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The Gazette

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Neighbors

Fine art photographer Daniel Oppenheim

"Daniel Oppenheim: Kolkata-Bengaluru Journal," an exhibition of large-scale photographs, will open in the Gallery at the Ossining Public Library on Friday, August 1.

A reception will be held on Saturday, August 2 from 2 to 4 p.m., and a gallery talk with the artist will be held on Wednesday, August 13 at 7 p.m.

The exhibition, which will run through August 30, features recent, unprecedented work by Croton-on-Hudson-based photographer Daniel Oppenheim, who traveled to Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) and Bengaluru (formerly Bangalore), India in 2012, seeking new subjects for his specialization in nature photography. Instead, Mr. Oppenheim was profoundly inspired by the human subjects he encountered and created a new body of work that departs from his intimate, well-known images of the natural world.

Daniel Oppenheim

"I left … for each city's slums, where the caste of people known as 'untouchables' lives," he says. "One hears and sees much about the exotic colors, sounds, and scents of India, but what took me by surprise and deeply moved me were the people. What they lack in material possessions they remediate in humanity. They did not treat me as foreigner with a big camera; to them, I was a fellow human being. We met on common ground, with no barriers. I found throughout a mutual curiosity, openness, and a sincere desire to connect."

Mr. Oppenheim first became enamored with photography in his early teens, when he created a darkroom in his home in Jerusalem, Israel, to support his professional and fine art work. His photographs are on permanent exhibition at the Hotel Allegro in Vienna, Austria, can be viewed in galleries along the Hudson Valley, and seen online at www.danoppenheim.com. His work has been collected locally and internationally.

"Daniel Oppenheim: Kolkata-Bengaluru Journal" is open Mondays and Thursdays 9 a.m. – 9 p.m., Tuesdays and Fridays 10 a.m. - 6 p.m., Wednesdays 1 - 9 p.m. and Saturdays 11 a.m. – 5 p.m. The Gallery is located on the lower level of the OPL, 53 Croton Avenue, Ossining.

Daniel Oppenheim was interviewed last week by Croton-on-Hudson art historian Marion Callis. Some excerpts:

MC: Tell us about yourself.

DO: My professional life took a rather circuitous route. As a teenager in Jerusalem, Israel, I built my own photography darkroom to support my professional and fine art work. But at the same time, I was equally involved in science, performing research at the Hebrew University as a high school biologist. Suddenly, for reasons I can't explain even now, I was swept away by music, which led me to pursue three degrees in music theory and composition. My music compositions twice represented Israel in the prestigious World Music Days, and my technical graduate work at Stanford University's Center for Computer Music in Research and Acoustics (CCRMA) focused on supporting music composition and performance. This specialization attracted IBM Research, where I'm still working after more than two decades! But back when I enrolled as an undergrad, I remember thinking I'd focus on music rather than biology just for a year or two, so I can find out if I truly am a musician, an artist; this turned out to be a question I could not answer for many years. Today, I finally recognize that I am indeed first and foremost an artist. This is because I view art and creativity primarily as a way of life, a way of looking for, approaching, and solving problems. So the artist in me applies equally to my "doing" of photography, science and music.

MC: How did you get started with photography?

DO: Fortunately, as a teenager, I had a neighbor who was a professional photographer. He taught me all about composition, light, and darkroom techniques - he was a great mentor. He also tried teaching me studio techniques for shooting models, often nudes, but I was too shy to follow through. So I'd give him my camera and learned later, while developing his shots in my darkroom. Years later, I was hoping to rebuild my darkroom in my home in Croton to share my enthusiasm for photography with my daughter, Tal. We both looked forward to the physical interaction with paper, light, and chemicals. But soon I realized that pouring photo chemicals down a septic system presented a problem, so reluctantly I moved into digital photography, which with hindsight, was a great move.

MC: If you could work with another photographer from the past, who would it be? What is it about their work that attracts or inspires you?

DO: What an interesting question -- more so because I'd have given a very different answer a few weeks ago! I just returned from Vienna, where I saw a fascinating exhibition of photos Stanley Kubrick made as a journalist in his twenties, "Eyes Wide Open." The images were made well before he got into filmmaking, but one can trace a direct path from his photographs to his movies. Kubrick was praised for capturing realistic images of people and celebrities "exactly as they are," when in fact, his approach isn't about realism at all. To paraphrase him, "Reality is good, but stories are more interesting." His photographs were meticulously staged, and preconceived to fit his storyboard -- stories that later became central to his films.

All this has direct relevance to the work presented in my current exhibition. The images are about a very direct and intense connection that formed in the moment the image was captured. The connection is relived and transmitted when the printed images are viewed. Kubrick excelled at finding that connection. I would love to spend time with him and learn how to plan and approach a shoot with a very clear intent, as he did.

MC: If no one saw your work, would you still create it?

DO: How we used to ponder this question as young composers! But like most things in our human experience, there isn't a simple yes or no. I believe that making art fulfills an inner need: one composes, because one can't *not* compose. I shoot photographs because I am compelled to. A purist would say it isn't truly art if it's motivated by earthly concerns of money or fame. Perhaps that's true, to a point. For me, being an artist is a way of being and doing, and thus most of what one does is art, regardless of domain: music, visual art, engineering, science, mathematics, etc. In that context, perhaps the question asks "Would you still have created these images without the motivation of an exhibition?" I can't help but recall Mozart's comment about his then-unrealized composition, *The Magic Flute*; he said something like "I wish someone would commission an opera from me, so I can finally compose *The Magic Flute*." Would I still shoot the same photos? Absolutely. Would I still have discovered among them the images for this exhibition, or made the prints you see here? Perhaps not, unless I was fully retired.

MC: Who would you like to have see it?

DO: Nothing would please me more than to have the subjects of these photographs see the final output -- I'd love to be with them then, too.

Above, 'Girls, 2014,' Below, 'Young Men, 2014.'
30 by 30 inkjets, copyright 2014, Daniel Oppenheim

MC: Please tell us about your process.

DO: As a composer, my creative process is all about invention: I create every aspect of my music, from motif through melody, harmony, structure, and orchestration. Each work focuses on a different musical problem, first inventing its raw materials, which are then shaped into the final musical experience through which I want the listener to travel. This kind of process is relatively common in the realm of visual art, but it is an approach I am less familiar and less comfortable with right now. I cannot yet work in photography the way I do in music, or as other visual artists do, including many photographers. For me, photography is still a process of discovery and refinement; I need an image to start with. This is not unlike the pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, who often started with a popular comic image, which for me is like a captured image, and then refined them in his hallmark style, which for me would be the rending of the print.

One thing I consciously carry over from music led to my notion of the final print. The musical score in itself, in my view, has little musical meaning, it just tells performers what to do. Musical meaning, whatever it is, is revealed only during a performance as part of the musical experience. Similarly, any image in my computer, however processed, has little artistic meaning. It is only the final print that opens up for the viewer's experience, and is therefore the "true" manifestation of the image. In fact, my current understanding of the body presented in this exhibition, and all the critical decisions I made relating to things such as size, selection, and order, began to crystallize only after I experienced for myself a 30x30 print I made of the *Young Men*. I was astounded, because this experience was so different from my previous understanding that grew from hours of exploring the images on my computer screen. This is why I insist on doing my own printing: it is my interpretation of the image.

MC: What challenges do you face as a photographer?

DO: While I have a deep understanding of elements of music, I feel exposed and somewhat bewildered by visual art. As musician I loved teaching music appreciation to non-musicians. People often say they love music but don't understand it, to which I reply something like "There is no need to understand; there is the joy of the experience." This is what I am learning about visual art: it is less an issue of my not knowing formal concepts, and more that I was unaware of what I already knew instinctively. For example, years ago when I was taking my first photo printing class with master photographer and printer John Paul Caponigro, who was explaining the difference between warm and cold light. In music, I would know exactly what to do in order to create an

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experience of warm or cold, but I could not translate that visually. Paul pointed to the white wall, and had me experience the color changes from the cold noon light to warm evening light. Similarly, when selecting images for this exhibition and designing the installation, my good friend Richard Sigmund, an incredible artist, explained to me it's not about individual images, it's about creating a "piece." It took me a while to understand that he was talking about creating a unified experience for viewers, and that this experience is crafted by carefully controlling expectation, tension, and release. And these are exactly the elements a composer would consider for the structure of his composition!

It's been interesting to hear, following performances of my music compositions, people describing visual experiences they've had while listening, which I confess I often couldn't understand or relate to at the time. Similarly, people observing my visual images often tell me they feel a rhythm and sense of movement. I'm very curious and constantly learning from such feedback, and this is all highly motivating.

MC: How does your work affect the way you see the world?

DO: My work is a reflection of how I see the world; it's a two-way feedback loop. As my views of the world, of people, and of relationships change, so does my work. And what I learn by making work about the world, people, and relationships in turn changes me.

MC: Would you like to share any upcoming projects?

DO: This project is a very important turning point for me as I am moving from an abstract and intellectual portrayal of an object into a very personal and intimate dialog with a human being. For this to happen, a dialog must first occur between me and my subject. But more importantly, a dialog must also occur between the printed image and the viewer. They say that a good image tells a story. I think that a good portrait creates a dialog, and better still, a dialog that may well be different every time one encounters the same image.

This is fundamentally hard. For example, one can perfect a technique of shooting flowers. By carefully controlling things such as light, angle, distance, focus, aperture, and so on, one can be reasonably confident he can capture the image he envisions. Not so with people and dialog. Point a camera at somebody and everything changes. Shoot in a studio and everything can become artificial. So how do you capture a dialog, an expression, a feeling, that is perceived as true, authentic, and engaging?

Figuring all this out is a big part of my next project. One ingredient is, I believe, authenticity. The images in this exhibition are compelling to me because they are authentic. Everybody knows about the poverty these people live with, but too few recognize their dignity and humanity. It wouldn't work, or at least it would be something very different that wouldn't interest me, if the subjects were in any other setting than their own. But can I go a step further - can I also tell their message? Will it then be their message, or mine? Behind the beauty and humanity lurk some horrific things, such as the hardship and abuse of women. Take the image *Girls* for example. I pointed out to a native Indian friend the decoration and detail of the girls' clothing, and how it must give them a sense of balance and dignity. My friend looked at me with sad eyes and said -- "I wish that were true, but there girls are too often for sale: the more attractive they are, the higher the price." This shocked me terribly. The exploitation of women and the violence to which they are vulnerable in India is a subject I want to try to address in the future.