

INTERVIEW

Carl Corey

Interviewed by Stephanie Dean

If there was one thing I could impart upon a young photographer wanting to publish it would be this: Work to your own venue with all of your passion, listen to good picture editor's comments on your work, and wait to publish until you are ready. Once a book is out you are exposed to the world, be sure you are ready for that exposure.

— Carl Carl, January 6, 2013



"4325" from the project "Blue"

Carl Corey is working on his second book. Or is it his third? His first monograph was **Rancher** (Bunker Hill) and was published in 2007. His second monograph, entitled **Tavern League** (Wisconsin Historical Society Press), was just published in 2011. However, he was also featured in the book **New York A Photographer's City** (Rizzoli 2011). So perhaps this is his third *monograph*, fourth *book*...? Well, however you would like to count it, Carl is prolific. Carl is prolific both in photographs and in books. His next book **For Love and Money** is scheduled to be released in spring of 2014. You can catch glimpses of the work on his website. Looking at his website, you will come across the project **BLUE: A Portrait of the American Worker** which is his fourth long-term project. The culmination of the **BLUE** photographs will be, in his words: "a nationally traveling exhibition, an illustrated book, community programming and time capsule opportunities for the companies featured in the project." So, Carl is planning his fifth book...or is it his fourth?

He photographs masculine things: Wisconsin taverns, ranchers and manual and blue-collar labor. The individual photographs themselves are masculine. The large color photos of worker's eyes meet the viewers with proud gazes here, with sharp acuity there, with calm courage here, and with a relaxed confidence there, and the pride of the American Worker *everywhere*. Secondary themes such

as strength, the power of one, the honesty of manual labor, and the pride of America as a working nation come through in bold, sturdy compositions full of descriptive information. His sitters are usually centered in the frame. However, they "fit" in their compositions perfectly. You don't immediately notice that his subjects are centered in the frame, as you do with the more stagnant and static-shooting photographers, such as Reinke Dijkstra or Dawoud Bey. Because Carl shoots with a medium format Hasselblad with a Phase One back, the burden of the large format is not pushed on the viewer with its weighty simplicity and monumental banality as it is in Gursky or Struth, from whose photos the viewer can nearly feel the weight of the equipment and it's burdensome size.

For this issue of F-stop I interviewed Carl about his work, including his newest series "BLUE". I asked him about the place of beauty in art and I asked him "How would a young photographer go about publishing a book?." In this interview the voice of the man with two male first names, comes out loud and clear, and brimming with advice.



"2226" from Portraits of Ranchers



"3527" from For Love and Money

Interview with Carl Corey over email December 24, 2012 - January 6, 2013

Carl Corey: I totally disagree with the quote, "a smiling face has more mystery than a dull one." (Odd Nerdrum [1](#)) I don't feel non-smiling faces are dull. But this is what differentiates styles.

Stephanie Dean: First question: please expound upon your thoughts about the Odd Nerdrum quote you mentioned above, and how your beliefs affect your work and working process...

CC: I don't believe non-smiling faces are dull. Quite to the contrary I believe smiles are usually false representations of mood placed upon a subject by a photographer to represent a pleased and happy tone. I usually discount portraits containing smiles because of this falseness. Very few people go through their day with a smile on their mugs, and most of those few that do are probably breaking the controlled substance law. It's not that I don't appreciate a smile however, I just don't want a fabricated one. Since childhood people have been told to smile for the camera. It's a conditioned response to being in front of a lens. I work to establish a serious rapport with my subjects and the first thing I say is no smiles just be yourself... even then a few can't loose the smile.

SD: When did you realize that you were going to become a "photographer"? Can you describe the moment or moments to us? Or did you realize that you were going to become "an artist whose medium is photography"? Is there a difference for you?

CC: I was always interested in photography since I was about 10. At Northern Illinois University when I failed my voice test as a music major....which was ridiculous as I was a set drummer...I decided the

art department was interesting (cute girls) so I took a few classes. I soon became more involved in photography and transferred upon a professor's recommendation to another college offering a degree program in photography (SIU).

SD: What photographers motivate you or inspire you? Who are your photographic mentors (from near or afar, dead or alive)?

CC: David Gilmore retired from SIU - mentor. Diane Arbus, Walker Evans, Lewis Hine, Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Richard Misrach (early work), Stephen Shore, Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind.

SD: When I look at your photos, they are so well composed, the colors are so lush and vibrant -- in a lot of your work (especially the moments such as: "Diary" - May 22, 2012 - Popcorn Machine, July 13, 2011 "Variet" Written on a wall with a yellowing tree next to it in some beautiful light, July 13, 2011 A tent at an event which reads "Winter Area Lions") the light is almost palpable; I experience overwhelming pleasure out of viewing those photos. Where do you think "pleasure" belongs in the art world? For instance, I believe I have the right to seek pleasure from other photographer's images. Do you believe that ideas such as "pleasure" and "beauty" are outdated? Why or why not? Are there other words for these emotions or experiences?

CC: As a hedonist (I was a philosophy minor) I believe pleasure drives all human response and actions. It's impossible to not get pleasure from art that you connect with. Beauty or aesthetics in art is not outdated it's just evolving. What we see as beautiful changes as we mature, as artists, individuals, and as a race. I do adhere to an ethic of content first aesthetics second. The best work has both of course.

SD: In your "diary", the passage from August 19, 2011, shows a smiling young man at a pool table. The picture is luscious - a blend of cool aqua, teal, and Caribbean blues along with the tungsten yellow of lamps, the flesh tone of the pool table wood and the boy's skin. What makes this photo or photographic situation so different from the other, non-smiling photographic situations? Is this one of the situations you described in your response to me - *"I work to establish a serious rapport with my subjects and the first thing I say is no smiles just be yourself... even then a few cant loose the smile."* Is this a case of one of the ones who just "can't lose the smile"?

CC: This fellow just wanted to smile. It was a natural thing for him so I did not want to make him unnatural or uncomfortable. I don't feel it's any different from other situations in that it is an honest picture with a subject that is in his natural state. But as I stated earlier very few people go around smiling all day.

SD: Where is the farthest you have traveled to take a photo?

CC: China

SD: Did you know what photo you wanted to take in that distant location? Are you "a planner" (sketching out the photographs, getting the composition as close to your premeditated vision as possible...) or a "c'est la vie" photographer living by the decisive moment?

CC: I did advertising photography and film direction for 25 years and worked with sketches and layouts. I could not wait to get away from that pre-determined venue. So no, I don't limit the experience by sketching or predetermining a situation. I do however scout locations I will be working in to meet my subjects ahead of time and sometimes determine the area I want to photograph them in.

SD: Do you have any secret or "just for you" projects?

CC: No, I make pictures to show people...I document with a purpose and that needs to be shared to be effective. I think of myself not so much as a photographer but more as an anthropographer.

SD: What is it about Misrach's early work that you like? Where in the chronology of his career did he lose you as a fan?

CC: Misrach never lost me as a fan. I am still intrigued by Richard's work. However his early work had an influence upon me as I was re-establishing myself as a documentary photographer, particularly the *Cancer Alley* work.

SD: When do you consider a project "Finished" or "Done"? It seems like a natural break would be when you published a book. Were your projects "done" when the book was published?

CC: I finish a project when I feel the story has been told and more pictures in the series would be redundant. Too many excellent photographers are not good storytellers as they belabor a series to death. They need a good picture editor who will discard some pictures to make the remainder much stronger. I saw work by wonderful photographers on the World Trade Towers disaster, aftermath of Katrina, and Cuba that was very interesting up to a point but then it became boring and redundant as way too many pictures were included. It left the entire body of work weaker. It's like a comic telling a punch line twice...yeah we get it. Editing is so important and the adage of *leave the audience wanting more* is so true. I want to leave some room for interpretation as well.

SD: You described yourself as an "anthrographer," which I assume is a blend of an anthropologist and a photographer, can you describe the split that comprises the "anthrographer"? Is it 50/50 or does the anthropologist become more important in certain situations and vice versa?

CC: There is no split. It is one discipline. What I endeavor to do is unearth a certain cultural context in my pictures. I am very interested in the place my subject fills in society and how that place was affected by history and how that will affect the future.

SD: Absent on your list of photographers that have inspired you is August Sander. I'm sure you're used to comparisons between yourself and Sander. What is your relationship to Sander's photography and photographic philosophy?

CC: I hear that comparison a lot. It's quite flattering. I am no August Sander. Unfortunately I was not that familiar with Sander's work when I was in an influential stage.

SD: When discussing the smiling man in your "Diary" series, you used the word "honest" to describe the photograph. Photography will never be able to rid itself of the idea of truth, and it is something you seem to have come to terms with in your practice. Can you describe a dishonest photo using either one of yours as an example or using a photo from the photographic greats (Sander, Sherman etc.....) as an example?

CC: I do not introduce technique in my work. I use invisible technique to create a clean and straightforward picture with no alteration. An example of work not fitting into the "honest" category would be narrative work that utilizes whatever techniques needed to make a statement. This does not invalidate that work in any way. In many instances it becomes a totally wonderful and important piece, like Cindy Sherman's work (which I absolutely love). But it is not an honest photographic approach and that's just fine as it does not need to be. I do not make statements, I share

observations.

SD: Honesty comes up again in your “Blue” statement: “The intention is for BLUE to enlighten people about the American worker and bring focus to the benefits our workers provide by using an honest photographic aesthetic”. Is this definition of an “honest photographic aesthetic” close to the definition of an honest photograph? If it is different, even subtly so, would you mind explaining an “honest” photographic aesthetic?

CC: Honest Photographic Aesthetic = Real subjects in real situations and an invisible technique that portrays the situation pictured accurately. Post processing that does not alter the picture in any way other than what could be achieved in a darkroom, color correction, dodging, burning, spotting.

SD: When did you start on your project “Blue”?

CC: May 2012

SD: How did you come up with the idea for “Blue”?

CC: I was working on *For Love and Money* (which I just finished, book to be released in spring 2014) and I became interested in the workers at some of the larger family owned businesses I was photographing. I have always been conscious of the working class struggle as that is my background. I want **BLUE** to support these people, my people, and create an awareness of the important role they provide in American society.

SD: Your artist statement said that the project will last for 3 years, however when I asked you when a project's finished, you said “I finish a project when I feel the story has been told and more pictures in the series would be redundant. Too many excellent photographers are not good storytellers as they belabor a series to death. ...It's like a comic telling a punch line twice...yeah we get it. Editing is so important and the adage of leave the audience wanting more is so true. I want to leave some room for interpretation as well.” What is determining this 3 year timeline for this particular project? Did you receive a grant? Is it a publication deadline?

CC: After 35 years experience as a photographer I have a feel for how long a project will take. The logistics and pre-production in BLUE are immense, necessitating a long time frame. This does not mean it will not be edited properly after its completed. Editing will take quite a bit of time and is being done as I make pictures. There is a book planned and several publishers have expressed their interest in **BLUE**. The expenses involved are also immense so I am working with sponsors.

SD: Speaking of publication, do you have any tips for young and/or emerging photographers to follow? For instance, I'd like to publish 2 books – a book of my “Modern Groceries” (photographs) and a book of my essays on the smile, titled “The Exile of the Smile”. What advice would you give to someone in my amateur position?

CC: First and very importantly do not think there will be an income from publishing. There should be some financial gain, but it will never cover your picture production costs and your time as a photographer spent to create the work featured in the book. The publishing industry is in turmoil and changing rapidly with the advent of iBooks, eBooks, blurb books, etc. independent bookstores are folding rapidly as the on-line market replaces their services....It is not a pretty picture in publishing. Any one can self publish. However, the key is distribution, support for the title, and credibility. You need a good publisher to accomplish that. You also need passion, perseverance and the ability to know when it is right to publish a series, which can also come from a good picture editor. Never give

up the passion.

SD: Your project "Portraits of Ranchers" reminds me of Avedon's "In the American West". Can you tell us more about the process of making the portraits? Tell us everything, from how you got to the location, what the location looked like (i.e., were you in a studio or outdoors?), how you picked your models, what kind of conversations you had with them, how you printed the photos and so on....

CC: I had a show in Rapid City, South Dakota for the work in my first book, *Rancher*. I asked the museum director to please invite anyone who ranched to come in for a free portrait. I spent two afternoons in the museum's conference room doing that series using the big windows as the light source. I edited the takes to the series presented.

SD: What advice can you give young or emerging photographers that you wished someone had given to you?

CC: If you want to succeed as an artist be serious and understand it is a business like any other. You are a brand. If you do not understand business then acquire the help of those that do. It will be very difficult to build this business, but you need to persevere and be passionate while understanding that you are only one of many. Be nice, be smart, be confident.

SD: You've been interviewed by quite a few magazines and famous people, what was your favorite interview question?

CC: This one.

SD: And what answer did you give?

CC: This one.

SD: Can you give us (the readers of F-stop) an honest account, a timeline of emotions, if you will, of that proud moment of acceptance into the world of print, the very last conversation or changes to the book as it hit the press, that very first whiff of the fresh paint that came out and olefact-orily stained your name - photographs made multiple, with their own scent! If you do have the time, your first, second and third book publishing experiences are very much of interest to us.

CC: I believe content drives success, that along with perseverance and passion. I can't stress that enough. I did not self publish as I believe partnering with a good publisher will yield much better success in distribution, promotion and credibility. Self published books or vanity presses don't achieve much for a first time author. I see them as a waste of time and money which would be better spent making pictures that a publisher will want.

As for not making any real money that refers only to book royalties and by real money I mean a living wage. You will not be able to live off a single book's royalties. Usually I make back what the series cost to produce the first year in a book's royalties. However if done properly a good book will promote your work and prompt print sales as well as other venues of income from your work. I am a firm believer in making a living from my work. It is a profession and a career.

I have been fortunate in working with great people on my books. I have had total control over picture content and even the design approach. This is not to say there was no input from my editor there was. I have great respect for her and her input has influenced decisions I make, but the final call has always been mine. This is quite unique and I feel fortunate to have her confidence and trust on such

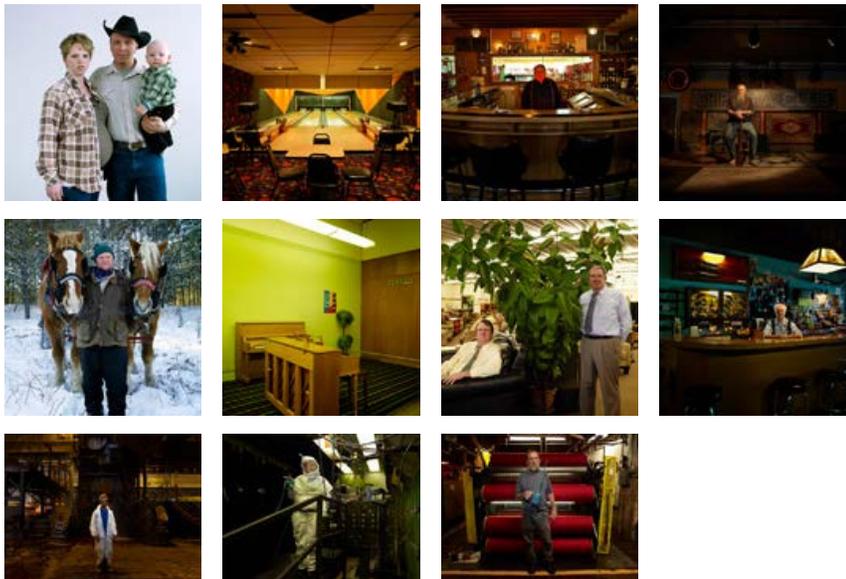
a grand level. She has mine as well.

I am not real fond of press runs as most printers have an arsenal of excuses as to why they cant do what they need to do. This statement comes from 35 years in the industry. Printers need to get the book off press as soon as possible and get more paper through the press. This is unfortunately a sad statement of the current publishing / printing industry trying to remain competitive with the Chinese bookmakers which they cannot possibly do. This however was not true with Worzalla Book makers of Stevens Point, WI. (Tavern League) They are outstanding and exhibit a sense of pride I have not seen in many printers / book makers. The end product was excellently produced. Of course the press director at the publisher (Wisconsin Historical Society Press) had much to do with this as well.

If there was one thing I could impart upon a young photographer wanting to publish it would be this: Work to your own venue with all of your passion, listen to a good picture editor's comments on your work, and wait to publish until you are ready. Once a book is out you are exposed to the world, be sure you are ready for that exposure.

Odd Nerdrum, Kitsch: More than Art, 2011, Cited in the author's article "Smile! A Polemic on Fine Art Portraiture and Portrait Photography" published in fstopmagazine.com, Issue number 46, October 2011 - November 2011.

[download pdf of interview here](#)



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