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# LENSWORK

Photography and the Creative Process • Articles • Interviews • Portfolios

No. 30 • Jul - Aug 2000

*Article*  
Jan Phillips

*Interview with*  
David Hurn/MAGNUM

*Portfolios*  
David Hurn/MAGNUM

Mary Landi

John Willis



# LENSWORK

30  
JUL - AUG  
2000

*Photography and the Creative Process*  
*Articles • Interviews • Portfolios*

*Editors*

Brooks Jensen  
Maureen Gallagher

In this issue

*Article by*  
**Jan Phillips**

*Interview with*  
**David Hurn**

*Portfolios by*  
**David Hurn**  
**Mary Landi**  
**John Willis**

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# EDITOR'S COMMENTS



## DAY JOBS

### *When Life and Art-making Collide*

I met Ansel Adams only once, very briefly, at a gallery opening. It was at the Weston Gallery in Carmel just a few years before he died. I was one of the first in the gallery and I saw him, standing there, a big smile on his face, peering through those black framed glasses, a giant wall-size print of *Monolith Face Of Halfdome* behind him. I shook his hand and fumbled out some feeble comment about how much I liked his work. I secretly wished he had heard about my photography and would comment how wonderful my work was. Hell, my parents barely knew I did photography! I vividly remember shaking his rough-gnarled, arthritic, outdoorsman's hand and feeling like I had met some potentate or pope. It is this image of the Grand Old Man, the artistic king of photography that comes to mind every time I think of Ansel Adams.

Curiously enough, this same kind of imagery dominates my mental images of all the other photographers I admire. I see

Wright Morris as a successful photographer in his eighties with flowing gray hair and black moustache. Brett Weston is, in my mind's eye, a bold, passionate, and lusty old man in his seventies with pipe aglow and head cocked high. Imogen Cunningham exists in my mind as a frail but mischievous elf-like figure with a twin lens reflex. Minor White is a thin, white-haired Zen guru. Edward Weston stares vacantly toward some unknown memory before he was stricken with Parkinson's disease.

I paint these images to make a point. In fact, these great photographers were *none* of these things, except perhaps fairly late in their career after they were already successful and even *famous* individuals. I've recently become more aware of the limitations of such hero worship.

Not long ago, I was speaking with a very close friend of Brett Weston. I was fascinated by the stories I heard of Weston's

life. Weston confessed to my friend — this of course rather late in life after he was famous and successful — that for forty years he never filed an income tax report with the IRS. In *forty years* as an artist he had never once made enough income to require an income tax filing! It's a wonderful anecdote, and possibly even true. This got me to wondering about the realities of life as an artist. Is it fair to assume that Ansel Adams occasionally bought groceries, did the laundry, mowed the grass, played ball with the kids, argued with the neighbors, cleaned the downspouts, changed the spark plugs and shopped for socks? Did André Kertész ever wash his dishes? I suppose so. There is every reason to believe that great artists had chores like the rest of us, but it is so tempting to assume that everyone around them knew how important and historic their artistic vision was. I see great artists as pampered, protected, sanctified individuals who were separate and apart from life's daily drudgeries. Of course, this is not true. Great photographers are just *people*, like all of us, subject to the same demands as all of us. If there is a difference, it is not in the basics of life but rather in their *response to life*.

I've always had to work for a living. I've also tended to use that as an excuse for the art projects I've never begun or never completed. It's been so handy to use *life* as my excuse — as though the luminaries in art didn't have such trivial details to take

them away from the creation of their great works. Using this convenient myth you see, I too could be creating great works of art if I didn't have to clean the fridge or commute in traffic or think about things that are non-art. (Unfortunately it never occurred to me that cleaning the fridge could itself be an impetus for creating art until I had seen the wonderful photographs that Joseph Sudek did of eggs and cheese and bread and paper bags. Damn him for adding so powerfully to my guilt!)

What to do? If we can't change *life*, then we must change our *response* to life and see the magic of the world in which we live. Sudek photographed eggs and cheese. Wynn Bullock made *Child in the Forest, 1951* while on a camping vacation with his family. The key is to integrate our art into our life, not the other way around. In *LensWork Quarterly* #25 I interviewed Chip Hooper, who described keeping his camera in his car at all times and making photographs on his way home when the light was right. As Ansel Adams is so often quoted in photographic circles, "Success favors the prepared mind."

Photographer David Bayles — one of the best workshop instructors around — is fond of saying that in order to create great art one has to photograph every day — *every day*. He then stresses that this doesn't mean exposing film every day or even printing every day. In order to be a great

artist one must be *thinking photographically*, looking *at* photographs, looking *for* photographs, sensitive to potential photographs, rehearsing, practicing and even, when one can, creating photographs on film and paper. His point is that photography is not something that happens or should happen at special times at special places on special days or even by special people. Every day can be a day on the path of the creative life.

I can think of no better example of this philosophy in action than David Hurn, the featured photographer in this issue. David, a MAGNUM photographer, understands the value of having a camera with him everywhere — every day. I'm sure he must take a vacation sometimes, but I doubt he takes a vacation from his camera. Some of us look. Some of us see. Hurn has that eye that penetrates the moment and finds the significant in the fleeting. I suspect he can do so because of his daily practice — *years* of daily practice.

Why is it that so many photographers (myself included) believe that we can make important and significant artwork by working only occasionally? Athletes can't compete at the highest levels if they only workout a few times a year. Musicians, surgeons, even tax accountants know the value of dedication and repetition. Why do we think we are different?

For me, the answer to this question is the seduction of luck. I know I can't write a great novel with luck. I can't make it to the World Series of baseball with luck. I can't discover new laws of physics with luck. But I can (or so it seems) make great photographs with nothing more than an expensive camera (a myth the camera-makers love to enable) and the right 1/60<sup>th</sup> of a second. I know I share this feeling with a lot of photographers because I hear it expressed in workshops all the time. "I started photography because I wanted to make art but I couldn't paint. I lack the talent to sculpt. I tried drawing and all I could make were stick figures." Are we sure? Or did we give up too soon?

I'm beginning to think that photographers tend to share one consistent personality trait, regardless of their particular devotion to photography. Photographers are *impatient*. Four minutes is a long time to wait for a print to come up in the developer. Reciprocity failure is a *failure of film manufacturing*, not a law of physics. Why can't they just make a film with an ISO of 10,000 and be done with it? We want quick-release tripod heads, faster motor drives, instant recycle times on strobes, and frames that snap together without screws. Give it to us quickly. Give it to us now. It all starts to sound like the whining of a five-year-old.

When Ansel Adams told us that a good year might produce 10 good photographs, maybe he was giving us advice to slow down. We misunderstood and thought he was telling us to expose even more film to “up the odds” of success. Seeing takes *time*. Photographing takes *time*. Printing takes *time*. Fortunately, time is doled-out to us equally every day, equally for every one of us. Maybe the great lesson that is presented to us every day is that there will *never* be time for photography, but there is

always time for *life*. When, like David Hurn or Chip Hooper, we find a way to make photography fit our life, we’ll have time for photography, at last. Perhaps we’d best learn this before our time for life runs out.





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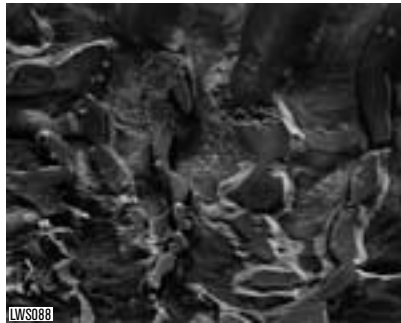
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# RECYCLED REALITIES



*by*

*John Willis*

John Willis

*Hear an audio interview with John Willis and see more of his images  
in the LensWork MultiMedia Library. Online preview at [www.lenswork.com](http://www.lenswork.com).*







# PHOTOGRAPHING THE RITUALS OF OUR LIVES

*by*

Jan Phillips

*I never had to go very far for subjects –  
they were always on my doorstep.*

*André Kertész*

Most people, when asked what worldly possessions they would try to save if their house were on fire, mention photographs. “I could replace everything else,” they say. “My pictures are my most precious possession. My whole life is in those photo albums.”

Photographs provide evidence that our lives have meant something. They show our relationships with people, the places we’ve traveled, the events we’ve celebrated and honored. Of all the things that happen to us in the course of our lives, the most important get photographed, put into the shoeboxes and albums that we leave behind as legacies. Photos are our autobiography, a way of telling the tale of who we are.

*This article is from Jan Phillips’ new book God is at Eye Level: Photography as a Healing Art,  
published by Quest Books, ISBN 0-8356-0785-2*

# NUDES



*by*

*Mary A. Landi*

Mary Landi







# AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID HURN

Brooks Jensen: This is a particularly momentous time to talk with you in view of your important millennium exhibition at The National Museum of Wales, and the release of your new book, *Wales, Land of My Father*. As a member of the prestigious MAGNUM organization you are much more well-known in Europe than you are here in America. Would you mind starting by giving us a little bit of your background and your involvement with MAGNUM?

David Hurn: Well, I suppose the most significant thing in my background was the fact that I'm dyslectic. Dyslexia — the word was not known when I was in school — basically meant you were thick, you were unintelligent. I was lucky, however, because I was exceptionally good at sports. Because of sports, I got through school fine. When I had to leave school, I couldn't pursue the vocation I wanted, which was to be a veterinary surgeon, because I had no qualifications whatsoever. To be a veterinarian you needed to go to Bristol University. I decided to do what was called my *national service*, which meant I had to go into the army for a couple of years. It was compulsory in England at that time. Largely because of my sporting prowess I ended up in Sandhurst which is

*Editor's note: This interview was conducted in March 2000 in Phoenix, AZ while David was visiting the United States.*



# WALES

*Land of My Father*



*by*



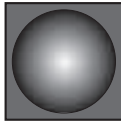
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