

The Photography of Stephen Elson

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By Angela Romeo

Art is a part of our lives. Every day it has an impact on us. For Photographer Stephen Elson growing up in a home that embraced art has led to a lifetime of inspiration.

"I was fortunate to grow up in a household surrounded by art books, multiple periodicals of fashion and art, and a collection of Japanese art that my mother collected during our stay in occupied Japan 1946 – 1951," said Stephen. "My Dad had a photographic studio in Hollywood in the 1950's. He graduated from Fred Archer School of Photography, where Ansel Adams taught occasionally. The visual impact of fashion, art and black and white photography had a significant influence on me."

"There is something very special about the Hollywood glamour style of the 40's and 50's. Its continued impact is evident. I am still inspired by the classic French and Czechoslovakian black and white photographers of the 20's and 30's. Their work was created when photography was the new medium. The level of sophistication is mind-boggling. These photographers were using film and dark room techniques, not Photoshop."

Stephen moved to New York City after completing his graduate school studies. "Living in NYC in the 'hey days' of the 1970's was a very special time. I lived near Warhol's Factory Union Square. I actually did

a sit down of my portfolio with Interview Magazine. They were complimentary but my work was not 'edgy' enough. There was so much happening during that time. My work was more focused on the architecture and street scenes of NYC."

"I was also influenced by the work of Cris Alexander," continued Stephen. Cris Alexander was a New York photographer noted for taking portraits for Warhol's Interview magazine and the New York City Ballet. His work was influential in creating the unfiltered portrait image that influenced a generation.

While in New York Stephen studied with Life Magazine photographer Harold Feinstein. "Harold was a purist who taught that the eye was the best editor and the best framer. He also taught that it was best not to over think the image. I took that to heart. In my work I try not to over think or over edit an image. I do not spend hours in the darkroom or hours with Photoshop manipulating the image. I present the image that I capture. Nothing more."

Has living in Palm Springs changed Stephen's approach to his art?

"Yes. Coming to the desert has changed the images I now take. I am interested in architecture. But the openness and subtlety of the desert's endless horizons have influenced me. I am focusing on colors and textures in both black and white and color photography."

Having worked in both digital and film what does Stephen see as an important influence in the contemporary art world? "Technology and the internet are the biggest influencers. The ability of a cell phone to capture images that previously had required equipment has changed the photography field. The requisite skill is now point and shoot. Lighting, metering and dark room skills are becoming extinct. I had resisted switching from film to digital, but the fact that results are instantaneous is attractive. It does save time and frustration in setting up the shot. When my father went to work in the photographic department in the aerospace industry he would always use a Polaroid to check his set up. In the digital age, no one does that."

"Moreover the expense of film and the development process are distant memories. Anyone can now take an endless stream of photos. There is no great challenge in taking a picture. But there is still a skill required to take a photograph."

"I am still a bit of a classicist and do have a problem with highly manipulated images but do recognize that some of the results are wonderful. I am the least tech person and not sure I ever fully grasp f-

stops – so technology for me is not an option. But the art of photography is something I do embrace.”

Stephen Elson is one of the artists selected to show at the Palm Springs Art Museum – Artists Council Exhibition. The show runs through November 27 at the museum.

