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JONATHAN MORSE

INTERVIEW BY STEVE MILLER

TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS

With your absolute consummate knowledge of technique and your ability to invent technical solutions, how does technique affect and inform your aesthetic?

Well I don't think that it forms my aesthetic as much as it enables it. And I think that has to do with my education as an architect, because architecture is one of the few professions where you're supposed to really understand technology and use it in the service of aesthetics. And in order to get an architectural license you have to pass an exam in structural engineering, electrical engineering and so forth, so architecture is one of the few professions where you have the technical and the artistic working together. It's quite different, for instance, from industrial design which is really more of an artistic endeavor. In addition, as a kid I was always taking things apart long before I could put them back together. Having worked as an architect, I'm used to finding technical solutions to artistic problems.

You have this incredible knowledge and database of possible solutions, but how do you sift through them when you're trying to create an aesthetic, and how is your aesthetic informed by your knowledge?

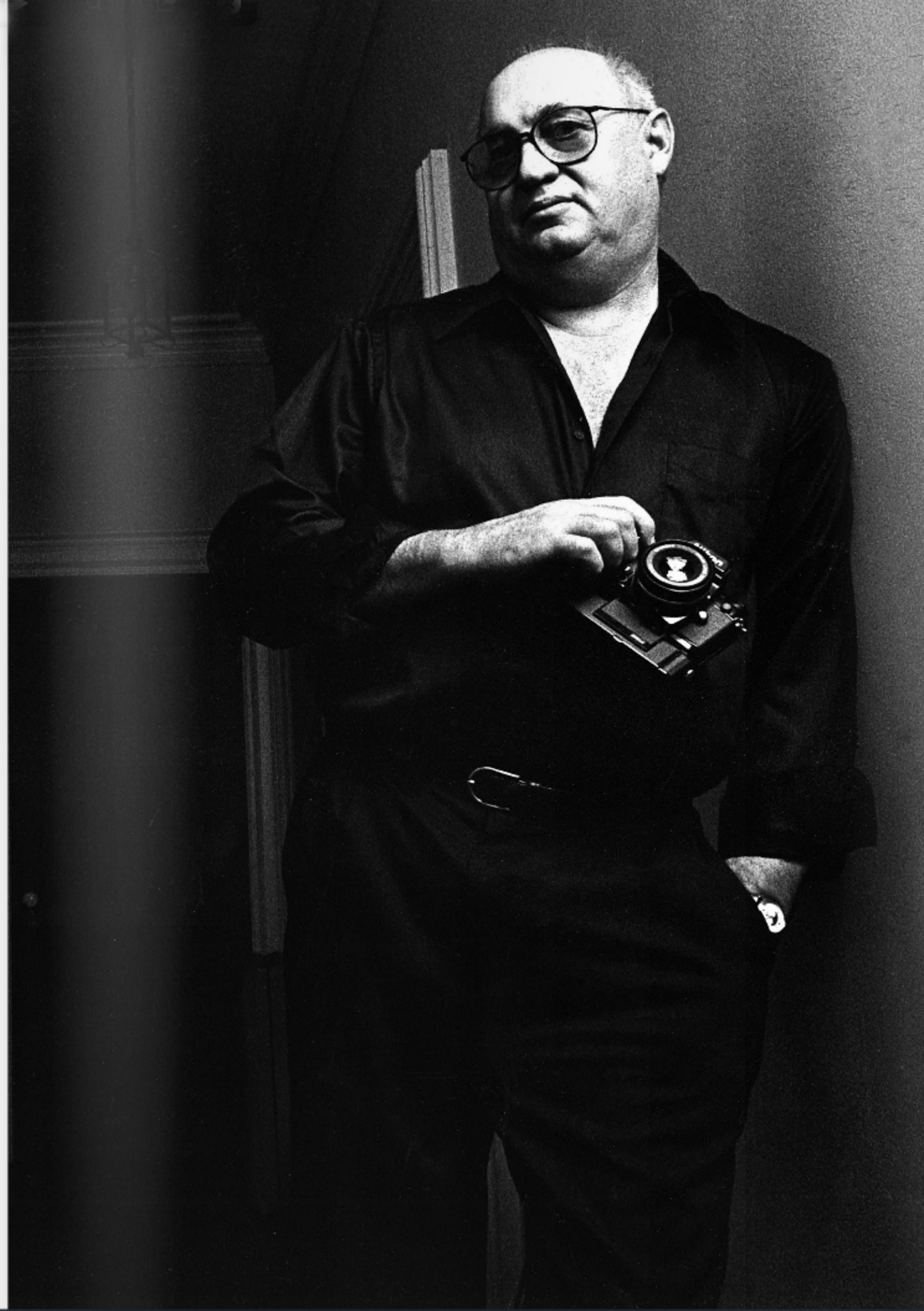
I'm very interested in traditional beauty, and being someone born before WWII, I come from a family of art collectors. I was very influenced by the classical artistic tradition. Now the classical artists were great technicians. In the earliest days of Photoshop I would consult paintings. I would almost call them photographs; Goya, and Sargent, and other great realistic painters and lo and behold, I remember the day I discovered, "That son of a bitch is doing the same thing with the eye that I'm trying to do." Or I would say, "I'm trying to do the same thing he's doing." When they would render an eye, a nose, an ear, or finger, there was a great deal of simple technical technique. The tradition I come from doesn't really separate the technical and the artistic. That was a later, post-industrial idea when the professional engineers who weren't artists came along and invented ugly machines and steam engines; steel frames, highly functional things, and we began to think of technology and art as two separate things. But in the classical period, art was a technology and I feel that I'm working in that tradition.

There's a certain quality in your photographs. Whenever I look at your work, I think, "How do you do that?" And I was thinking on the ride up here, "Who in painting has that technique?" And I thought Vermeer, but in photography I was thinking Robert Mapplethorpe.

Yes, Mapplethorpe is great and Vermeer is great, and when I teach the history of photography I consider the first photographers to be Caravaggio and Vermeer. The way I get that "wow" look that you're talking about is to finish the photograph in Photoshop by regulating the tonality, the sharpness, the composition, and I'm not above - for example in my nudes - altering the curves no matter how lovely and feminine they may be to fit an idealized version of my idea of femininity.

So there are many ways to approach photography and one is through technique, but another is time. So I was thinking about Brassaï and his work; the light in that storefront window may change, but that doesn't mean the scene changes. You look at it five minutes or an hour later, it's the same stuff in that window, and some people may say that it's the moment that the light hit that window, but when you look at someone like William Eggleston's work, time is the essential part of that image. It's the notion that the photograph will take something that the eye is never able to see, and I think there's a quality about that in your work.

Well I'm obsessed with not only collecting cameras but also



portrait by James Moore

capturing the unseen moment. The idea for the birds was feeding the birds, getting to know them, having them eat out of my hand and snapping photos of them with my iPhone. Then I began to imagine possibilities. The possibilities with that particular case of the birds required an extremely rigorous technical approach, and I had to go through two or three cameras to find what I wanted. In this case I wanted speed. The Panasonic GH2 was a camera that focused and shot very fast, so a fine compromise had to be reached between shutter speed, light, focusing speed and composition of the birds. In addition, those birds required a conscious alignment of the elements – sun, clouds, and sky – in order to get those pictures. Without it, you wouldn't get the impact. So with the gulls in particular the idea was that it was very important that the birds should have great detail and be sharp. I believe all photographs should be in focus all the time because that's really the way we see things. For instance, I am looking at you now; this part of the room isn't in focus as much as it's out of mind, but if I shift my gaze there, in focus, now you're out of mind. So whenever I look at something it's in focus. When you look at my photographs you'll notice almost everything is in focus all the time and that's in contrast to a long tradition of using focus and out of focus to indicate the object of attention. In my view, the object of attention is to find what we're looking at. So the things that are not the object of attention aren't really out of focus, they're just not the objects of attention. In my photographs, the reason why everything is in focus is so that the eye can wander throughout the photograph, and every object that is the object of attention is in focus. So with these birds, as they're flying along at thirty or forty miles per hour, composing them, focusing, shooting, and getting them sharp was quite a challenge. But I think the impact of them derives from that of total sharpness.

I agree. Why did you choose these birds?

It might be easy to say the birds chose me. I often take my lunch along the Sag Harbor Long Wharf, and I'd throw the seagulls scraps of food. We became friends, and the subject suggested itself. I took a quick iPhone photo, and all of a sudden the unseen moment was seen. The technique began to be applied: unseen things were seen. The technique was further refined to be seen, and that carried on to the post production - after capture, which in the case of these birds is at least as complex as the shooting.

It's weird talking about Nan Goldin, the casualness of the eye, the casualness of the view creates another sense of intimacy. You have phenomenal technique and an intimacy with the birds in a way that you could never have in any other circumstances. On the other hand, just using Nan Goldin as an example, there's a casualness that creates another kind of intimacy, but it's still a kind of intimacy.

The intimacy of Goldin's work may come from the sense that one has been invited to view a very private, perhaps illicit moment, by the subjects of the pictures themselves. By contrast, the gulls have no sense that they are being photographed or even witnessed. They are simply getting fed by a trused friend who can see beauty in a moment they take for granted.

In your point of view, what do you think has been the impact of the digital revolution on photography? And what role does analog now hold?

Those are tough questions. Personally having spent a lifetime screwing around with analog photography, I compare myself to a guy who buys a fiberglass boat and is so happy he doesn't have to screw around with wood, then fifty years later there arises a fashion for classical wooden boats. We're in the early days of digital photography, I would really hate to have to shoot an assignment with film now because the technique seems to me like playing a 33 RPM record with its needle being so manual and difficult to control. I have no attraction to the film and analog world, and I don't believe film is in any way better compared to somebody using digital photography and really knows Photoshop. I have printed film prints digitally, retouching the image. Well known photographers, including Bill Silano and Jimmy Moore, have all said they never made prints of their work as good as the digital ones, including compared to wet darkroom prints.

So that being said, you're basically a digital photographer. What percentage of your camera collection is digital?

[laughter] Well I have, call it two-hundred film cameras, and two digital cameras. Three including my iPhone.

You're collecting this incredibly expansive and comprehensive collection of old film cameras, and the three cameras that you use are digital.

The reason for that is that the collector's gene is an entirely different thing. My father was a collector of Asian antiquities, and to have a collector's mentality is to put a group of related items together; the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. And again by accident of birth, I happened to be exposed to all these different kinds of cameras as they were being introduced, and I used many of them. Not all of them but many of them. So this collection illustrates something to me that interests me as a designer, an architect, and a collector, which is the development of film and form cameras. I have the first Leica camera and the first Contax, and those cameras became copied by Canon and Nikon. I have transitional cameras, which are Nikons transitioning away from its Contax origins and making its own cameras, then developing the single lens reflex. So as a designer I'm interested in how these very few elemental forms developed and changed from one to another. My interest in a camera collection is not to have tools that I can use, but to appreciate historical artifacts that were produced in an extremely interesting period in photography with the rise and fall of roll film. I was privileged to be familiar with the material and put together a collection that illustrates that.