

# Mary Ellen Mark: Photographer and humanist

Seraphine Collins  
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Renowned American photographer Mary Ellen Mark died on May 25, 2015, at age 75, leaving behind a rich legacy. Born in Philadelphia on March 20, 1940, Mark began experimenting with image-making on her Box Brownie camera at the age of nine. As a young woman she went on to study painting and art history at the University of Pennsylvania, and in 1964 earned a master's degree in photojournalism from the university's Annenberg School for Communication.

Though Mark identified herself as a documentarian, claiming, "I'm a documentary photographer. That's what I've always wanted to be; that's where my heart and soul is," she also produced well-known commercial work and was a highly respected and well-paid maker of movie stills. Over the course of her life she published 18 books of photographs, showcasing predominantly black-and-white images, always shot on film. Her 19th book, *Tiny: Streetwise Revisited*, will be published posthumously this fall.

While Mark was known for photographing those at the fringes of society, including prostitutes, homeless families and the mentally ill, she was clearly motivated by genuine interest rather than exploitation, as is evidenced by the respect she paid her subjects.

She recalled her mindset when shooting Mother Teresa and the missions the nun served in India: "I knew the people, which I think is very important. Especially in a place like the Home for the Dying, where people are really ill and some of them die, you go back day after day, so when someone dies it's someone that you knew. You're not just running in and taking someone's picture who's in a bad situation." This sentiment should be an important consideration for—and perhaps even a rebuke to—admirers of Mark who tend to reduce the work's value by attributing its power to shock-value alone.

Many art school graduates and others will recall Mark's controversial 1990 image, "Amanda and Her Cousin Amy." Nine-year-old Amanda Marie Ellison stands at the front of a plastic swimming pool, wet in a tummy-baring swimsuit, face adorned with make-up complete with thick black eye liner. Her small hands boast fake salon-nails, and she smokes a cigarette. Her body language, with arm crossed across chest, and facial expression, communicate defiance. The unflinching nature of the child is unsettling for viewers. She is clearly not playing dress-up with adult props; she has smoked countless cigarettes before.

A certain type of contemporary moralist might criticize the photo for its "over-sexualization," but the fact remains that such children, in such circumstances, exist, and in greater numbers than many realize. Mark's work does its best to remind viewers of this. You may only have part of the story in front of you, but the reality of the artist's human subject is always unabashedly present. You can't help but ask: what circumstances led this individual to this place?

Mark claimed she was not being "political" in her work, explaining that she merely "[felt] an affinity for people who haven't had the best breaks in society. What I want to do more than anything is acknowledge their existence." However, she later observed, "Every photograph is the photographer's opinion about something ... It's how they feel about something, what they think is horrible, tragic, funny." Every one of her photographs communicated her perspective on the social issues she chose to document.

In the afterword to her 2006 career retrospective, *Exposure*, Mark reflected on her early career in the mid-1960s, when she often carried out freelance projects for publications such as *Life* and *Look*: "Documentary photography was respected and given a

real place. Magazines looked for interesting and meaningful stories about real people around the world. The cult of celebrity had not yet been invented... Today it's very hard to know what to believe. Cut-and-paste rules, inches are taken off bodies, heads are moved around, and the computer acts as a new and improved vanishing cream. Now the primary interest seems to be surface; content and reality are seldom seen. This new field of photography, 'photo illustration,' has replaced documentary photography in magazines."

The "content and reality" Mark mourned the loss of and regarded so highly are irrefutably present throughout her Ward 81 project.

In the winter of 1976 she was given permission to live on Ward 81, the maximum security section of the Oregon State Hospital, the only locked ward for women in that state, to interview and photograph the residents. Mark interacted with the women, all considered dangerous either to themselves or others, for 36 days, and the resulting images are created with grace and honesty. The humanity of these women—to many, a despised, faceless group of misfits—is elegantly captured. Mark said she was driven by the desire to tell the stories of those she encountered. In doing so, she also communicated many valuable truths that will continue to speak for years to come.

For the WSWS, New York-based photographer, and one of Mark's colleagues, Ivory Serra, recalled the woman and her gift, "There'll never be another photographer that shoots like she did; she saw a situation and became part of it instead of placing people into a manufactured vision. I don't think she could have seen life any other way but through the lens of a camera. Others have traveled, but no one has seen the world she saw.

"I ran into her once with my twin brother at a book signing and she examined us, asking 'Are you really twins? Let me see your eyes, your teeth.' She saw the physiology of the face. She got to know her subjects and was able to reveal their humanity. Through her work she provided people with access to communities and individuals they would never be able to encounter on their own.

"Mark wanted to make work that would be remembered, felt a responsibility to the history of photography, was compelled to capture these images because they were never going to happen again. For

her, a large part of that was square-format, analog photography—leaving behind a legacy of unaltered artifacts.

"She had a presence people remembered and respected. She wore trinkets around her neck that made a little sound when she walked into a space. There will never be another Mary Ellen Mark."

Mark's photographs can be viewed here.



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