

An interview by Alexis Anne Clements

Alexis Clements: When you prepare for a photo shoot are you more methodical or spontaneous?

Arnold Newman: Both of the above. Whenever I want to photograph someone, I read about them. I read biographies. If they are painters or scientists, I know their work. This is all good. It prepares me to observe. For example, with Stravinsky, I loved his work and when I was asked to photograph him finally he was staying in a hotel, this was in New York, I had no opportunity to get out to the West Coast where he lived -- this goes along with another question you had about him -- I am not only an environmental but a portrait photographer. So, I am going to the concerts all the time. I love music. Everything from Beethoven to good New Orleans jazz. I would watch the piano or notice the piano. It was strong, harsh, beautiful and it looked like a big flat. It looked very much like his own work. We went on from that point after we researched his apartment to find the right place (including Steinway) to find the right place with the right kind of piano.

Other times when I have no opportunity and I have to come take a quick look, I have to use all the resources of all those years of experience, my knowledge, my innate ability to look around, which most people should have that should be in the arts, and have to make quick decisions. I do almost as well that way as when I am researching it. That doesn't mean that it's going to be a better photograph. It just simply means that I am able to think better. Let's put it that way.

AC: I read that you don't really consider yourself an environmental portrait photographer, is that true?

AN: No, I think basically I am. But I hate labels. That label was placed on me by an early writer who did an article on me calling me the father of the environmental portrait, which seems to have stuck. But the Stravinsky is not an environmental portrait, it's really, if you want to put a label on it, it's symbolic, the Picasso] If you're familiar with my work. (I'm sure you are or you wouldn't be doing this.) You know my Picasso head, that is not an environmental portrait. That was taken in an environmental but I was so fascinated by the intensity of his look that I cropped it right down to his head. I think it was much stronger as a photograph.

In other words. I think the best picture I can make whether it's environmental or not, it may start out environmental but that's it.

AC: How do you feel about digital photography?

AN: Why not?

AC: Do you use it?

AN: Yes. Particularly in color. I work in color a good deal. It's only in recent years that some of the books used a lot of color where before it was too expensive. That's why so many people thought I didn't do color. But anybody who had seen my work in many

magazines, they mostly all required color most of the time. And color is not just for the sake of color, it should mean something.

AC: Absolutely. I know that you studied painting before photography. Do you still paint?

AN: Unfortunately not. I started as a painter and I got fascinated by photography and when I felt after about 6, 7, 8 years that if I would go back or have enough money to paint I realized that I would take 6, 7, 8, 10 years to get back to where I should have been had I never discontinued painting. By this time I was in the Museum of Modern Art and many other museums and I just realized the effort was too great and besides I got interested in the young lady who's on the other telephone. (His wife was listening in on the interview - Ed.) That was a few years ago. We are married 55 years. It's temporary. You should be as happy as we are.

AC: Who was your favorite to photograph?

AN: There were two. Particularly Kennedy. Because I became acquainted with him when he was totally unknown to the public. He was only known for dating the most beautiful women in sight. {Laughs} He had not yet been married. I spent 3 hours with him photographing him as part of a story on the Senate. We had coffee together and all that sort of thing -- I haven't counted the number of times I have photographed him. I mean, I don't say that he was my best friend or that I was his best friend but I was pretty well acquainted with him and I sort of had an open invitation to come to the White House

whenever I wanted to but if you over do that sort of thing suddenly the door closes. I photographed him with a group of his advisors, but that was by accident, it was supposed to be only the advisors, about a month before he was killed. {Quietly} He had a great sense of humor and all that sort of thing.

AC: What projects are you currently working on?

AN: Well, at age 86 I am taking a good look at the future -- what's left of it. Nobody knows. My heavens! Cleaning up. Occasionally taking pictures for myself as well as for others. I am working on a new show, my memoirs -- always hope there will be enough time for all that sort of thing. I've never known a real artist who's ever retired or played golf.

AC: That's good to hear.

AN: You can't retire. If you'll excuse the expression, you have to work, its like you can't help yourself, its like you have to go to the bathroom.

AC: [Laughs] Very good. A couple of years ago I saw you present a lecture at the University of Denver. I was wondering if you are going to be traveling around again.

AN: There's nothing scheduled at the moment.

AC: How many grandchildren do you have?

AN: We have 4.

AC: Any future photographers amongst them?

AN: No. Thank heavens! First of all we had 2 sons and we agreed that they should do what they want to do. We hoped we were bringing them up right. One of them went to MIT and became a scientist. People are still working on a discovery he made when he was an undergraduate. The other became first an artist then a designer of furniture. He's out on the West Coast with a firm where he's got about 90 people under him. Our oldest granddaughter is at MIT and just finished her second year. His brother, who is 22, just graduated from Rensselier Polytechnique and is doing his graduate work at Brandeis. The youngest one wants to be a doctor, so, we're not disappointed. The youngest one is 14 and a girl so she has to get through that period [her teen years] before she knows what she wants to do in life. I am always told that girls are the difficult ones in their early teens.

AC: We are. [Both laugh] We are for sure. What kind of advice can you give new photographers trying to get a break in the market?

AN: Well, I hope before they become new photographers that they start studying the past going back as far as cave drawings. Painting and photography are intertwined. First of all you have to know the difference psychologically, physically and all that sort of thing.

They should really study the past, then study the present to see what's good for you then work your ass off. I am astonished to find now that a lot of the young people don't know the past in photography; I've actually had some of them ask who's Stieglitz? You do know who Stieglitz was, don't you?

AC: Absolutely. We have two history of photography courses at the Art Institute.

AN: I hope the students don't just slough it off because it isn't just the dates and things like that, although it's good to know what came when and who influenced whom sometimes, but you have to know what they did creatively. Too many people think they are being original when they are copying other people who copied other people. They really think if they put a little twist on it they're original. This kills me. Very little work in black and white has been done with digital. With color there has been a great deal. But they don't learn color, and they haven't learned how to use it and make it meaningful rather than just throw it in for the sake of color. In other words, I guess I am old fashioned, but rather strangely all the great photographers I know in the early past and particularly in my generation, and even the present generation -- the people in the 30s and late 20s -- the really good ones have an art background or at least studied art, sometimes on their own when they didn't get enough in school. That's part of our background, how to put things together, even if its a candid shot. Take a look at Degas, he was the first candid photographer. He actually did photography.

AC: I wasn't aware of that.

AN: That's what I'm talking about! [laughs]

AC: They didn't teach us that. They stick strictly with photographers in our history classes.

AN: Well, if you look at Degas' photographs, because of the technical problems with photography in those days, his pictures would have to be very posed but still there was a spontaneity in them that showed up in his paintings. He would cut people's heads in half at the edge of a canvas. Take a look, there's a lot to be learned.

AC: What was your first photo shoot?

AN: I was offered a job during the depths of the depression. My father lost all his money in the banks over night. After two years of working 8 hours a day and holding down a scholarship and traveling 15 miles out to the University of Miami where I was taking art courses, I was offered a job in photography in Philadelphia, where many of my friends were. I thought I would study art at night. After I got there. I was there a few days and they all went out taking pictures and I borrowed a camera from an uncle of mine. He had picked it up as an amateur photographer in the 20's. I began to experiment. In my last book, which is just called Arnold Newman, the first photograph in that book which is a black mother and child was the very first photograph I took. I remember walking out, only 2 blocks away from the big department store I was at. I realized that if I was going

to take pictures there was a psychological and physical difference between making a photograph and making a painting or a drawing. When I saw this woman I asked her, I always asked first for permission, I asked her if I might take her picture. She looked up and nodded her head and went back to nursing her baby. That's what I took.

Automatically, having studied composition I just put the picture together. You can see the influence of many photographers from Walker Evans to Mondrian to heaven knows who in my work. This particular photo, though, is just influenced by a general sense of composition.

I worked for 3 years in these studios, in these very cheap studios; the first one was a forty-nine cent picture. You still can go into the old PP of A type of portrait studios and you'll take a look, it might be in your town, and you'll see 2 photographs amongst a lot of others on display that impress the people to come in to spend their money. Its 2 men side by side they both have the same dark blue suit, little white hankie, the same lighting, the same expression, same background and everything else. Everything is the same; one might be a little older than the other. One is the owner of the factory and the other works on the assembly line. To me this isn't photography, its merely doing it by the numbers. A lot of those people are still doing it. That is why I decided to go on out and say something about these people. To my surprise, you couldn't find anything different. You'd see a picture of President Taft taken in the Whitehouse and it looked like it could have been taken in any office in the world. Everything was pushed into the background; you didn't [know] where it was taken. That's why I started experimenting with what is now called environmental portraiture.

AC: Who is the one person living today that you would most like to photograph?

AN: Well, are you a Republican?

AC: Yes.

AN: I've been trying to work out arrangements with the current President, who I don't agree with, but I will not do a bad picture of him. I've done the last 10 [presidents] and I want to keep my franchise going. There are so many others I would like to do, whose work I admire, many great scientists, great artists and that sort of thing. There are so many people who have contributed to culture. I don't go for the popular artists and stuff like that. For me, I don't get it. I want somebody whose work is going to live through the ages because it gives me something to hold onto and say something with.

AC: Woody Allen is one of my favorite directors and I was wondering what it was like photographing him.

AN: We had to put it off once. We found out there was a big parade like we're having today, up 5th Avenue. We had to postpone it a week and he was shooting in the street so he had 30 minutes and gave me 50 minutes or something like that. I'd already looked through his apartment. He had asked me to come and take a look, or I asked him if I could do that and he said, fine. So when I got up there I found out that he always did his writing in bed. So I photographed him writing in bed, which I thought was a good idea. It was [a] lot different than other pictures of people. When we started talking I found out we

were racing and I said, you've got to give me a little bit more time. The people said I only had a half hour. After 20 minutes this PR girl starts nudging him to go back, he had a couple of hundred people waiting for him. So I said, Woody, for heaven sake, if a scene doesn't please you, wouldn't you want to do it again? He said, damn right! So we started talking about having to do it right, in other words -- perfection. Our conversation went off on those lines -- creativity and perfection and that sort of thing. In other words, he's a perfectionist. He looks like a shlump if you know what I mean. Do you know what a shlump is?

AC: No.

AN: Its sort of a bastardized Yiddish expression meaning somebody who doesn't know where he's at and that sort of thing. Personally, he's the exact opposite. He's a perfectionist and everything has to be perfect. Everything has to be right and that's how we got along.

AC: Are there any photographers that you really admire right now?

AN: There are so many. I have a collection of other people's photographs, including some student work. Students that I think have promise. I love when I see a new talent coming up and the work doesn't have to be at all like mine. As a matter of fact I hate when people imitate my work or deliberately do it and show it to me, thinking I am going to admire it. I like to see original, real, creative work by younger people. I have several

younger people I have seen from high school on up to college. I guess I'm a mentor to a couple of them. One of the younger ones, well I guess you wouldn't call her so young, is Andrea Modica. Do you know her work?

AC: Yes.

AN: Do you know that she works with an 8x10? I was stunned when I found that out. We've actually become good friends, she and her husband and my wife and I. There are a lot of other younger people, right now I am trying to remember the name of one who's in her 20s, I think she is from Philadelphia. There are so many people who are really good. True, some of them are not all that original but it gives me pleasure just to see new things. Any art form doesn't die, even with Picasso. People have gone on to make great art after him. Do remind me of Picasso! He was a great artist and a lousy human being.  
[Laughs]

AC: What piece of writing, art or music has most influenced your life?

AN: I have always said, thank heavens that not one piece of art or one piece of music has influenced me. If I was influenced only by Mondrian or only by Strand only by anybody I would then become only an imitator of Strand or Ansel Adams, who was a good friend, or any of these people...I was influenced by quite a number of people. Then, as I explained before, with the advice to young photographers -- really try to find out what you love to do and try to stick with it. In the very beginning, I made a mistake, when I

was asked to do my first photograph for Harper's Bazaar - and they asked me because they liked the work they'd seen of mine when I was quite young - and I made the mistake of trying to imitate the work of one of their photographers. I did very careful lighting, very sharp and all of that. It was back in 1942. It wasn't a total failure but it wasn't one of my best photographs. So I am thankful that not one person influences me so strongly that I only follow that one person or that one group of people.

As far as music is concerned I am all over the lot. I love it. I love classical music; I love jazz and all that sort of thing, anything that has any soul in it. Stravinsky particularly of course -- I did a whole book on Stravinsky -- it was badly printed, I hope you take that into consideration. They broke every agreement we had. We decided not to sue because we would spend the rest of our life trying to sue because the original publisher with whom we signed the agreement sold out to another big publisher who had more lawyers than God. We are hoping to have it redone properly one day.

AC: What kind of technical advice can you offer?

AN: We are moving into the digital age. Thank heavens most of the kids that come out of the schools are pretty well trained. They ought to really know a bit about the past because then they would have an idea of what real quality is. At this point, you can't get the quality you had in the past. I have to think always about archival ness. A lot of the stuff coming out of the digital workshops are not archivally permanent. So I try to keep up with all the information in that. The problem is, too many of the magazines cater to amateurs and forget about the fact that if any of the become really good artists that a lot of the art dealers and particularly museums are very suspicious about where these prints

came from, how long they will last and all that sort of thing. I have been in photography for 67 years and some of the pictures I did in that first year, are archivally permanent. A lot of them are mounted on the wrong thing, but I won't go into all the details. In terms of archival quality, a lot of the things they worry about are not true, but a lot of the things they worry about are absolutely true. You have to know your craft. I have never known a good artist whether painter, or photographer or what have you who didn't know their craft.

AC: Is there anything else you'd like people to know about you?

AN: It's nice to be recognized, to get awards -- honorary doctorates and all those things. You have to keep your feet on the ground. There are a number, not many, but a number of well-known photographers who let it go to their head. Then their work begins to suffer. Honestly, they begin to think anything they do is good. You have to be self critical, and you have to listen to your inner honest person. I always say, I have never known a real artist who's ever retired or played golf. It is like you have to go to the bathroom. You just can't help yourself. You just love to do it. Everybody I have ever known or read about who was really a great artist has worked until they dropped dead. I think that is the way it is.