**NICOLAS BALLARIO**

**Curator of the exhibition**

*Photography as a Dialogue* ***\****

The birth of photography is a topic shrouded in uncertainty. Some attribute its origins to 1827 with the first known photograph, *Point de vue du Gras* by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. Others associate it with the 1839 daguerreotype patent granted to Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre by the Academy of Sciences in Paris. In a hyperbolic burst, there are even claims that Caravaggio was the very first photographer in history. These hypotheses, while intriguing, exist in a realm where truth and falsehood intertwine. However, regardless of whether it dates back five hundred or two hundred years, one undeniable fact stands out: today, within a single minute, more photographs are taken than in all the centuries combined since the inception of this practice. With over five billion mobile phones equipped with integrated cameras worldwide, it is estimated that more than one trillion photos are captured annually. This burgeoning trend poses a challenge to the traditional role of the photojournalist as we once knew it. Despite the skill and intuition of professionals, they struggle to compete with the collective impact of hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of smartphones that document significant events from countless perspectives and share them with the world through social media.

In a sense, the proliferation of photography has had a detrimental effect on the profession itself, impacting not only those who document wars on the frontlines, but also professionals involved in wedding and sports photography. The decline of the newspaper industry has further contributed to the challenges faced by photographers. However, it could be argued that there is a reciprocal relationship at play. Indeed, we are in the era of photography, yet photographers themselves seem to be disappearing.

With a touch of harmless irony in hindsight, one may contemplate that Jimmy Nelson’s initial success, which garnered some controversy, was directed toward the very category he represents: *Before They Pass Away* could be interpreted as a reference to photographers rather than the Indigenous peoples he portrays. This idea may reside in Nelson’s subconscious, as his primary mission is centered around the preservation of an artistic discipline. It is poignant to discover that his first journey was embarked upon in search of a comforting space on the opposite side of the world, following the challenges he faced during adolescence, including the loss of all his body hair due to illness at the age of seventeen. It was in Tibet where he encountered monks who share a similar physical condition, but who view it as a renunciation of the ego—a cultural possibility.

Therefore, whether taken in Bhutan, Ethiopia, Tibet, Siberia, Angola, Mongolia, or other locations, the photographs showcased in this exhibition represent a quest for new possibilities within the realms of culture and art. While Jimmy Nelson’s work may evoke the style of renowned photographers such as Réhahn Croquevielle, Manny Librodo, or Steve McCurry in its formal aspects, it is in the language of community portraits that we find a parallel. Within those faces, we encounter the classicism reminiscent of Richard Avedon’s iconic series *In the American West*, which immortalized the essence of a macro-region through a journey along the West Coast of the United States. Similarly, there is the celebration of differences as the utmost value found in Oliviero Toscani’s *Razza Umana – Human Race*, a remarkable social and anthropological exploration through tens of thousands of portraits. Furthermore, we witness the instinct and vocation of an outsider like Mike Disfarmer, who discovered everything he needed within a small town in Arkansas. As you observe the projects I mentioned, you may wonder if my vision is impaired, as they all feature a white and neutral background. What relevance do they hold in comparison to the vibrant landscapes that serve as backdrops in Nelson’s images? Yet, I iterate my point because I believe they are the same thing.

who discovered everything he needed within a small town in Arkansas. As you observe the projects I mentioned, you may wonder if my vision is impaired, as they all feature a white and neutral background. What relevance do they hold in comparison to the vibrant landscapes that serve as backdrops in Nelson’s images? Yet, I iterate my point because I believe they are the same thing.

The photographs themselves become “voices,” originating from words and stemming from Nelson’s obsession to understand and enter gently, seeking permission. Each pose, costume, and expression is a deliberate portrayal of how each person and community wishes to present themselves before the camera. Nelson’s approach is well-defined, steering clear of the naturalism found in realistic photography, instead transporting the portrait into a metaphorical realm that evokes a neoclassical essence. These are not everyday images but rather a visual testament meant to be preserved for historical significance. Ultimately, it is the subjects themselves who make the choices, and in this profound sense, Jimmy Nelson assumes the role of a director working with a script that already exists. His meticulous attention to detail showcases his exceptional talent. As the difficulty of reaching a location increases, the weight of the monorail camera he carries transitions from a physical burden to a moral one, laden with significance. No detail is deemed irrelevant, and only with this type of camera can one ensure that nothing is overlooked. Thus, Nelson not only presents far removed peoples from an unprecedented perspective, but also offers photography a new realm of possibilities, wresting the mantle of in-depth exploration from the dominion of phones, newspapers, television, reportages, and explorers.

With Nelson, art becomes the pinnacle of communication, and his stories resonate with our own experiences. Indeed, art possesses the extraordinary ability to captivate us through tales from distant lands, diverse faces, and fresh perspectives. However, above all else, through Jimmy Nelson’s lens, we have the opportunity to gaze into the eyes of others and effortlessly discover ourselves. Within that tiny sparkle, there exists the essence of fire, mountains, rivers, masks, necklaces, feathers, busbies, earth, boats, spears, and flags. It encapsulates the very essence of humanity.

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