

Joel Aron: Secrets of a Passionate Portrait Photographer, Continued.

Q: Can you give us a little background information on your careers at Lucasfilm and as a photographer?

A: I've been with Lucasfilm since 1991, starting as an entry-level technical assistant at Industrial Light and Magic (ILM). Working for ILM was always a dream of mine, as they are one of the most legendary visual effects studios in the world. It was Star Wars that initially pointed my young sci-fi mind towards them when I was about 11, after seeing that movie the day it released. I had to know how they did all of the effects in that movie.

After roughly three years of working at ILM, it dawned on me that what I was doing could possibly lead to a career if I applied myself. I therefore started learning every discipline possible in the company that had to do with computer graphics and visual effects. It was a much smaller company then, and the live action miniature department and stage teams greatly outnumbered the digital artists like me. I was even working with version 1.0 of Photoshop at that time, as its co-creator, John Knoll, was, and still is, one of the digital geniuses at ILM. In 2002, while on location in Australia for a year with the production of the movie "Peter Pan," I had the honor of working alongside the cinematographer Don McAlpine. Don was just getting into digital photography, and eating it up — so much so that he wanted to start shooting stills on the set digitally so he could pre-visualize what the lighting and composition would look like on the monitor prior to rolling the motion picture film. This method is pretty much standard today. Don would also talk to me for hours on set about photography and its connections to cinematography. This is when everything clicked for me. At the time, I was using an ancient DSLR on the set to reference objects distances and sizes to help calculate the dimensions of the scenes being shot for digital replication. But learning from Don made me want to shoot the sets he had lit, and I started shooting a lot of behind the scenes images in between setups. Don would unknowingly educate me, like a grandfather talking to young whippersnapper, about lighting and composition. Over 40,000 images later, I returned home with a new connection between photography and cinematography imbedded in my mind.

I had gone to Australia with just general knowledge of shooting images, and was now fueled with a desire to create art. I personally need photography to be able to do what I do now at Lucasfilm. Over the last 10 years, since returning from Australia, I found as many reasons as possible to take pictures. It was just a few years ago that I started getting requests to shoot weddings, and that led to shooting portraits for friends, and a second career started to parallel my career at Lucasfilm. Currently, I am the Visual Effects Supervisor on the now cancelled but recent Emmy-winning television show, "Star Wars: The Clone Wars", but tirelessly working on a new Star Wars animated TV show that I can't tell you

anything about. Over the past five years of working on the show, I've educated teams of lighting people about the methods of real world lighting, and the behavior of lenses when they look at light. I honestly believe that there is no animated TV production out there that looks as cinematic as our show. Everyone at Lucasfilm and our overseas partner that does the actual lighting work, know that I am with my camera always, and that it's just matter of minutes before I make reference to something photographic. I also teach photography at Lucasfilm a few times a year, and lecture about everything from developing film, to studio and set lighting, to full post-production work. At the last two Star Wars Celebration conventions in Orlando Florida, I gave several lectures to crowds of people dressed as their beloved Star Wars characters, on shooting and lighting. It's amazing to see people make the connection to photography and how the lighting on our show looks.

Q: What approach do you take with your photography or what does photography mean to you?

A: My approach for portrait work is always a calculated one that leads to chaos. I'll build Pinterest boards for weeks leading up to a shoot just to plant some ideas. I try not to over-think a setup, and almost prefer winging it on the day of the shoot. It's odd that I'm such a perfectionist, but prefer the chaos of figuring out the way to get the shot on the fly when it comes down to taking the shot. It's that pressure of getting it absolutely right in the moment that works for me, as opposed to the long lead-up. I plan everything as much as possible, except the actual shoot. That's exactly how I operate at Lucasfilm. Everything has a plan, but it's all quite different when the production is in full swing. I guess doing that for 23 years has formed some very odd wiring to the calculating part of my brain. During a portrait shoot, I don't stop talking the entire time and try to be as social as possible. So much so that whoever is sitting for me forgets he or she is having a portrait taken. For street photography, it's exactly that. I just need to know where to go, but when I get there I just wander off and go wherever the people take me.

Q: In a way this collection of intriguing and emotionally compelling portraits suggests the supremacy of subject matter over technique because visually, technically, and conceptually, they have a certain similarity, but on the level of feelings and identity none of them is exactly like the others. Do you agree, and if so how much of this is attributable to your vision and skill as a photographer, and what kind of decisions go into this creative process?

A: A great question. I learned a very important lesson in March of 2007 from my wife Lisa. I had just spent a week with her in London before she took off back home, and I would continue on for a lecture talk for work in six more counties in Europe and Russia. We were walking past a homeless person sleeping on the street, and I stopped to get a shot as she continued walking. When I caught up to her, she quickly educated me on the uselessness of just taking a snapshot of a

sleeping homeless person without context. It took me the entire rest of my trip to piece together why I was going to take pictures. The images needed to flow together, and they need to be shot that way. I could no longer just take a picture without it being connected to the last or the next.

For the Lucasfilm portraits, it was fate that had me shooting with my Leica, as it was not the camera anyone was expecting to see when they walked up to me for their portrait. Most didn't even see my camera since I moved it away from my face as quickly possible after each shot.

I know my Leica so well that I can be consistent with it. I always make references to Moto GP motorcycle racing, and it's something I'm involved with daily, my sport to watch. To race at that level, you must not even think for a fraction of a second how to do even the simplest action of riding, for example, shifting gears. This needs to be so neural, that you forget you even did it, but you still know what gear you are in. This is what shooting is for me when I use my Leica. For these portraits, I was able to hold the conversations I did without once stopping to think about focus or shutter speed. I was able to let the camera disappear in the room, and allow me to home in on the one emotion I needed each person to present. So, going back to the homeless person lesson, I didn't go into any of these portraits thinking that I was just going to take their portrait. I wanted to connect and communicate with each person whether I knew them or not, and I would just document each conversation as if we were casually sitting and having coffee.