

WALKING & WITNESSING

ANNE GIBSON'S LIFELONG COMMITMENT TO HER NEIGHBOURHOOD

BY JENNY MONTGOMERY

Though she makes most of her images around Toronto's Kensington Market neighbourhood, Anne Gibson doesn't really describe herself as a street photographer. Instead, she calls herself a "gatherer of people and things." But even if the genre might be debatable, the talent is not. The Toronto native's work has been getting noticed, and a documentary, *Making Memories*, has even been made about her. Looking at her portfolio, you'd never guess that Gibson only recently got into photography...at the age of 58!

THE COMMUNITY

Though Gibson took a black-and-white developing course in her twenties at OCA (now the Ontario College of Art and Design University), she explained, "I never followed through on it. Four years ago, at 58 years old, I was just over a year clean and sober and was looking at my world through an entirely different lens. I needed a way to not only express what was in my heart but also to communicate and represent the unique community of Kensington Market where I spent my entire adulthood." So she took a Photography 101 course from Henry's then went out with her camera into the community that she considers home.

Gibson was 13 years old when she first visited Kensington Market with her mother, and ever since Gibson has lived on her own, she's lived within walking distance of the neighbourhood. Currently she lives in Queen West, but she emphasized, "Kensington has always been my social and cultural

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location especially since Queen West effectively died as a hub of music and creative life in the late 80s as a result of gentrification and corporate investment." She continued, "I have always felt more at home among multi-ethnic and countercultural, multicultural people. The chaotic, creative, down-to-earth historic vibe has always felt like 'home' to me. The neighbourhood embraces quirky, off-the-grid people, and that has always made me feel like I 'belong.' I have watched families have children and then watched those children grow up and take over the family business. That kind of community is rare in the city. By now, I am familiar with three generations of people of every kind of background, who all know and watch out for each other. It is probably the most inclusive neighbourhood I have ever seen. Asian, Portuguese, Jewish, Gypsy, Italian, African, Jamaican, South and Central American, First Nations people all living and working together in the same community—and then

there are the hippies, the punks, the musicians, the artisans and the epicures. But you have to have been there a *long* time to see just how integrated and supporting all these communities are of each other and of the ethos that is Kensington."

The hope that comes from hearing about such a diverse and inclusive community is quickly tempered by its precariousness. "Gentrification and tourism are turning another chapter in the evolution of the market at an alarming rate. Rents have skyrocketed; expensive cafes and dispensaries are filling up the old vegetable stands effectively driving out the people and the culture that attracted the attention," she pointed out. "I spend every minute I can there photographing the people I know who still make up the quirky, creative bohemian and old-world population. I feel a kind of desperation to photograph my perspective because so many of the photographers who go there



FUJIFILM X100T, 23 MM, F/6.4, 1/250 S, ISO 400. © ANNE GIBSON

from other locations shoot as visitors, observers, outsiders. I want to photograph my point of view as someone from the inside. The sad thing is that, at this point, the market is dependant on tourism for its survival, and so we are constantly under siege and are seen as performers for tourists with cameras. The very thing that makes the market so special is its greatest liability.”

THE COMMITMENT

Gibson mentioned that she has two distinct motivations for photography, depending on the situation. “My role as a photographer is either entirely personally motivated, i.e., I shoot because I need to. I cannot *not* shoot. I am simply compelled to photograph. I always have a camera on me and use it, even if it is just my iPhone. Or, I shoot as a gift to my community. I want to document a neighbourhood that is suffering under the weight of gentrification and objectification. My perspective on Kensington Market is just that,

my perspective. But enough of the other locals recognize my perspective and feel connected to the perspective. These are ‘gifts’ to the community that has homed me for so many decades.”

And gifts they are. Gibson’s deep desire to honour her community is evident in her images. “My personal sense of responsibility to the people I photograph is that my work, in some way, ennobles them,” she explained. “I use my photography to connect with humanity—my own and others’. I see the images as artifacts in the world, and I choose to bring artifacts into the world that contribute to the general good. Others like to focus on the decaying, the failing, the diminution of humanity. I see it as a choice. I choose to enoble that which is often simply overlooked. I want to contribute something of spiritual value.”

Gibson’s belief in the power of photography carries over into the role it plays in her own life. She

shared, “I am ‘memory making’ with my camera. It is a form of meditation or therapy. When I am photographing, I am not living in my head. I am not with my memories. Rather I am creating new memories of my own design. Once I realized that images are so closely tied to memories, I began to actively rescript my world. In fact, whenever I am down or simply feel lost, I automatically grab my camera and run out of the house. I never know what I will encounter, and I specifically set my goal to see my world with new eyes. I do a little walking meditation to clear out the cobwebs and be open to the world as it is on that day. In that way I am not bound by old narratives that no longer serve me; I am able create and participate in new narratives and experiences. So, it is really my emotional health that motivates my photography.”

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THE MOMENTS

When asked how she chooses what to photograph, she admitted,



FUJIFILM X-T2, 23 MM, F/5.6, 1/250 S, ISO 250, © ANNE GIBSON

"I don't honestly know if what compels me to document a particular moment or person can be put into words. It's that old conundrum that if I could put it in words, I'd be a writer or a poet. But I feel naturally attracted to moments

when people are the most open, warm and vulnerable. I feel a sense of bearing witness. But those moments flash by like lightning."

Gibson has fine-tuned her ability to capture the fleeting, though—

and in a most unexpected way. "I have a little dog-walking business and have had to learn how to read body language—to see subtle shifts in demeanour and intention that reveal a changing inner state. I have to constantly

GIBSON'S ADVICE FOR PHOTOGRAPHING STRANGERS

I developed my way of shooting strangers, but I have never been afraid as long as I have a camera in my hand. I have modified and developed my approach based on experience. If I had to say anything like a "recipe," it would be flexible with no one technique. These are in no particular order because often I am multitasking the set up. That is where repetition comes in. I am always practicing.

1. BE OPEN

Don't hide—people see you and it creeps them out.

2. LOOK AND LISTEN

I often walk with my camera up to my shoulder so I can both frame and read people's body language as they see me. I generally avoid people who actively shy away from the camera.

3. BE QUICK

If I see a frame in my mind and I realize that my pointing the camera at it is going to alert the subjects and ruin the

composition, I prepare the exposure on something adjacent to them, then quickly shift to my intended composition, and then turn away very quickly. In most cases I'm usually long gone before they process that I actually took the picture.

4. GET CLOSE

I get up as close as I can to make the frame and try shooting from several different vantage points. I don't use a zoom.

5. BE ATTENTIVE

I observe the entire frame, not just my subject. A quick snapshot in my mind of what is in the corners, behind, etc. Maybe I need to wait or reposition myself if there is an element I think will be distracting.

6. VISUALIZE THE IMAGE

I flatten the frame in my mind so that I am somewhat aware of foreground, mid-ground and distance. That will determine what aperture I am going to use.



FUJIFILM X-PRO2, 35 MM, F/2.5, 1/250 S, ISO 1600. © ANNE GIBSON

watch a pack of dogs as they interact and be aware of how each of them is feeling. I have had to learn to act fast before any real action takes place," she explained. "I focus on a narrative I see playing out in front of me knowing something will happen and being ready for it. That's a skill I have had to learn from observing dogs interacting. They are very much like watching humans in that respect."

Through practice she has also developed a technique for approaching people. "I have a variety of ways that have, in hindsight, been codified by others who do workshops. But I learned them 'on the hoof.' I am conscious of my body language and make sure it is neither obsequious nor aggressive—but just confident enough to inspire that in my subjects. I rarely ask beforehand, but I present myself in such a way that I am neither hiding nor invading their space. I try to flip them a big smile, a tiny bow, or even a warm compliment as I go on my way. I really don't want anyone to have a negative experience any more than I want to experience a negative experience myself. I rarely get called out and more often than not, they give me back a great big smile. Sometimes I stop and chat for a bit. But often I don't. I think each person has their own way of doing it," she said.

For those photographers who want to try out street photography, she

suggested, "Shoot with passion. Shoot what you love. Otherwise it's just a picture. We have enough of those." Gibson's own enthusiasm for photography is contagious. She loves just about everything about photography, but she said, "What gives me the biggest rush is coming upon a stranger on the street who gets what I see in them without my having to say anything. They just play along with me in magical and silent collaboration...a flash of a sympathetic connection passes between us that is revealed in just a reflex. If that image captures the magic I felt at the time, I do my happy dance. If I discover, serendipitously, some other striking element during post-production, I am beside myself with a kind of joy that sustains me every time I look at the image. It is a moment in time where I feel truly, spiritually connected to humanity. It's bliss to me."

THE ARTIFACTS

When asked if there was a photographer she admired the most, Gibson replied that there were many and that she keeps finding new ones who blow her away. But if pressed to name one person, she'd say Vivian Maier. Gibson relates to "being an older single woman with a caretaker's job wandering the streets making photographs simply for the sake of it." And like Vivian Maier, Gibson is also the subject of a documentary film. "The documentary by Michka Saal was just completed



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literally days before she passed away. I have a huge amount of respect for her work. She is an artist in her own right, and, to my way of thinking, I am the subject in the same way people

in my images are my subjects. She has a unique perspective and message that says as much about her as it does me. I believe her lifelong theme was the redemptive power of art in

one's life to overcome adversity. During the process I turned myself over to her artistic vision entirely. The title will be *Making Memories*. Since we have similar sensibilities in this respect, I

ANNE GIBSON ON...

STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

"I don't specifically refer to myself as a 'street photographer' because the term comes with a whole series of rules about what is, and what is not street photography. Labeling my work 'street photography' opens it up to criticism that, to my mind, is pedantic and quite beside the point. I don't want to be held to a genre-specific set of values. That paralyzes me. I feel that any great work of art is great because of something besides the rules it is following but rather the way it elevates the subject to some magical place that resonates in the heart. The great street photographers did not work from rules. Guidelines and rules were identified after the fact by academics trying to codify the work. So, I rarely refer to myself as a street photographer but simply a gatherer of people and of things that please me."

MENTORSHIP

"I have a few people who are close to me whose work I respect, and, occasionally, I work with them. I have invited several people to comment on my images or to have discussions about them, but they are not all photographers. I watch YouTube videos of the 'greats' and just listen to them share. I love watching biographic documentaries on 20th-century photographers. *Everybody Street* comes to mind. I also belong to a women's street-photography group called @womeninstreet

(Instagram and Facebook) and Her Side of the Street (Medium). The exposure and support I get there is the most influential at this point. We are a cross-platform, international group of women street photographers whose purpose is to support and promote women's voices in the genre."

THE FEMALE GAZE

"I am fascinated and drawn to exploring the female gaze, that is, the unique way women look at the world and how that translates into the body of work we create. The beauty about perspective is that I don't need to justify myself. It's mine. It's not a debate. Having said that, I do believe that it was the sense that I was not seeing my perspective reflected back to me when I looked at the great street photographers through the ages, though I was attracted to the street. After discovering Vivian Maier, I found myself drawn to the other women photographers. I hunted them down and absorbed women like Mary Ellen Mark, Diane Arbus, Dorothea Lange, Cindy Sherman, Jill Freedman, Helen Levitt and so on. But they were not readily visible at the onset. In them I saw I had a unique voice, and I felt I had something I wanted to say. Initially in my journey, the female gaze was difficult to find in the wide world of the male gaze. I have always felt 'outside,' 'liminal'—'other.' Being in a women's group has been so



FUJIFILM X-PRO2, 35 MM, F/5, 1/350 S, ISO 200. © ANNE GIBSON

trusted her enough to portray a message that is also important to me as an artist.”

Gibson’s subjects seem to trust her in the same way that Gibson

trusted Saal—no doubt because they can sense Gibson’s desire to honour the community she calls home. “I plan to spend my senior years there.” She added, “I don’t care if I live in a tiny bachelor

so long as I don’t have to move to another neighbourhood that is outside walking distance. I cannot imagine living anywhere else. That is my ‘tribe’—young and old.” ■

empowering for me. I look at the other women’s work and feel inspired, and I feel that the work itself is accessible to me. I want to participate in that voice, and so I protect and foster it. I have no idea where that will lead. But I do believe that women’s voices and visions will enrich the dialogue and the body of work done by what we commonly call ‘street photographers.’ Perhaps with these new voices, I’ll feel more comfortable identifying as a ‘street photographer.’ Lately I have been able to Google ‘women street photographers’ and get a really decent number. Still, we have a long way to go.”

INSPIRATION

“Someone I respect very much said to me, ‘Whenever you feel stuck or uninspired, whenever you feel like your work is no good, I’ll tell you what to do. Go look at your *own* work for inspiration!’ I didn’t understand him at first. I thought he was just being nice. But when I tried it, it made perfect sense to me. The fact is, I get overwhelmed and insecure when I focus on other people’s work when I feel down on myself. But when I look back over my work, I look at it anew and discover new insights within it. More importantly, it reminds me of why I took up photography to begin with. Looking back over what I have done puts me back on the track of trusting the process. Then I feel inspired to pick up where I

left off with a new sense of purpose and to stop comparing myself to others.”

COLOUR VS. B&W

“While I always shoot in RAW, I used to process almost exclusively in B&W. But that has changed. I think I liked the mood of the B&W and found it more accessible for me to focus on composition. But when I was in New Orleans in 2016, I realized what an important voice colour is in an image—for me at least. It’s a personal choice. Once I started experimenting with colour and allowing that voice to join the ‘choir,’ I became quite enamoured with it as I realized how potent it is to supporting a fuller narrative. I do all that in post-production, and getting the ‘mix’ just right is like flipping the last turn in a Rubik’s cube. Suddenly it all makes sense. The final colour tweak elevates the image beyond simply recording an event to interpreting it.”

HER FIRST CAMERAS

“My first camera was a Rebel T5i, but after six months I realized it could not do what I wanted. I pushed it to its limit and then I made a checklist of the things I wanted and came up with the Fujifilm X100T. I shot for two years with that camera. I loved it so much I got it tattooed on my forearm. I consider the X100T to be the camera I learned on.”