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In the moment: Steven Wilkes Interview

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Stephen Wilkes took some time on a crisp fall day a few weeks ago. He looked out the window to observe the perfect light, poured some home-brewed espresso, and paused to reflect on his career—jet-setting around the world in search of the perfect moment. It was difficult arranging time with this globe-hopping, world-renowned photographer as he gathered his gear to take off to the next hot zone on the turn of a dime. A bit exhausted and mentally worn out from the intense physical challenges of wading in the oil-soaked bayous and endangered waterways of Louisiana’s barrier islands, Wilkes surged with emotions. TIME magazine’s world audience had an exclusive look inside a BP oil rig and the environmental disaster with Wilkes’ eye-opening photo essay last summer.

“Sometimes I do get to places,” once remarked Ansel Adams “when God’s ready to have somebody click the shutter.” That person for our time—who thinks, feels, and ‘clicks’ Ellis Island, the wreckage of Hurricane Katrina, Eric Clapton, Ruth Madoff, Carlos Santana, or day transforming into night in New York—is Stephen Wilkes.

For more than two decades Stephen Wilkes has been widely recognized for his fine art and commercial photography. With numerous awards and honors, as well as five major exhibitions in the last five years Wilkes has left an impression on the world of photography. For Cover Girl magazine while I was still in high school, and continued my career path by enrolling at Syracuse University’s (SU) Newhouse School of Public Communications.

At SU, I was a dual major in communications, photography and business, marketing. It was in my junior year of college that I got an opportunity that most young photographers dream of. After I showed my portfolio to Jay Maisel, he offered me a job to assist him for the summer. Jay would be my mentor and friend; his influence has had a major impact on my career. Jay taught me so many things, but what always rings in my head was one of his mantras: “No matter how much talent you’ve got, it’s 90 percent work and 10 percent talent. If you really want to make it, you have to out work everybody.” Jay really defined the work ethic for me. It probably took me five years to realize how much I actually learned.

Our readers will be fascinated to hear about some of the celebrities and internationally recognized personalities you have photographed. Can you share some of those stories? Who was easy to work with? Who was difficult? How did you overcome their issues of vanity, self-edging, and control and put them at ease?

I’ve been blessed over the years to photograph a varied range of subject matter. Whether I’m shooting some of the world’s greatest athletes, musicians, or working as a photojournalist documenting Hurricane Katrina, of the Bernard Madoff story for Vanity Fair, there are always stories behind my photographs. I had the pleasure of photographing Michael Jordan for Nike during the peak of his career. We organized a street basketball game for him in Chicago with a group of very lucky local high school students. The image was of Michael flying through the air in a pickup game on his way to a monumental dunk, with a graffiti wall behind him. Michael was real cool with me from the get go, he would only dunk five times on an outdoor rim. Magic happened on that last dunk, as one of the kids started talking trash to Michael. Being the ultimate competitor that he was, he decided to take this kid to school, air Jordan style! He suddenly made a crossover move and began to jump from the top of the key. It looked like he’d suddenly been shot out of a rocket. He was literally floating above the entire group of kids, as if he was in another dimension. The photograph
has become an iconic image from Michael's illustrious career.

I photographed Eric Clapton in his hometown of Ripley (England) for Rolex. It was an amazing experience, yet it was also quite challenging to get a unique expression from Eric. Something truly different than much of the published work that was out there. We had to shoot our background at sunrise without Eric, as he was unavailable. I created a tented outdoor studio at a cricket club close to his home. I’ve been a fan of his music for many years, and had studied many of the artists who had influenced him. To break the ice, I made sure we had one of his favorite albums playing in the tent prior to his arrival. I chose Buddy Guy’s Vanguard collection.

As soon as Eric walked into the tent he turned to me and said, “Great album, man. Is this the Vanguard collection?” That was it, he gave me an additional hour to photograph, as we were having a real good time working together. I actually got a shot of Eric smiling, which is a long time friend of his. I said he’s never seen before. Music was the common denominator.

I currently shoot most of my commercial work digitally. As I’m shooting we often have an opportunity to review images; this allows me to engage my subjects in a more collaborative manner. Working this way allows the subject to become part of the process. Everyone begins to relax because they’ve seen the shot already. I’ve found that shooting digitally actually allows me to push the envelope creatively.

Your fine-art portfolio is both varied in subjects and rich in its emotional content. If we could walk through an imaginary Stephen Wilkes retrospective exhibit at a major museum, can you pick some of your signature works as highlights? Tell us about each of those moments captured forever. As long as it’s imaginary—I’m a bit young for a retrospective! Photographs are kind of like children... you have a special place in your heart for all of them.

If we were discussing signature works, I would say a representative selection of my personal projects over the years. I’ve always been fascinated by history and forgotten places. That’s what initially drew me toward my work on Ellis Island. I discovered through my work on Ellis that photographs could inspire change. This became a benchmark for the kind of art I wanted to create. The passing of time has always been a theme in much of my work.

Over the last several years technology has gotten to a point that as a photographer you can create almost anything that you can imagine. With the ability to blend images in Photoshop, I became fascinated with the idea of changing time in a single photograph. This fascination has
ART REALLY MATTERS:
STEPHEN WILKES
Central Park, NYC, Day to Night Collection
led me to create a series called Day into Night. I photograph from one camera angle for 10 hours. I shoot literally from day into night, and then electronically blend the various times together in one photograph. I study and photograph the overall scene in extraordinary detail, capturing hundreds of images within the image. This project fuses two of my favorite types of photography: pure street shooting, melded with large epic cityscapes. This work resonates with my deep affection for NYC, as each image is iconic in its view and subject matter.

Let me play devil’s advocate here as the art historian. We know that the 19th century was the turning point in the millennial development of human imagery. Once Daguerre perfected the “mechanical image” in Paris in the late 1830s, the role of the painter was challenged. How do you explain the divergent paths from that moment of photography’s conception? Where did Monet, van Gogh or Picasso take the image versus where did Steiglitz, Mapplethorpe or Wilke go in another direction? Is it fair to compare the brushwork of the painter and the large-scale digital chimp of a master photographer?

I’ve been a student of the pictorialist period of photography for many years. I’ve often dreamed of what it would have been like to live in that period, truly an extraordinary time to be an artist. When you look at the breadth of work of Steiglitz and his contemporaries—Gerrude Kaelber, Edward Steichen and Clarence White—the photographic movement of pictorialism was truly beginning to challenge the world of painting. I’ve always felt that abstract expressionism, which became popular at around the same period as the pictorialist movement, was a direct response to photography’s ability to look like impressionist painting. Photography has obviously evolved from those days, and yet, what is old is new again. Many are revisiting the period processes of the turn of the century. Photography is constantly evolving with technology that allows the photographer to find new ways to express one’s personal vision. One of my hobbies is to collect 100-year-old lenses, the very lenses that photographers like Steiglitz and Steichen used. I mount these antique lenses into modern camera bodies and photograph using a state-of-the-art digital camera back, melding old with the new.

Many people operate under the delusion that it’s easy to take a great photograph. I sometimes hear them...
say, “If I had a high-end Canon or Nikon with all the bells and whistles, I could get pretty close to taking my own Edward Weston or Ansel Adams shots.” Respond to that?

I always laugh when people describe today’s photography as “not photography,” and that masters like Siedlitz never shot digital. I think quite the opposite; he’d be the first in line to play with this new technology. In the end, the thing we photographers care most about is the image, not how you get there. The current printing technology has further changed the perception of the photographic medium.

One of my favorite things as an artist is to create a photographic print that actually gives the viewer a visceral experience when they see it. I want the viewer to experience the same feelings I had when I made the photograph. Today’s technology is allowing me the ability to create images with extraordinary depth and detail, expanding the visual narrative within my images. It’s an incredibly exciting time to be a photographer.

Can you deconstruct for us the process that separates the well-equipped amateur and the advanced professional photographer?

As a professional photographer, you think about every possible situation that could go wrong on a shoot. You make sure that you have back-up for everything. When I take an assignment, I guarantee a picture, with or without the sun. Being a professional means you’re prepared for any scenario. It’s like any other profession. Amateurs almost never have to think about photography in that way.

Tell us some of your hopes, dreams, and ultimate challenges. What else would you like to shoot? Where else do you want to go? Where do you want to capture in your lens? I’m currently working on several personal projects simultaneously. My hope is to keep growing as an artist, stretching into new areas. I don’t ever want to feel comfortable, as that’s when you stop learning. I hope to visit several more countries this coming year; Russia and the Arctic are both high on my list.