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Bill Lusk

By Louisa J. Curtis



Bluegrass Musician, Allen Mills © Bill Lusk

This month my conversation is with fine art and advertising photographer Bill Lusk, whom I first crossed paths with some years ago when I was at the Black Book. The “South” was one of my territories back then and I remember being very taken with his work right from the start. Although I can’t recall if he ever did buy a page in the book, I do remember he was quite hard to get a hold of because he was always so busy, and I usually had to speak with somebody else! So now, fast-forward several years to a few months ago when I received an email from Bill in response to one of my newsletters (which he proudly informed me he had been reading and enjoying all these years) and to cut a long story short, he has now become a consulting client. I have enjoyed working with Bill enormously, not only because I’ve always been a big fan, but we also share great conversation together in our discussions about the work, the plan, and life in general. So then I thought, who better than Bill to interview for this month’s ChatterCorner?

I began by asking Bill about his very distinctive style of work, his visual aesthetic. I remember when I first saw his bold imagery, and the “look” is still very distinct now, so did that style evolve naturally or was there a very specific plan to it all? Trust me, no plan. I just made images that felt natural to make. As with anyone interested in photography, I studied other photographs, the way they were made, the gear required, and I was influenced by my environment. You put all those ingredients together and out comes the soup. Now, however, I have very specific goals about the pictures I want to make and lay out a lot of plans to make the images come together.



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After a break from the industry, you are now back again – how is it different for you this time around? What are you hoping to convey with this newer work? I left the industry for a while to spend some time with a beloved family member before she passed away. Having come back, I feel a hunger to work again and not take projects or opportunities for granted. I hope the work I’m producing now represents a keen study of normal behaviors we humans engage in in the environment around me. I’ve always been interested in featuring production and lighting in my work. I think I’m now adding a strong layer of academic study of characters to my past work.

With the lines being so much more blurred these days, I was curious to know if Bill considers himself a fine art photographer first, or a commercial advertising photographer who is also a fine artist? Or are the two so intertwined that they are both simply part of the same thing? Certainly, I think the two are intertwined. But, I believe I’m a fine artist who happens to have some production skills that commercial worlds can make use of. For the most part, I view myself as a photographer making pictures that I want to make. It’s a privilege that someone else sees my work and decides to show or buy the images or asks me to photograph something for them or their client. So what is it about portraiture in particular that speaks to you? I wish I could answer that with an elevator speech but I’m never able. (That’s okay I’m not a big fan of “elevator speeches” I’d rather hear about what you “feel”) Without getting too heavy, I’m very interested in human behavior patterns. Particularly dreams. My portraits are not necessarily about the single person in the photograph. Often, I’m making a picture about a group or category of people or behaviors I’ve observed. In that way, the portraits feel universal.

How do your personal projects tend to come about? Where do you get your inspiration and ideas? Do you keep a journal? Yes, I've always kept a journal. Last year I switched from a hard copy to Evernote, which I love. My ideas come from my surroundings, the people I meet, the landscape and hardscape around me, the music and movies I watch. I make notes about anything to which I have a response. Sometimes my images are an amalgam of three or four experiences I've had, sometimes an image is a draft for part of an image that will be made at some future time.

This brings me nicely to how perfectly suited Bill is to what he does for a living. His birthday is February 19th, and although one might think he is an Aquarius, he is in fact zero degrees and fourteen minutes Pisces, literally right on the cusp. So what does that mean? It means that the Pisces in him is the part connected to dreams, fantasy, and the imagination, which Bill obviously has a lot of. Pisces wants to experience everything so they can identify with it. And, as he is right on the tail end of Aquarius, he also brings that energy to the table – the Planet Uranus rules Aquarius and is connected with the light and the ether, and without that, there would be no photography – notice how Bill talks about the importance of the light!



©Bill Lusk

Do you have an essential piece of photographic gear that you always carry with you - your “must-have” item? Not really. Though, when I read this question aloud my assistant just answered “Elinchrom Deep Rotalux”. I do like that piece of gear. (For those of you that do not know what that is, it's a lighting “soft box”) My answer would likely be light. I just feel lost if light is not playing a role in crafting an image. So, I will most likely have strobes, flashes, or fresnels with me when going out to shoot. And how about the most important piece of non-photographic gear you always have with you? My journal. That's where I log thoughts and ideas. My memory is pretty short term so a journal has always helped to keep me focused.

During your break from the commercial advertising world, you also began teaching. What do you most enjoy about teaching and what do the students teach you? I've been teaching now for about 3-1/2 years. Teaching does a lot of good things for you. You have to really understand what you're teaching to be able to teach it. I teach lighting so I have to know the science as well as approach to manipulating light to help others understand light better.

A teacher has to be aware of technology changes and the effects those changes have on how they present information to students. In an educational environment the learning goes both ways. I'm always hearing a new perspective and approach to subject matter. Sometimes I'll even add notes to my journal right in front of a student as they're talking about something on which they're working. Their influences on me have been nothing but positive. I'm very grateful that I found teaching.

So who would you say are your teachers or the photographers you admire or who have influenced you? I certainly can't name only one. A few off the top of my head include: Nadav Kander, Robert Mapplethorpe, Annie Leibovitz, Irving Penn. Plenty, plenty more... And notice again the importance of light in all of these photographers' work...



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I'm always interested to hear how a photographer first got started, and what they would do if they weren't a photographer? I was a fine art major so I considered photography to be one of multiple media with which to work. I used to produce works that included photography layered with mylar or very thin paper upon which I had drawn or printed things out. I'm still very attracted to collections of things and layering them. Commercially, my wife's sister worked at an ad agency and they needed someone to shoot a job cheaply. I was young and inexperienced so I guess I fit the bill perfectly. Things just snowballed and grew organically from there. If I weren't a photographer I think I would probably be working with collections in some capacity; a history museum or teaching. I thrive in academic situations.

And in closing, do you have a funniest moment or story you can recall from a photo shoot? I remember a little guy, who weighed maybe 115 lbs. that was working on one of our crews at an outdoor golf course location. It was spring and the wind was gusting, so as a precaution my first assistant sent this guy over to manage a 12x scrim in the wind. A huge gust came and we all turned to see the scrim lift off the ground with our fellow crewmember attached like a kite's tail. His legs got caught in the stand and he landed on his back. I guess I shouldn't find that funny but I can't help myself...

And last but not least we have the ChatterDozen quick questions:

- 1) What is your favorite day of the week, and why? Friday. Most Friday evenings are still precious to Americans. Everyone wants to get back home to their families by Friday evening. Even if it's up early Saturday morning to fly out somewhere or meet a call time, Friday nights are personal time.
- 2) What is your favorite TV show? 30 Rock
- 3) What was the last movie your saw? To Catch A Thief
- 4) Give me a favorite word, and why? Reciprocal. So much good usually comes from reciprocating.
- 5) If you could be born in another period of history, when would that be and why? Would love to have lived in England, Austria, or Belgium/The Netherlands at the beginning of the 20th century. Arts & Crafts, Art Nouveau, and Secessionist art and ideals were realized then. I'm attracted to the work and many of the tenets of those movements.
- 6) What is your favorite music, song, or band? Allen Mills band The Lost and Found. We just photographed Allen and had one of the best shooting days ever. The guy is a national treasure!
- 7) How about your favorite animal? Dogs
- 8) If you could get on a plane tomorrow, and go anywhere you wanted to and perhaps somewhere you've never been before, where would you fly to and why? Funny you should ask, we were just talking about this with some friends this weekend. We've traveled quite a bit but haven't been to one of the best tourist destinations of all - Paris. So, if I had the chance tomorrow I suppose I'd swipe that one off the bucket list. (Then allow me to give you full permission to get yourselves over there ASAP! Paris is a must!)
- 9) What is your favorite food? Toughest question of all because I love food! But, I'll give you an honest, non-foodie answer. A southern style hotdog. I'm a vegetarian so I don't eat what we refer to in the south as a "wienie". We usually pile deep fried hush puppies in its place. Then add mayo, mustard, slaw, onions, and veggie chili. (You're right – that was an honest answer!)
- 10) And your favorite color?
- 11) If I handed you an Oscar for photography, whom would you be thanking in your acceptance speech? My wife, Sissy. Jim Davies. George and Jean. Mom and Dad. All of the great crews and clients. Canon, Broncolor, Adobe, & Apple.
- 12) And besides these key people for your acceptance speech, who else (dead or alive) do you admire? I'm choosing a hero out of a multitude here. Annie Leibovitz - she's done so many things just right.



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