

THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S KEEN EYE

Photography has a special way of bestowing extraordinary meaning on ordinary subjects – we discuss it with **Izabela Łapińska** from the Leon Schiller National Film School in Łódź.





What can “tenderness” or “sensitivity” mean to a photographer? And what does it mean to you as a professional educator and artist?

IZABELA ŁAPIŃSKA: In photography, we can talk about two different kinds of sensitivity. One involves technology and is the result of the medium itself: the light sensitivity of the material used in photography, be it a negative or an electronic sensor. The other is human sensitivity to reality viewed through the lens. Technological sensitivity is very simple – you need good light and exposure, and those are skills which can be learned.

What role does light sensitivity play in photography?

The word “photography” itself means “drawing with light.” There can be no photography without light, but when we consider light we often forget that its flip side is shadow, or darkness. The concept of *chiaroscuro*, originating in traditional painting techniques, is one of the most important means of expression in photography. Light conveys more than just a mood – through shadows or darkness we can depict sadness, a sense of threat or danger. Shadows can also provide a sense of shape which brings deeper meaning to photography. There is a photo by Susan Meiselas showing shadows cast by a row of people with their hands behind their heads. We see nothing more than those vague shapes, but we can infer that this is a scene preceding an execution.

Light is key in photography. We can use natural daylight or recreate it in the studio in a controlled manner. The sun gives hard, directional light. Cloud

cover disperses light by acting as a natural diffuser. We can obtain the same effect in the studio by placing a soft box over the source of light. When I was in Paris, I had the pleasure of meeting the French photographer Jeanloup Sieff. He specialized in fashion photography and worked with some of the greatest fashion designers and magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. His trademark was that he always used only a single light source, including in the studio. This might seem incredible today, but he believed that we must not use more than one light source, because in nature there is only one – the Sun – and every object casts just one shadow. Sieff’s technique of only using a single studio light led him to take stunning black-and-white photographs.

What about the other sensitivity you mentioned?

The sensitivity between photographer and subject is the part of photographers’ work that gives them the chance to shine. Some blame poor pictures on inadequate equipment, but the fact is that it’s perfectly possible to take great photos with a cell phone without even adjusting the settings, as long as photographer has a keen eye and is sensitive to who their subject is.

I once conducted an experiment for an academic conference: I searched Instagram for pictures by anonymous authors which I thought were good photos, and juxtaposed them against stylistically similar ones taken by masters of the art. It turned out that many of the photos taken by amateurs were easily good enough to be included in a professional exhibition. I’m sure that at first glance no one would realize that the images were taken by amateurs and downloaded

*Beetroot II,
from the cycle Clinical Picture*

from Instagram. Of course what distinguishes professional from casual photographers is control over what they do. Professionals are able to take good photos without having to choose from among a hundred snaps – usually two or three are sufficient, and sometimes they are able to take a perfect single image.

Is it possible to approach any subject with a sense of tenderness and sensitivity? Let's say, construction work on a metro station?

I think so. If the photographer has freedom in how they approach the subject, they can take photos using the best possible source of light, for example by working at a chosen time of day. They can capture the mood of a misty November morning. Using natural light to your advantage is an element of creativity. Choosing the right atmosphere allows photographers

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and preserve it.

to present seemingly ordinary objects in extraordinary ways. When a photographer keeps their eyes open, they can elevate simple subjects to the level of art-work. We frequently encounter objects in our daily lives we dismiss as uninteresting. However, a sharp-eyed photographer can take a picture of something we've seen a hundred times and produce an image that will captivate us.

Anna 67,
from the cycle Naked Face

I once booked a model to pose for a cycle of portraits, but she fell ill at the last minute. I was feeling really creative that day and I wanted to make the most of it. I went grocery shopping and bought some simple provisions – beetroot, cabbage, that sort of thing. I photographed them and the beetroot came out amazingly well. By getting the light and settings just right, you can make even the most mundane object shine. Most people don't perceive the world the way photographers and their cameras do, and they lack the ability to notice the potential in the world around them. Our eyes see everything at once, even if it's a narrow view. Photography is able to bring out certain elements and give them an entirely new meaning.

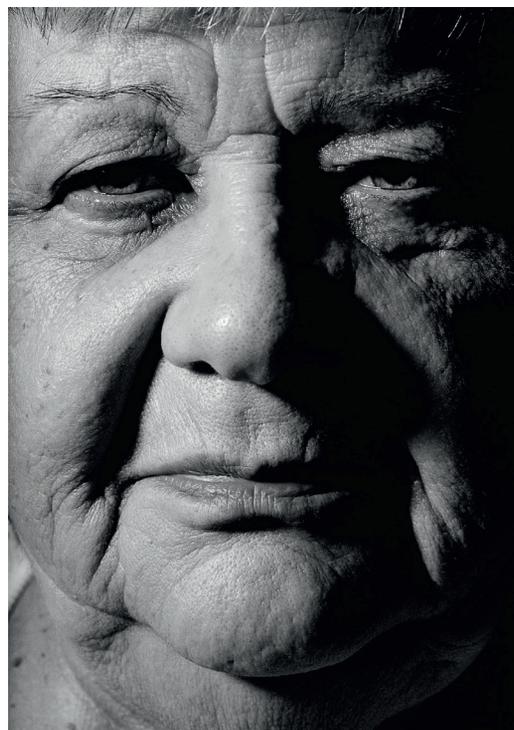
So the photographer's skill lies in noticing potential where others miss it?

Sometimes, when I am showing students outstanding photos, I tell them that anyone could have taken them. But great photographs are based on unique ideas. For me, the most enjoyable element of the creative process

is when the image is still in my head, before I download or develop it. The process of recreating reality is the most fascinating element of photography. Copying something which has already been done is far easier. You can always take a similar photo. But art is not about copying – it's about coming up with something new and unique. That's why I see framing as a key issue. And it's not just about cropping the image in Photoshop; great masters of photography get the framing right the moment they press the shutter button. They might have a fraction of a second to capture the right framing, and they know exactly how to use that time. The ability to capture images is particularly useful when documenting events. Something is happening but in a moment it will be over. We only have seconds or fractions of a second to capture reality in a photo, and we have to use our intuition to press the shutter button at exactly the right moment; that's just a matter of talent. It's important to have a sensitive, watchful eye and the ability to spot the compositionally perfect moment to take the photo.

Apart from framing and the interplay of light and shadows, what other elements are key in capturing emotions through photography?

Light is complicated, because it can be brutal and reveal flaws we wouldn't spot with the naked eye. Personally, I really like harsh, directional light which shows me the texture I am trying to capture. This was the case with the beetroot I mentioned earlier. By using the right light, I gave it a new dimension, turning it from a flat object into a three-dimension-



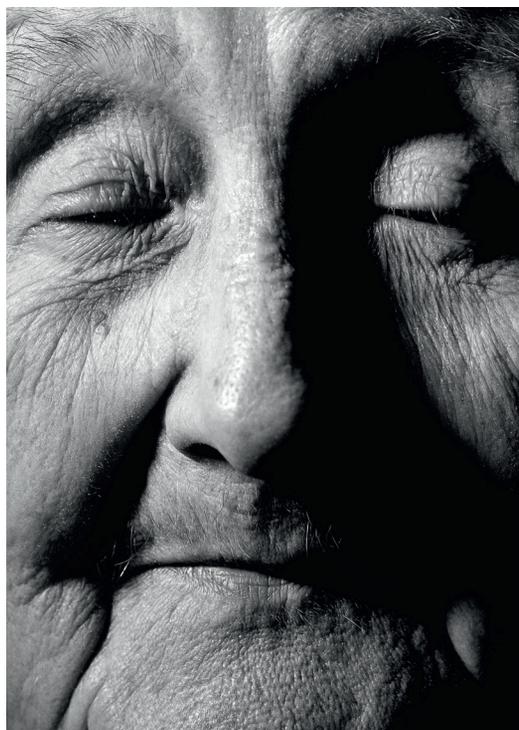
al solid. Light allows us to manipulate dimensions and space. When the subject is a person, light reveals all imperfections of their body. Directional light has a certain brutality which reveals flaws. Not everyone likes this style; this is why, for example, in bathrooms we use diffuse light to illuminate our faces evenly, while even simple cameras now come with an app which optically softens our appearance and smooths out wrinkles.

There is also composition.

That's right; in photography, composition is defined by the focal point of the image – what we are really trying to show. Form is extremely important in photography. Even the most fascinating subject won't speak to the viewer if it isn't supported by formal means of expression. There are also works in which form is the most important element; they are all about perfection of the message. It's all about savoring the medium with meticulous attention to detail and using tools such as depth of field – one of the most graceful forms of expression in photography. It puts the elements of the foreground in focus while the background is blurry. This makes the subject stand out more – to use a more technical term, it is dominant in the frame.

Your project “Naked Face” exposes human imperfections and inspires us to ask questions about truth and beauty. Did you find it difficult to find models bold enough to take part?

Only a few women have refused. Some felt physically uncomfortable when they first saw their portraits at



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Prof. Izabela Łapińska

is a photographer and Professor at the Leon Schiller National Film School in Łódź. She has presented numerous photography exhibitions in Poland and abroad, and published essays in magazines such as the Belgian *Objectif*, the French edition of *Photo* and Polish journals *Pozytyw* and *Camera Obscura*. She has participated in international projects and academic conferences with a focus on the place of bodies in culture, and exclusion and abuse in art. ilapinska@filmschool.lodz.pl

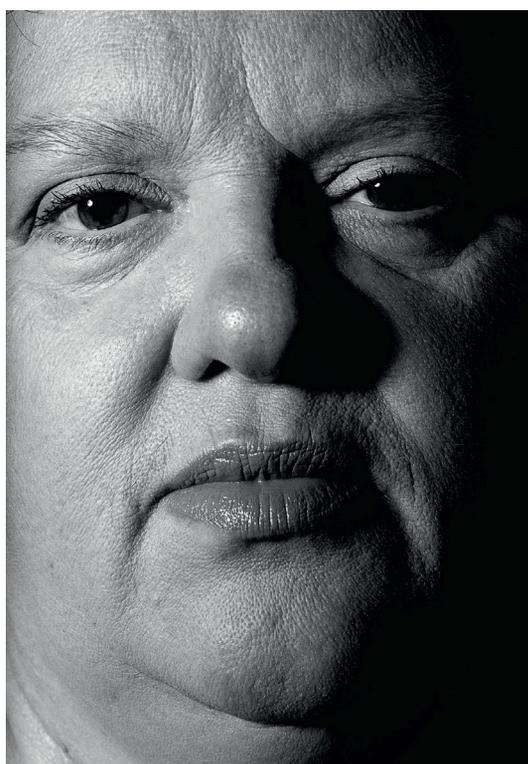
the exhibition, even though I warned them that the images would be completely candid and unedited. I illuminated the faces with harsh, directional light, and the images were taken close up and enlarged. An image of a face which is about 80 cm across is much larger than those we are used to seeing day-to-day. I also cropped out hair, which many women see as one of their key attributes. By stripping women off their hair we strip them of an important element of their beauty, and the photos show just harshly cropped faces. After seeing the portraits for the first time, some of my models felt they look unattractive. But later on, when they met other models at the exhibition, they felt a sense of community. Seeing other portraits helped them accept themselves. They were brought together by seeing that they aren't alone in facing ageing, saggy skin and new blemishes. To an extent the experience helped them come to terms with their appearance rather than fighting it or desperately trying to disguise it.

I conducted something of an experiment at one of my exhibitions, inspired by the behavior of women – not my models – who stood next to different portraits and wondered aloud whether they looked as old or younger (each photo gives the model's age). I decided to hang a large magnifying mirror at the next exhibition. I wanted to let visitors to see themselves in the same way as they saw the portraits, especially those who criticized them. I was really surprised by how many people avoided the mirror!

It's easy to criticize others if you're not aware that you are just as flawed as they are. I mean flaws in the

Niania 90,
from the cycle Naked Face

Renatka 58,
from the cycle Naked Face



cultural sense; for me they are often the most beautiful element of a person's appearance, and in photography all flaws are attributes. This aspect of photography has always stirred controversy. When photography first arose as a medium, a century and a half ago, many people refused to regard it as art precisely because it showed reality too accurately. The imperfections of our sight were obliterated by photography, because it depicts reality exactly as it is. In the second half of the 19th century, people were simply unprepared for certain things. They were outraged to see a model with dirty feet; in the past, when the model posing for an artist had dirty feet, he or she would simply depict them as clean. Even today many people have a problem with photography precisely because it depicts the whole truth. I am not talking about manipulation and postproduction; in pure photography we trust that the image is genuine.

What about the other side – viewers? Is sensitivity, a sense of tenderness, essential to how we perceive art?

I can call on my own experience here. When I was taking down one of my exhibitions, the woman who'd been minding the gallery told me about an old lady who had visited several times, and said that she was in tears every time. I see this as my greatest achievement. Not opinions of colleagues or reviews from art critics, but stirring such deep emotions in a member of the public – that was the greatest praise I'd received.

Perhaps the old lady was unusual, but the fact is that she came to see the exhibition several times because something in my art clearly touched her. This is a perfect example of the power of photography. And its strength is precisely that it shows something which really exists. Painters can imagine and depict something abstract, while photographs depict reality seen, as Henri Cartier Bresson famously said, with one's head, one's eye, and one's heart.

So photography can suggest how we can experience reality more fully?

That's right, and there's more. Photographers have the opportunity to explore spaces and areas of our lives most people have no access to. This can be because they may not be bold enough to explore beyond their own community, or have no means to travel and meet new people. Photography allows us to become more sensitive. I frequently return to Susan Sontag's essay "Regarding the Pain of Others." It discusses how photography depicting other people's suffering (mainly referring to war photography) can bring positives. Photographers are frequently accused of taking photos of people in distress and then leaving them to it. This is simply not true. Once they've taken their photos, many artists then take their subject to hospital, continue visiting them and remain in contact for life. Without knowing the context and circumstances, we can judge photographers harshly.

Simply the act of being photographed means that the suffering individual has a witness, a companion in their pain, which can be valuable...

That depends on the photographer, and unfortunately some take advantage of others' suffering without respecting them. If that's the case, the individual being photographed has the full right to feel used or even abused. No one enjoys hardship, be it financial, physical or mental. A keen eye can always detect falseness and a lack of empathy in photographs. I recently started a new project working with people who endured suffering during the Second World War. Frequently, when I leave their homes, I have this sense that just the fact that I visited, that I listened to them and took their photos, means a lot to them. They know that someone still remembers them, thinks about them and wants to tell their stories. And that's another power of photography. Reality changes and passes, often forever, but photos capture and preserve it. When we lose someone, photos of them become one of the most valuable things we have left of them. This is the true power of this medium: photography can preserve a fragment of reality forever.

INTERVIEW BY DR. JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA
PHOTOS BY IZABELA ŁAPIŃSKA