

Meaning in Art -- A look at my chosen path – Photojournalist Earl Dotter

I was an advertising design student at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in NYC from September of 1967 through June of 1968. When I began my studies at SVA, I planned to hone my skills in Advertising Design, and had the good fortune of being instructed by Madison Avenue art directors, the “Mad Men” of the era. One of those SVA instructors was a pro advertising photographer, Paul Elfenbein, who instructed the class to respond to his assignments by only presenting photographs that expressed our “personal point of view.” During that era of Civil Rights activism and Vietnam War protests, I came to appreciate Elfenbein's objective of having the images reflect the photographer's personal experience and outlook. He also required that we photograph with a 50mm lens so that we would have to stand in close proximity to our subjects, interacting and collaborating with them as we photographed. It is a lesson that still informs my photography work to this day.

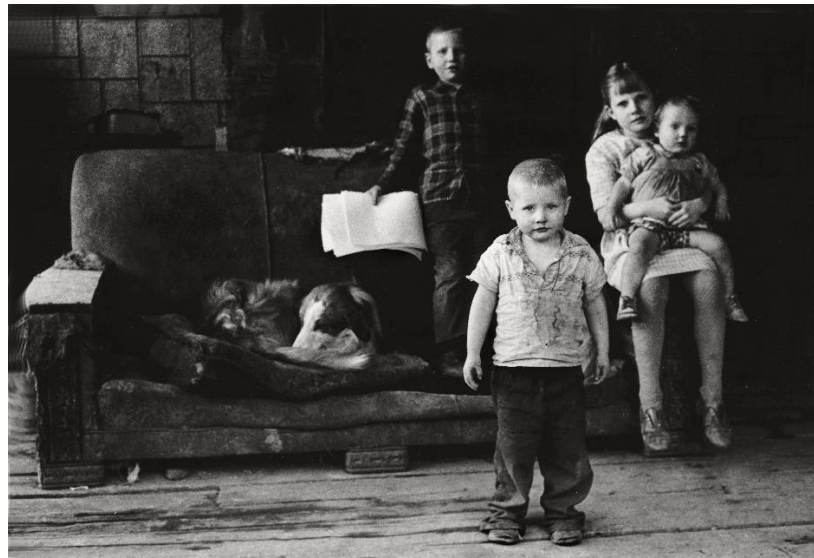
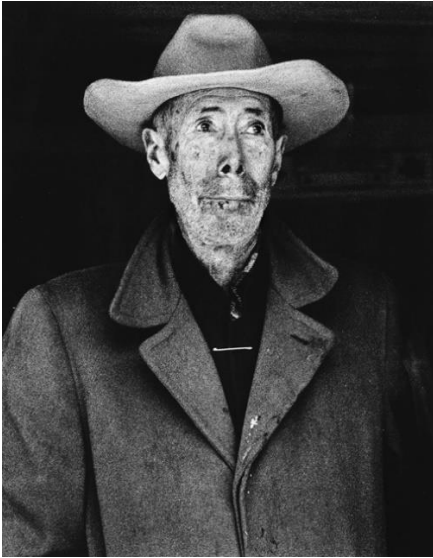
With not much means to support myself, I found a low-rent sixth-floor walk-up tenement apartment in the Lower Eastside on East 11th Street between Avenue A and B. On the evening of April 4th, 1968 my advertising class was meeting in the board room of the Young and Rubicam Advertising Agency. We had reversed roles with our instructors, giving them the assignment to visually respond to the Bob Dylan song, “*Something is Happening, But You Do Not Know What It Is, Do You, Mister Jones?*” In a moment that changed my advertising career plans forever, the first instructor told us that Martin Luther King had just been assassinated. In the aftermath of King's death, I responded by taking photos in a direct response to that tragedy and also focused my camera on subjects I



found in my impoverished Lower Eastside neighborhood and the impact this national tragedy had on it, images that caught Paul Elfenbein's attention. He arranged for me to show my photos to the renowned Art Director of New York Magazine (then in its first year of publication), Milton Glaser, and I immediately had two front covers published and a double page spread showing the impact of the NYC Garbage Workers strike that was occurring at the same time as the one in Memphis that had led to King's assassination.

Ready to begin a career as a NYC photojournalist, I soon found my Draft notice waiting for me in my tenement mailbox. On November 20th, 1968 I learned of the Farmington Mine Disaster. The news of 78 miners dying confirmed my desire to seek the VISTA Worker alternative in Appalachia to serving in Vietnam. When the Draft Board finally caught up with me after I had completed six weeks

of in-service training in Putnam, County, TN, my Vista supervisor wrote a letter on my behalf, attesting to my value in “Fighting the War on Poverty.” I was given a draft deferment.



I lived with impoverished families, both black and white, and spent the next two years, from 1969 to 1970, in the Cumberland Plateau region photographically documenting the VISTA and Community Action Project's efforts to reduce poverty and its effects. Just as I had sought out the day-to-day experiences of those living in the urban blight of lower Manhattan, I took my camera to the backroads of rural Tennessee to capture the lives of its hard-pressed coal mining people.

By 1972, because of my coalfield experience, I was invited to become the photographer for a reform group in the United Mine Workers of America called Miners For Democracy. That group had set an agenda to oust the union's corrupt leader and to forcefully address the fact that coal mining was then the most dangerous job in the United States. The effort to elect new officers in the top positions of the UMWA was successful, and I became the photographer for the *UMW Journal*, the union's by-monthly publication. It was a formative five-year stint confirming my interest in taking what I term today to be, social useful photographs of hazards that claimed the life of a coal miner

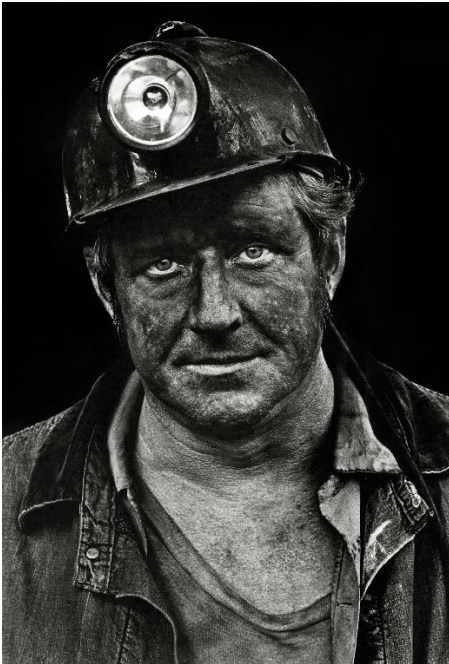


every other working day. Lessons learned at SVA gave me the understanding to navigate highly sensitive circumstances like the funeral for Robert Griffith, who had survived Vietnam only to be killed in the Scotia Mine Disaster that claimed him and 25 other miners in Eastern, KY, in 1976. I had learned the importance of letting my subjects know who I was and why I wanted to photograph beforehand, and received the Griffith family's permission to take pictures at the funeral and of Robert's widow as she left his gravesite.

With this long photographic career, I relate very well to David White's essay statement:

"A work of art potentially has a great deal of power on many levels. The better the work is, the more carefully and skillfully crafted it is, the more power it has. Now, does the creative artist worry about this? Not particularly. Instead, she or he uses the rudiments of the specific art form together in support, in counterpoint, in contrast, and in other technique to engage and to express in the medium most available to him or to her. The power lies in the work itself as it interacts with the artist and, ultimately, with the individual consumer in real time."

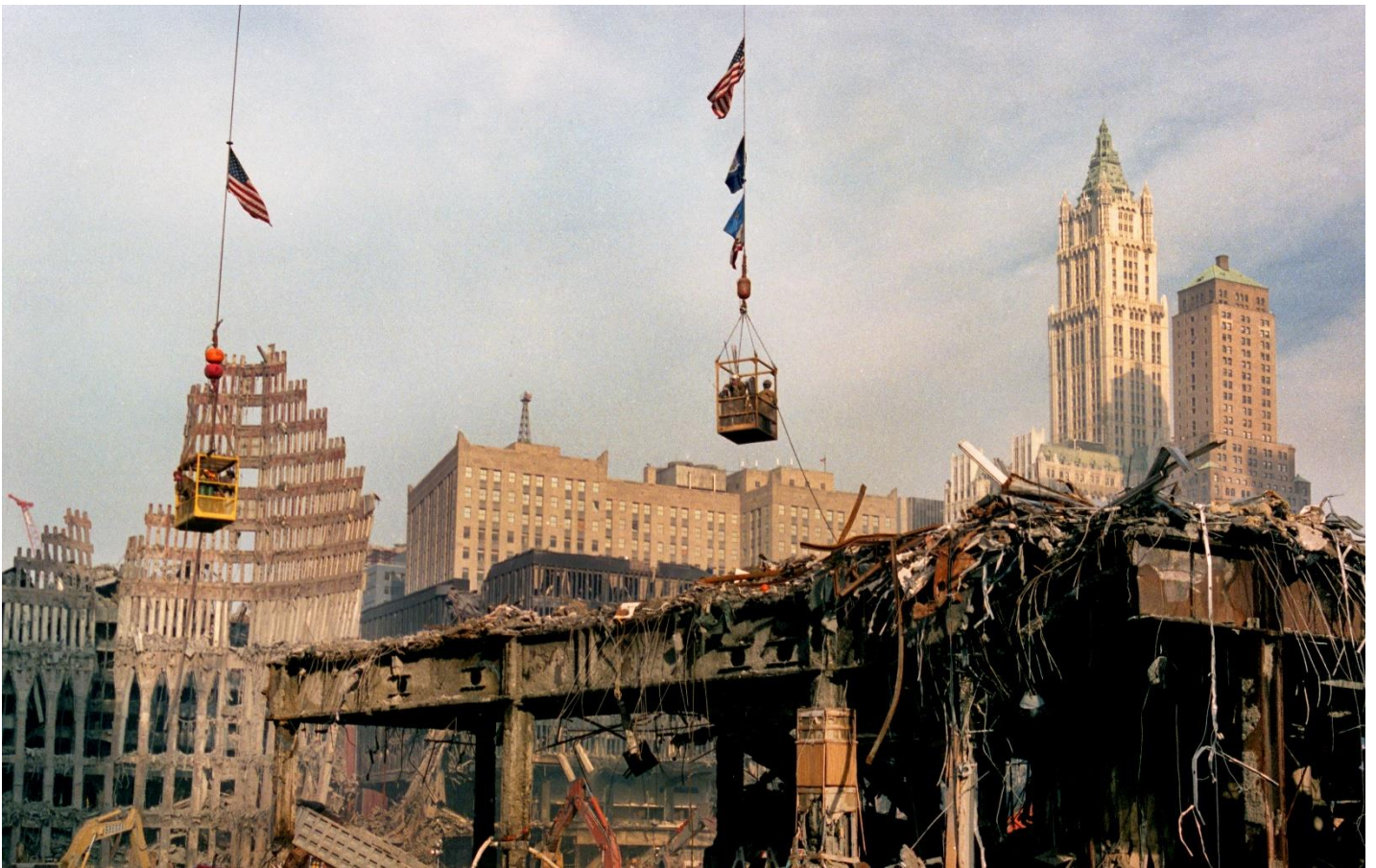
My motivation is to create art that reflects my point of view that focuses on the dignity of the worker and the importance of safe work.



To focus the viewer, I photographed West Virginia coal miner, Lee Hipshire, with his coal dust blackened face against the darkness of the mine mouth, so that his eyes meet yours as he exits the mine at the end of his shift. Similarly, I photographed Paul Roades, a survivor of the Buffalo Creek WV Flood that claimed 128 lives, in what I call "Rembrandt" window light, that is sculptural and moody to set the tone for the viewer.

As David states, "The idea germane to my discussion here is that the creative artist expresses himself or herself with techniques and skills designed to highlight human feeling in a way much more fundamental, much more human, than mere expository language can do."

While my photographic subject of hazardous occupations has continued for over 50 years, my tools and techniques continue to evolve in the digital era. David's essay statement, however, represents the core principle undergirding the work I have done with my camera throughout the decades.



By the time of 9/11, I had been photographing dangerous work for 30 years. On the first day the public was allowed to return to Lower Manhattan I was compelled to be there. I overheard office workers conversing, they did not yet know if others in their building had lived or died. It took two trips from my home in Silver Spring, Maryland to finally gain access to Ground Zero itself. Now



COVID-19 has greeted me on my doorstep. I am compelled to photograph everyone keeping me safe.