

“The real question is: does your art speak to the times and ask serious questions?”

Veteran photographer Errol Sawyer talks with the World Socialist Web Site

Richard Phillips
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After a more than 40-year career in the US and Europe, Errol Sawyer is a rare figure in contemporary photography: someone who worked in the often faddish and superficial world of high-end commercial photography but still retains his artistic integrity and creative spirit.

Born in Florida in 1943, Sawyer grew up in the Bronx and Harlem. He decided in 1969, after traveling in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, to become a professional photographer. In 1971, Sawyer moved to Europe—first to London and then Paris—where he became a fashion photographer, working for *Elle*, *Dépêche Mode*, French *Vogue* and other magazines. In 1978, he returned to New York and worked for American *Vogue*, *Essence*, *New York Magazine* and other publications before relocating back to Europe.

Constantly drawn to the real world outside the studio, Sawyer’s creative impulses found their most artistically satisfying expression in his street photography—portraits, wall graffiti, torn posters and semi-abstract “found objects.”

While Sawyer has devoted his energy since 1984 to special project assignments in the commercial arena, most of his time is concentrated on fine art photography (see: errolsawyer.com).

As leading American photography critic, A. D. Coleman, notes in Sawyer’s latest book, *City Mosaic*, a collection of 64 images shot mainly in New York, Amsterdam and Paris: “He works in a classic mode of mainstream-modernist street photography” but “speaks in its own voice, aware of the tradition on which it builds but not noticeably beholden to any predecessor therein.”

Sawyer is now based in Amsterdam where he continues to take pictures on a daily basis, developing and printing his mainly black and white photographs in his darkroom. From 2006 to 2010 he was a guest professor of photography at the Technical University Delft, Holland. His photographs have been acquired by France’s Bibliothèque Nationale, Le Musée Français de la Photographie, London’s Tate Gallery, the New York Public Library, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and other museums.

Sawyer has five other *Potbooks*, including *Children 1973*, *New York 1971–2003* and *Colombia Ecuador Peru 1968*, all ready for publication. He recently applied for a Guggenheim Grant to produce a photo-essay on the social plight of working class youth in European and US cities.

Sawyer spoke by phone from Amsterdam with the *World Socialist Web Site* about his early career and influences and the responsibilities facing photographic artists today. The following is an edited version of the discussion.

Richard Phillips: Could you explain something about your earlier influences and comment on the current photography art scene?

Errol Sawyer: I had many influences—I’m a child of the 60s and was around the bohemian scene in New York, which helped to shape me. Art must be about living experience. It’s essential for that to come through and be seen in your work. This is how you produce images that live and really speak to people.

There’s a lot of visual noise out there and it’s all up there on the Internet, but most of it has no real content. It’s all very underwhelming and there’s a lack of direction.

RP: And extraordinary prices are being paid for this material.

ES: Yes. The prices are unbelievable, simply unbelievable, and this really distorts the creative process.

I’m not in the larger arena of the art world today. I’m in my 70s and one of many people from my generation who are excluded from the current scene. I kind of see myself as a loner—and I guess many photographers of my generation feel that way—but I’m not terribly pleased with what I see around me.

I used to earn my living by shooting beauty and fashion—that was my speciality. I was in the company of a lot of commercial photographers who took themselves seriously as photographers. They did personal projects and were critical of much of the work and techniques around them. I was encouraged by that.

I met all sorts of people—Jimi Hendrix, Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg—and Larry Rivers’ son, Steve

Rivers. Diane Arbus photographed me when I accompanied my friend, Robin Phillips, to a photo session at Diane's loft on Avenue of the Americas. In fact, Robin, due to her family's connections, invited me to a lot of exhibition openings. It was this community—this vortex of energy—that helped my formation as a photographer.

James Moore allowed me to watch him work for *Harper's Bazaar* and other publications and so I learnt about commercial photography. Moore and other photographers, like Bill Silano, regarded themselves as creative artists, a bit like David Hemmings in the movie *Blow-Up*, but there was a duality that I was very ambiguous about.

The fashion people were comfortable with me but I wasn't really comfortable with them. I wanted to prove that I could do this work and rationalised it by telling myself that once I had the money I'd get round to the more creative work.

This was crap, of course. If you're going to do anything genuinely creative then you do it as a lived experience. That's the long and the short of it. Usually when you get comfortable with money, you lose that creative hunger.

Success is important—people can be inspired by it—but only up to a point. The real question is do you have anything to say—does your art speak to the times and ask serious questions? Are you going to be able to assist me in any understanding of our condition?

RP: Could you speak about your current work?

ES: I like projects that put me in touch with ordinary people. I want to provoke honest exchanges between their conceptions and mine and discover what we share in common. I'm not a person who can take a picture of someone suffering in the street and then walk away. I'm a human being first and a photographer second.

You learn from everyone and although I may not have the best ideas in the world, I permit myself to make mistakes and understand from those experiences. You may be walking past an image—on a wall or on a lamp post or maybe even an individual—and could have seen it many times but you decide to photograph it anyway. And you then discover something remarkable. I strongly believe in the hidden treasures in everyday life and try to discover myself through other people.

At the moment the whole damn world seems to be falling in on us politically and yet there are so few photographers and artists who seem to be engaged or passionately driven to try to express or examine this reality. There are too many in the creative landscape who are ahistorical and don't realise that you have to dot the i's and cross the t's historically in order to respond creatively to the world.

RP: This is bound up with the crisis of perspective in the working class and highlights the necessity for the development of socialist and internationalist movement. A movement in the working class will produce a shift among photographers and artists.

ES: That's right. One of the reasons I like the *World Socialist*

Web Site is that it probes into the root causes of political events and provides an historical perspective. There are all sorts of niche identity issues—feminism, gay pride and other things, which are valid things to discuss—but we have to address the larger questions. We have to understand the social dynamics that create these conditions and that is not being done.

RP: What was your response to the election of Barack Obama in 2008?

ES: I was never taken in by Obama. He tried to fly a symbol of hope and it seemed to take a long time before people realised he was just another puppet or as some would say "a house Negro." The African American community is becoming disillusioned with his presidency and slowly but surely becoming aware of his deeply conservative nature.

What is happening in Ferguson now is that many of the younger generation are dissatisfied with the so-called present leadership. They want to make their voices heard because they feel that they're being executed by the police. It doesn't take 17 shots to kill one person who is unarmed. These killings are being sanctioned by the state. Ask yourself, when was the last time a police officer was prosecuted for one of these shootings? And people like Al Sharpton, Jesse Jackson are brought in to close things down.

RP: What advice would you offer young photographers today?

ES: I used to evaluate master photography students' portfolios but insisted that they not only listen to what I had to say, but give me feedback. I wanted a genuine exchange of ideas.

My primary advice is that you must be honestly engaged and there must be a sort of spiritual connection. That's why I'm very dissatisfied with much of the work that dominates today. Too much of it is self-centred—staring at navels.

We are confronting a catastrophe and yet too many artists are just not rising to the occasion. The majority are not seriously attempting to understand what is going on around them. The attitude seems to be, "Do whatever you have to do for your five or fifteen minutes of fame."

Artists must allow their work to honestly reflect the human condition—for better or worse. Don't be afraid to criticise or ask questions and always discuss what direction you think we should be moving as human beings. We have to compare what we are doing today with what preceded us.

There's a lot of wisdom in the ancient artefacts of art. The primitive artists didn't work in a vacuum. It was an expression of their condition and about being challenged by the unknown, by famine, by pestilence, by death. It's all about context.



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