fine art photographers working today are still using film?

DG: Oh yeah. But still, invariably, someone will point to a digital photographer and say, "well, they're doing it." There might be a few, but I not that many.

BC: What would say to a talented student, who is shooting film and really serious about it, but know he can't make a living doing it, what do you say to them?

DG: Be critical of yourself in what it is you are doing, what you are after, and what you want and asking, "Am I accomplishing that?" These are the questions that need to be answered along the way. In some ways, that person has a real advantage if he doesn't have to make a living from photography, and has a job where he's making enough. Get the job and then work on the photography the rest of the time. There's always a chance that you could sell enough to allow you to cut back on the day job, but I wouldn't plan to make a living from it.

BC: Is there anything else they could be doing to become artists?

DG: A lot of looking a really good established work. And there's a ton of it that's been published. The literature is pretty extensive now. There are museums and galleries showing photography.

BC: Here's a different way to look at it. Who are the Bach's of photography? As a musician you start by studying the harmony of Bach? It's foundational to being a musician.

DG: There are some really important photographers from the 19th century in terms of those that followed them and built on them and were heavily influenced by those early ones. And their influence continues to this day, I'm still blown away by their work. Some of the early ones were Timothy O'Sullivan, and then another guy working on landscapes in the West, William Henry Jackson, and then there was Eugene Atget in France who was hugely important to Bresson, Davidson, and early Friedlander. And then later, Walker Evans, Alfred Stiglitz, Dorothea Lange, Edward Weston, and some of the FSA (Farm Security Association) photographers. Into the 50's you have Robert Frank, Bruce Davidson, Friedlander. In the 70's: Diane Arbus, Robert Adams, Richard Misrach

BC: What about Ansel Adams?

DG: He was a pictorialist and did some good work, so not just pictorialism in a pejorative sense.

BC: Let's take a look at some work [see Fig. 1]. Was this for *Look*?

DG: No, this was from one of my own projects done back in 1965. A friend of Barbara's, Jerry Spiegel, who started this school in New York for autistic children. It was the only day school for kids with autism in the country. These kids lived at home



Fig. 1

partially goes over her face. She has a very pensive look staring out the window and off into the distance. Very sad eyes. Right next to her is another bus with the door open that is coming right into the camera. And what struck me was that this was a person who was a prisoner in her own mind, enforced by the reflection, her expression, even the open door and all that metal that prevented any escape.

BC: How many frames did you take of this particular scene? And how much time did you have?

DG: Oh, maybe four frames but in a matter of seconds.

Q: Would you put this in the photojournalistic camp?

DG: Yeah, but again it's reaching beyond photojournalism. It has that sense of mystery. You wonder what is going on here, there are lots of questions.

BC: Let's compare that image with this one from the *American Wilderness* [Fig. 2].



Fig. 2

DG: This is where I was working with the idea of the survival of plant forms, no matter what we did to try and civilize them. It's still a wilderness, our American Wilderness. I like that the wall is crumbling a bit, the plants are all over the steps, coming over the wall and what struck me as I was walking along was this piece hanging down there as humorous. This untamed batch of wilderness saying, "Ha, ha, we're coming, and climbing over the fence." That's sumac, and when you see all that sumac you know it's gone wild.

BC: I like the white very straight, white, parallel sidewalk against the

with their parents, but went to school all day. No one was doing this back in those years. Jerry invited me to come down to the school to see what was going on and I ended up going back to that school, on and off, for about two years, photographing these kids. I even went to camp with them in upstate in Conn. and got a ton of material of these kids.

This one is the one I really like and use as an introductory photograph if I have these up for exhibition. It's of this little girl in the back of this small school bus, looking out the back window with the reflection of an apartment house across the way which

very dark organic vegetation.

DG: The straight lines tend to keep it formal, to tame it, to civilize it. “We’re man and we made this wall” and this wild growth is just thumbing its nose and climbing over the wall on it’s own.

BC: There are telephone poles and lines that further contrast with all this organic growth.

DG: It reinforces that fact that this is, supposedly, a retained area and these pieces of civilization are still around, but it’s lost in the tangle—it’s losing. It’s losing to this vegetation that is exploding around it.

Fig. 3



BC: Let’s take a look at one of the *Italian Light* photographs, the guy walking in the Piazza [Fig. 3].

DG: This is in Cannaregio, a district up in north of Venice, about 8:30 or 9 o’clock in the morning with strong sunlight, long shadows. It was the long shadows and the man standing there that attracted me. He is really dwarfed by these huge shadows, and yet he’s the center piece with the picture structured around him.

BC: All the shadows are explainable as shadows, rectangles from the building, except this one which is kind of curved.

DG: That is from a walkway that is up out of the picture but casting it’s shadow down into the image.

BC: What were your instructions to the printer?

DG: I started off by telling them to remember that the subject was light and I want the shadows to be open, to see into them without it being too obvious. And the highlights need detail, we can’t have anything completely white and without losing any detail.

BC: Is there anything you wished you change about this image, a slightly different angle, anything?

DG: Nope. There are about 10 frames in this negative strip because other things were happening. At one point I was a little further back—there was a woman on one side talking to a woman on the other side, kind of hanging out the window. And then he was over here (points to a place on the print) where I photographed him and then over there, and some stuff in between. But this is the one that really jumped out at me.

BC: What was the thing that stopped you here at this scene as you were walking by?

DG: The light and the shadows—the shadows really were dramatic.

BC: Have you ever cased a scene and then thought, “Hey, I need to come back later”?

DG: Oh yeah. I could have come by in the afternoon, when the shadows would be over here, which might not be what I wanted, so come back the next day.

BC: I know that Ilford is your film of choice, but talk about your camera.

DG: Oh, the Leica! The Leica rangefinder camera. I’ve used one since was a sophomore in college and started using Leica M2s.

BC: Could you afford one?

DG: No, but I got one. It wasn’t easy. Think I might have bought it used just to get started with one.

BC: How did you find out about Leicas?

DG: This guy I knew, Ron James, kept telling me “you’ve got to try this, it’s incredible.” So, I used his a couple of times and was pretty struck by it. Then I met another guy who worked for the newspaper in Lansing and he used Leicas, and was a big Leica supporter. So, between the two of them, I began to look at it more seriously. I was using Nikons at that point, but I started using the Leica and never went back because they are just incredible.

BC: So, why Leicas?

DG: The lenses are incredible, but you don’t look through the lens, so when you look through the viewfinder of the Leica everything is always crystal clear and sharp. You can see everything in the frame at all times, without the focus changing. You focus it by moving two images together, so in low light, you’re not asking yourself, “Is this in focus or is this in focus?” If you’re looking through the lens and trying to focus you might have to move around a bit. But in the Leica viewfinder, if the two images overlap it’s in focus. Also, its what-you-see-is-what-you get. What you see in the viewfinder is what ends up on the film.

And they’re quiet, exceedingly quiet. And when I used to photograph plays, or musical events and concerts, where I’m back stage or behind the curtain, I couldn’t have the “clunk” of a single-lens reflex with the mirror flying up.

BC: About focal lengths? Did you ever use telephoto or wide angle?

DG: I’ve stayed with two: a 50mm lens, or a normal lens, and a 35mm, or a modest wide-angle. I used to have small telephoto for the Leica, but I found I only using it once or twice a year, so I got rid of it. I’ve only used those two lenses, like my hero, Cartier-Bresson, who never used anything but those two lenses for all of his work.

BC: Well, thanks for taking the time to tell your story and to impart a little bit of what you’ve learned over your many years behind a camera and hunched over an enlarger. I’ve known you since 1970, but have never gotten the full story until now. It has been a privilege to have you share it with me. So, thank you.

DG: Well, thank you. ●