

Q&A with Steve McCurry

PDN: How did you get your start in photography?

Steve McCurry: I studied film and cinematography when I went to Penn State University. I wanted to be a documentary filmmaker. But I started working for the college newspaper, where I developed a real passion for still photography. After college I looked for a job as a filmmaker and ended up getting a job at a newspaper as a photographer, where I stayed for three years.

PDN: Talk about the first time you went to Afghanistan—that was the point when your career took off, right?

McCurry: My freelance photography career started in India in 1978. After working there for a year, I went to northern Pakistan. There were two Afghans staying in my hotel. They told me there was this war just across the mountain in Afghanistan and I told them I was a photographer. And they said, 'We would want to take you there and show you. Maybe you can give us news coverage of what's happening there.' It seemed like a great idea until it came time to go, and I got very nervous. I was worried about crossing the border illegally and being in a war zone. But I mustered up my courage and went into Afghanistan. I spent two weeks at the front line. As I was ready to leave, I got very nervous that when I crossed back into Pakistan, my film would be confiscated. So I put my film in my socks and my underwear. I sewed some of the film into my costume and into my turban, so that if I were arrested, I would at least keep my film safe. I wasn't arrested. I got a few pictures published in *The New York Times*. And when the Russians invaded six months later, I had all these pictures that nobody else had. Suddenly major magazines around the world—*Paris Match*, *Stern*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *LIFE*—were using my pictures. I started working for *Time* for several months in Afghanistan, and eventually started working for *National Geographic*.

PDN: You've been all over the world, especially Asia. Is there any one country or place that has captured your heart?

McCurry: I think the one place that has fascinated me the most in my 25 years of photography is India. India is so culturally rich with all of its different religions. Then there is the contrast of so many people living in medieval conditions—in the way they lived 500 years ago—next to a big middle class of

society, as well as computer industries. There's a huge disparity in India between modern and traditional ways of life.

PDN: You've been arrested, beaten and nearly killed. What makes you go on?

McCurry: I've had a couple close calls in my career, but the part of my brain that's concerned with self-preservation is very large. I was almost drowned in India and I was in an airplane crash in Yugoslavia, where I found myself about 10 feet underwater. Miraculously, I was able to swim out from underneath the seatbelt. But I came within a fraction of an inch of not making it. I'd rather take the risk and have the adventure, than to be timid and not to take those risks.

PDN: So you would never give it up?

McCurry: Never, no, no, no. It's the best life.

PDN: You photograph almost exclusively in color. Is there a reason?

McCurry: I've always worked in color. A lot of that is dictated by the marketplace. Certainly the world's in color. Color's another dimension. I think a good color picture should also work as a black-and-white picture. A good color picture should be as graphic and have a sense of design the same way as a black-and-white picture. I also want some emotional content. I don't want the picture to be only about color.

PDN: What do you want people to see in your photographs?

McCurry: The thing I want people to take away from my work is this human connection between all of us, whether you're living in India or Africa or Latin America. There's a kind of a commonality between all of us. Despite our religion, language or ethnicity, we're all basically the same.

PDN: One of your images from India is this picture of people preparing baskets of fruit in the middle of a street washed in blue. . . .

McCurry: I think one of the most colorful cities in the world is Jodhpur, in central India. This one particular area is all painted blue. And it looks more like a movie set, where you can't believe your eyes when you're walking through these twisty, windy, medieval streets. You can't believe that this is a real place. There are vendors, people going to work and cows. All sorts of incredible things happen around every twist and turn of those alleyways.

PDN: Do you interact with the people in your photographs?

McCurry: I always have a connection with the subject, whether it's in a refugee camp or in a suburb of Bombay. I always try and establish some sort of a personal relationship, however brief. There are also times when you may be walking down the street and you photograph people in a fraction of a second. Sometimes the image looks as though it was the product of a long interaction when in fact, it was very brief.

PDN: Do you ever give the beggars in your photographs some money?

McCurry: I'm a very soft touch when it comes to working on the street in India, and working with beggars. I'm always very happy to give them something because they have nothing. I think it's important to give back to people on the street when you work with them.

PDN: How do you decide where you go next?

McCurry: There's long-term planning, but there's also things that happen in the near future, like a breaking news story, for instance, Afghanistan or the World Trade Center disaster. Somehow you have to be able to respond quickly to things. As far as my schedule goes, it's always in flux.

PDN: What are you working on now?

McCurry: I'm working on a book on Angkor Wat, which I originally did as a magazine story for *National Geographic*. I'm expanding it into a book about the site, the temples and the surrounding villages. It's a very quiet, contemplative look at that part of Cambodia. Apart from that, I plan to go back to Afghanistan to do a follow up, and eventually do a book. It's a story I've been following for over 22 years now.

PDN: Now that you are going back to Afghanistan, what are you hoping to photograph?

McCurry: It'll be a very personal book. It'll be a book of my experiences, the places that have meaning for me. It won't be Afghanistan at war. It'll just be my journey. The customs, the culture, the architecture and how people live their lives. That, to me, is more important than anything else.

PDN: With your experience photographing Afghanistan, are there any tips you can give to someone who is trying to cover that country?

McCurry: You have to be very respectful if you're going to photograph women.

It's a very sensitive issue, as far as approaching women, photographing women, interacting with women. It's basically a taboo in Afghan culture. The other thing I would strongly recommend would be to try and have a good fixer or somebody who can make sure you are escorted, because there are bandits who take advantage of travelers in lonely places. It can be quite dangerous if you are in a remote area and you are alone, unprotected and unarmed.

PDN: What was your September 11 like?

McCurry: I had been working in China and India through most of August. I got back to New York on September 10. On September 11 I woke up at 6 a.m. because I was jetlagged. Later that morning my assistant's mother called and said, 'Look out the window, the World Trade Center's on fire.' I couldn't believe my eyes. In about two and a half seconds, I grabbed my camera bag and went up on my roof. The ironic thing is that having covered so many wars—the Gulf War, Lebanon, Afghanistan, the Philippines—I was able to go to this particular scene by simply going from the ninth to the twentieth floor of my apartment. I got up on the roof and started shooting furiously. I raced down to Ground Zero, knowing I probably couldn't get into the area because it was cordoned off, but feeling that I had to do it. This was something that had to be documented. Without calling my photo agency, without making any phone calls to anybody, I just went down there. I spent about half of my time that afternoon just trying to evade arrest since I didn't have any press credentials with me. I was just trying to work however I could.

PDN: What was it like at Ground Zero?

McCurry: Everything was covered in this white ash. And it was very fine, almost like confectioner's sugar. It was everywhere. The other thing which was really striking was that there was office paper everywhere. It was almost like a late Fall day, when leaves are everywhere. I was ready to go through and see if it was anything important, and try to send it back to people. It was sort of a funny kind of instinct. Right across the street from Ground Zero, there was a deli. It was totally evacuated, but all the sandwiches were laid out on the counter where they had been making lunch. It was almost like Pompeii. There weren't any people at Ground Zero, but all the stuff that they had been doing was just frozen in time.

PDN: What time did you go home?

McCurry: I got down to Ground Zero about 12 p.m. and I stayed until all my film was gone. I had one roll of film left in my camera when I decided I should leave, and that was around 8:30 that night. But I couldn't bring myself to

leave. I knew that if I left, I probably wouldn't be able to get back in. But eventually it just got too dark. I was too tired. I hadn't had breakfast. I hadn't had lunch. And I was jetlagged because I'd just gotten off the plane the night before. So I was really in an exhausted state. I got home around 10:30, I walked all the way back. I was struck how life slowly came back to normal as you walked away from Ground Zero. It was so strange listening to conversations, and how people were so unaware of the magnitude of this incredible event. I wanted to go up and shake people and say, 'Don't you realize that this is probably the most important day in your life?'

PDN: How do you think this day has changed photojournalism?

McCurry: I think documentary photography has changed dramatically from the time when *LIFE* Magazine was the way people got their news. People generally get their view of the world through television. The beauty about still photography, though, is it freezes in time something that you can go back to. And I think pictures often come to symbolize an event. Perhaps temporarily the events of September 11 have raised the appreciation of photojournalists. Still photography has certainly taken on more significance. But I think that in the long term, photography is a really important part of our culture and an important art form. And I see it not diminishing in its importance.

PDN: What would you say is the new challenge for photojournalism?

McCurry: I think the challenge for a young photographer, or for documentary photography in general, comes from television, and how important and pervasive it is. That's the way people get their news. But there'll always be a place for important still photography. You almost think of photography as kind of a family album of life in our time, of how we lived and what we did. There's always going to be a place for photography at a very high level. Every year, it becomes more and more competitive. And there are fewer and fewer magazines, and fewer and fewer assignments. I can't really say it's an encouraging outlook.

PDN: What would you do if you had to give up photography?

McCurry: If I had to give up photography, I think I would still travel. To me, photography and travel are kind of intertwined. And I have a fascination with both. So if I weren't doing photography, I would be a professional gypsy.