

An appreciation for Irving Penn

(I wrote this early in 2008, finally following through on something I'd had in mind for a long time, and sent it to Mr. Penn in care of his gallerist.)

Dear Mr. Penn,

I have wanted to send you, for quite some time, a note of appreciation. I doubt that you will remember me out of the many assistants you've had over the years, but I worked for you from 1977 to 1979 (during the Olof Wahlund period). I helped prepare many aluminum plates for your pin-registered printing, and spotted quite a number of platinum prints.

When I was introduced to you by Paul Katz of Marlborough, I was only dimly aware of who you were, astonishing (even embarrassing) as that seems to me now. I do know, however, that when I happened to see a print of Cuzco Children at the gallery, I was riveted, having recognized it without consciously remembering it. I suppose I must have seen it in Life Magazine when I was very small, and it had somehow burned itself into my unconscious. There is something so inscrutable about that image; I feel as if those children can see me better than I see them.

I also helped collect, early in the morning along the highways (another assistant serving as wheel-man), some of the detritus you eventually used in your still-life photographs. I recall you had a gentle criticism to make of my understanding of your project: it seems I tended to pick up objects that struck me as photographically interesting, whereas you wanted things that were not interesting in themselves, but which could be made into a photograph which would be interesting – a subtle but important distinction.

After leaving your employ, I taught photography for fifteen years within the City University of New York, pursuing meanwhile my own photographic projects. I even made a few palladium prints and kallitypes and such like. At some point I acquired a view camera and started making still-life photographs, which have been at the center of my efforts for the past twenty years. While I have had only modest success career-wise up until now – a nut this stubborn squirrel is still trying to crack – I have been quite satisfied with many of the pictures themselves.

Some fourteen years ago I fell irreparably in love with a certain Stefania Levi of Torino; soon I left New York to be with her and have lived here ever since. All this would be too personal to mention and of no interest to you, except that her father is someone you know and surely remember well, the collector Marcello Levi. Your name comes up from time to time in our conversations. He is very proud of his association with you; your portrait of Isaac Singer is prominently displayed in his home office.

Back when I was working for you I was too timid (or too proud), or afraid of importuning, to show you any of my own work. When I started to make still-life photographs, it was for my own reasons, not out of any impulse to imitate your work (which would have been a foolish enterprise in any case). Nonetheless, something may have rubbed off on me, which I notice in some pictures I've made. Of all your work my favorites are probably the images you made with the 12"x20" banquet camera. In them I sense a certain point of view that seems not far from my own.

Besides your work, I will always remember your dedication to the task at hand, your craftsmanship, and your clarity of intention, values which I admire and try to live up to. As a token of my appreciation, I am enclosing a little booklet of my own work. I hope this letter finds you well.

con affetto,
Allen Schill

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