

STEVE MCCURRY LESSON 17 – PHOTOGRAPHING CHILDREN

“they have their own mind, they’re uncontrollable...so I find working with children interesting.”

In this lesson, Steve talks about the challenges in photographing children and how, unlike, adults, you have very little control over their poses, their attention and their interest.

“I snapped off a couple pictures and then they ran off and continued in the festival.”

Steve provides examples of situations where he has had to work with the unpredictable nature of children, showing that although, you may not be able to set up the photo, the payoff of an opportunistic, natural shot can be great.

“with time, with conversation, making them relaxed, if you have certain confidence, put them at ease, I think you can find a place when they become more comfortable...a more kind of a real moment”

There is skill in encouraging the subject of your photos to be more relaxed and at ease. Creating a rapport with the subject is something that Steve has developed over many years as a photojournalist. Here, he gives an insight into how he works with people to create the best shots.

STEVE MCCURRY PROJECT LESSON 17 – TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS OF CHILDREN

“with time, with conversation, making them relaxed, if you have certain confidence, put kids at ease, I think you can find a place when they become more comfortable...a more kind of a real moment”

You have to be very quick and ready. You might not get more than a couple of pictures.

Sometimes, if you're with somebody on the street and you ask them if you can make their picture, it's maybe good to walk with them, wherever they're going, until you find the right suitable background, backdrop, light. And then say, "OK can we make the picture here?" And I think you'll find that sometimes it makes a good result.

When you are taking photographs of children just be aware and check the local country laws to avoid any issues or problems that might occur. If they are with their parents, ask permission of the parents first as they may not wish for you to photograph their children in public spaces.

TRANSCRIPT

Of all the people to photograph, different ages, men, women, children, one of the most challenging is photographing young children. Because they have their own mind, they're uncontrollable. Often, you have very little time. When they're concentrating with you, so I find working with children interesting. We all love children, but photographing them can be extremely difficult.

So it's best to have your camera already sort of set. You should be prepared. Sometimes, the child will decide that they're tired of being photographed and that's the end of the story.

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This picture, I made in Mumbai of this boy covered in red powder. It was during a festival that happens during the monsoon. During this festival, people dance and sing. And they were moving down the street in this festival.

I saw this boy, all of his friends, they were all painted with this sort of red powder. And I thought they really looked quite dramatic. So I asked him, I had a translator, I said, "You know, can I take your picture?" And so he really very intently looked into my lens in a very serious, sort of inquisitive way.

So I photographed this boy on a porch. There was this indirect light coming in. He was in the shade. It was this soft light I thought was a really interesting coincidence that he was red and the wall was green. It was just one of those happy coincidences where this, kind of, the color palette really works well.

I photographed, there was another boy in the background, which gave the picture a bit of depth. I turned the camera to get those, sort of, there were some red marks on the wall. So I thought there was a nice sort of balance and harmony in the composition. Particularly that boy in the background, in the shadows, I thought that was a nice sort of compositional device.

I snapped off a couple pictures and then they ran off and continued in the festival. So, again, I had to be very quick. I didn't make more than a couple of pictures. But I was very happy with this sort of kind of very festive occasion. Yet, there's a sort of seriousness on the boy, in the boy's expression. I thought it was a nice sort of a dichotomy, if you will.

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I was down in a Tibetan settlement in South India, photographing this Tibetan community. I noticed this one small monk. He couldn't have been more than eight or nine years old, but he had this very sort of, I don't know, almost seemed like an enlightened being. He had this very interesting kind of look. So I ask, I ask him and I ask his people he was with, if I could photograph him.

So they agreed. They said, sure if you want to, that's fine. So I wasn't sure where to photograph him. So what I did was, they were walking down the street and once I got permission I realized, OK, now, when am I going to photograph him? Let me wait until I find the appropriate place, maybe an interesting background or maybe a porch or maybe some kind of a place in the shade.

So he walked for a few minutes. And when I came to a place which I thought would make the best picture, then I said, "OK, let's come make the picture here." So I had permission, five minutes prior, but I thought, well, let's wait and find the right location.

So sometimes, if you're with somebody on the street and you ask them if you can make their picture, it's maybe good to walk with them, wherever they're going, until you find the right suitable background, backdrop, light, whatever. And then say, "OK can we make the picture here?" And I think you'll find that sometimes it makes a good result.

I like the color palette. I like the red robe. I like the blue background. I think that he had this cord, this yellow cord around his neck, which, again, is a nice dash of color. It's something which was, he had on, but I think it really works well for the picture.

So, sometimes, you know, you're looking for pictures which, and sometimes things happen magically. Sometimes, things just occur and it's just a surprise. Sometimes, it's just a coincidence, but you, you know, sometimes, you're grateful for those, those gifts that you get in the right color scheme.

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I think the intensity of this picture, this expression, is due to the boy being more serious, more himself and not a sort of a big smile. I think he was actually a very serious novice monk. And I think this more reflects his way of life and where he sees himself in the world and his sort of Buddhist practice.

I mean, sometimes, a smile is exactly right. It's great to have people that look happy. But, sometimes, it's also good to have people be more themselves, more natural,

more at ease, maybe more serious. And I think that you can arrive at that place more by time and patience and staying with somebody and be talking to them and creating a particular mood by just conversation.

People often are self-conscious and a bit embarrassed about being in front of the camera. So I think with time, with conversation, making them relaxed, if you have certain confidence, put them at ease, I think you can find a place when they become more comfortable, more, I don't know, more kind of a real moment, as opposed to sort of being giddy and laughing and silly.

So when you're making a portrait of somebody, it's good to try and stay with that person and get a range of emotion. Photograph them as their expressions change. Maybe you could talk to them, make them more comfortable. You might want to take several pictures because people initially may be uncomfortable, they may be awkward in front of the camera. They may be embarrassed being photographed in the street.

So you want to make them comfortable, put them at ease, and maybe take several pictures, not just one or two. Often, with one or two pictures, you can't get into a rhythm and get into a place where, when you get, when you start making your selection, you have a choice.

You always want to go through your pictures. And sometimes people's, you know, their expressions change. You want to be able to have, go through and look and see how this photo session evolved and find the picture which you feel tells the best story about them.

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Well, we're just outside of Havana, in this sort of suburb and it's really interesting. They just had this performance of these young girls who were, it looks almost like Carnival in Rio. They're probably nine or 10 years old, but really lively, lots of energy, a great vibe. And it's sort of a community event. Well, we're here in the town square. It's just a really wonderful sense of community, here.

I photographed all these little girls, here. It's great. People were hanging out, relaxing. And I made some, had some really interesting pictures with these little girls dressed up in their costumes.

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This is a picture I made in Ethiopia in the Omo Valley, which is one of the most fascinating parts of Africa, in that they still kind of maintain their original culture and their traditions. They have this sort of, they paint their bodies.

Now, it's become more, it's becoming, you know, the cell phone towers are appearing. You know, there's public transportation and a lot of tourism. So this way of life is changing rapidly. And, in a few years, their are traditions and the way they adorn themselves will probably be lost forever.

When I made this picture, I was trying to find people in the group where I could isolate them so that they would be kind of graphically more interesting. So when there was somebody off on the side, or some way I could compose the picture so that they weren't all kind of lumped together. I wanted to isolate that one child, so that there would be, you know, one group on one side, another group on the other side. But this was just a question of walking around and trying to identify people who were kind of separate from the group.

You'll notice that this picture was made in kind of a, more of an overcast, cloudy situation, which is really the way I like to work the best. I think this low-contrast kind of more muted approach works better in color. Perhaps in black and white, more of a contrast, these bright sun might work. But I think, in color, you tend, it works better in many cases when the light is more muted.

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We just met these mothers and their children and I was here with my wife and Lucia, our daughter. And it was sort of a nice friendly way to meet people in the street, especially if you could do it as a family. And it's a great icebreaker because, immediately, you had this connection. You had this sort of a, you know, kind of a bond because of the children. Look at all that hair.

You know, I would really encourage, if you have a family, you have kids, take them. They're a great icebreaker. They're a way to kind of get into a community and on the street. People, everybody loves children. And if you have your children with you, at your side, I think it's a great asset, actually, to travel with your family. So take your kids and they can make some great pictures as a result.