

Raymond Meier

Raymond Meier was interviewed about his life and work in March 2008, by his close friend Nathaniel Kahn. Kahn is the Oscar® nominated filmmaker of *My Architect* (2003) and *Two Hands* (2007).

Nathaniel Kahn: When did you first realize that you wanted to be a photographer?

Raymond Meier: As a child growing up in Switzerland, I wasn't too interested in school, but I was always interested in science and technology. I wanted to become an astronaut. I wanted to become an astronomer. When I was twelve, I had a friend who was a few years older than me who had a darkroom. He showed me how to process film, and the first time I saw an image appear out of the dark, I knew this was it. I immediately built my own darkroom. I was interested at first in mixing the chemicals and processing the film and making prints. But of course, in order to process film, I had to expose film, so I started to take pictures. At the beginning I didn't even care what I took pictures of. I photographed flowers, because my mom had them in her garden, but then there was this amazing moment when I realized that it was even more interesting to take a picture than to process it, and it was at that moment you could say I became a photographer. After an apprenticeship and attending the Zurich Art School, I opened my first studio, in Zurich, and started freelancing.

I have always had parallel interests in both the creative and the technical aspects of photography, but from day one I was also interested in the economic aspect, too. Chemicals and film cost money; cameras are insanely expensive. So I started photographing parties at school, I photographed weddings, I photographed girls—I made them prints and sold them. All the money I put into photography was always made from photography. For me there is a threefold thing that goes on with photography: the technical, the creative, and the commercial aspects. And I think I was very lucky that throughout my career all these three elements have been in harmony with one another.

NK: What is the secret of taking a good photograph?

RM: You must understand what you photograph, because a picture can never be smarter than you. If you do not have an understanding of what you photograph, you can't take a decent picture.

NK: What do you mean by "understand"?

RM: I mean emotionally. You have to feel what you photograph. You have to study your subject, form an opinion about it, and then come up with a concept.

NK: So your process is more intuitive than intellectual.

RM: Absolutely. If you do everything on an intellectual level, it can take a hundred times longer than if you do it intuitively.

NK: Looking at your photographs, some people might say your pictures are a little cold.

RM: My photographs are conceptual and graphically very clear, and, yes, they are somewhat on the cold side. But if this were all there was, my work would have no success. I believe what makes my photographs work is that they are emotional and made with a sense of humor and a slightly twisted vision. My pictures may look, at first glance, extremely technical and clean, but there is always a hidden part that people can relate to. Either it inspires them or it doesn't. A totally cold, technical picture can never, never release any emotions in the viewer.

NK: Tell me about this "hidden part" of your photographs.

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RM: I know when this certain special detail is not quite there. Sometimes it could be that everything is absolutely perfect in the picture and the hair just needs to be messed up a tiny bit. As I say, you need to “break it at the end.” Make it perfect and then break it. Make something slightly wrong: it could be just an awkward hand position, it could be a shoelace that’s a little bit off, a little bit not so right, a slightly disturbing thing. Then suddenly the photograph starts to tell a story.

NK: So should a picture tell a story?

RM: I think a picture should stimulate the viewer to make his own story, and probably every viewer makes a different one. I don’t think a good photograph should tell a single definitive story.

NK: You shoot in the studio, but you also do projects around the world. Why so many different kinds of work?

RM: I love photography, but I’m not a fashion person or a journalist, and I’m not particularly interested in celebrities. I am actually, and I think this is kind of rare these days, an all-around photographer. I work in the studio, but I also have the opportunity to go out there, to travel, to photograph architecture, to photograph landscapes, to do my own personal projects. But no matter what I photograph, or where I am, the same principles come into play—the same process of learning and understanding the subject in order to create an image that is my interpretation.

NK: In addition to commercial assignments, you do personal projects. What was your breakthrough personal project?

RM: It was definitely the photographs I took of pedestrians when I was eighteen. I had this crazy idea of mounting my four-by-five camera on my motorcycle and speeding up to people and taking their picture—making a record of their reaction. But I didn’t do what a journalist would do: wait for the moments and then photograph them. I created the moments.

NK: This idea of creating the photographic moment is something that defines your work.

RM: Yes. Every picture I take is created and manufactured. These are crafted pictures.

NK: You call your more recent personal projects “documentations.” Tell me about them.

RM: In the early 1990s I realized that I was just not happy with the quality of my black-and-white photographs. I always loved platinum prints, so I built a whole lab for making platinum prints. With this gorgeous technology, I began to photograph what fascinated me most about the way human beings interact with the planet. I photographed the Nazca lines, skies at night, and satellite launches. When I saw the mummies in the catacombs in Palermo, I knew I had to make a documentation of them. It was so haunting how these people had tried to live forever. Another documentation is of TWA Flight 800. After a long and trying process, I was given permission to shoot in the hangar where the wreckage of this plane was laid out. It had an incredible kind of beauty. It was a total disaster, a plane falling from the sky; it was shocking, but it was also poetic—how we human beings want to reach beyond ourselves. We want to live forever. We want to fly.

NK: Your commercial photographs and these documentations seem totally different from each other.

RM: They are actually very related. The same spirit is behind them. If you know my commercial pictures, you will recognize the documentations. They are part of the same family.

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NK: So the subject of a photograph is less important than the way it's done?

RM: I think so. It is like playing a musical instrument: to a certain degree, it almost doesn't matter what you play. It's more interesting how you play it.

NK: You do a great deal of architectural photography now. What drew you to architecture?

RM: I was very involved with the design of the studio in Switzerland. I realized that I needed to know more about architecture in order to have a competent conversation with the architect. For me the best way to learn about architecture was to photograph it, and I found that I could apply the same principles I use in still-life photography. You look at a building the same way you look at a bottle. You walk around a building the way you turn a bottle. You notice that a building looks much better in morning light, or that it should be shot in the middle of the day because that way you can see all the texture in the concrete. You could say I did not understand architecture until I took pictures of it.

NK: Your first book is on Louis Kahn's Capital Complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh. What inspired you to do this project?

RM: I was fascinated by this building, and it had not been photographed very much. By taking the pictures, I got to understand the building and I also got to know the architect. A good architect puts himself into a building, just as a good photographer puts himself into a picture. I made a two-volume set: one volume contains the archival photographs of the building under construction, which we restored, and the other contains my color photographs. I shot on 8 x 10 color negatives, and this was one of my last film projects, actually. Shortly after this project, everything switched to digital. I had always scanned my negatives and worked on them digitally, but I made the transition from film to digital camera backs basically overnight.

NK: Speaking of the move to digital, what role do you think technology plays in photography?

RM: Technological inventions determine how we take photographs. When the industry came out with high-speed film, we could catch moments in low light, so we took pictures that were grainy, and this became a look that people liked. Even before that, with the introduction of the 35 mm camera, photography had become looser. Cartier Bresson's amazing pictures would have looked very different without Leica technology. There have been so many advances over the years: Polaroid film, motor drives, fast long lenses, color negative film, drum scanners, large-format printing . . .

NK: Give me an example of how technology has changed your work.

RM: When I first came to New York in the 1980s, everyone was shooting chromes, but I realized that color negative film gave me a greater ability to manipulate my pictures, so I started shooting on color negative and making C-prints. I scanned the negs, worked on them in Photoshop, and made digital C-prints. This had a huge impact on the look of my pictures. At the time it was considered more of an amateur method, and it confused many clients, but as retouching technology expanded, it became the total norm. Now we have digital technology, and this too is changing the way we take pictures. The important thing to realize is that it is not just about what the photographer wants to do, it is also about how technology determines what he or she can do. It is a dialogue that is always changing.

NK: In your opinion, what is the main change that digital photography has brought to photography?

RM: We have all become editors. We get instant feedback, so that we are now taking pictures just to see what we have

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done. I think it can mean we think too much about “what we just got,” as opposed to sticking with the moment of what is happening in front of the lens and judging it later.

NK: Do you have any advice for a young photographer about digital photography?

RM: Yes. Cover your monitor for a whole day. Just shoot, and don't look at what you got until you are done. Chances are you will get better pictures. You will be using your brain instead of the monitor. It is also important to learn not to fight your circumstances. If it's raining, don't go setting up lights to try to make it sunny. Change your concept and use the rain. Find beauty in the rain instead of being frustrated by it.

NK: What are your favorite cameras?

RM: Just a few years ago I had ten different cameras, 8 x 10, 5 x 7, 4 x 5, 2¼, 35 mm, and each one had to have a backup and multiple lenses and Polaroid backs. Now, with the digital revolution, I use only a Leaf digital back on either an Alpa, for architecture and reportage, or the same back on my new Rolei AFI, for studio work.

NK: You have been taking pictures for many years. Has it gotten easier to get a good photograph?

RM: No. I work just as hard now, but that should never be seen. Sometimes you see a picture where you just know they built a huge set and needed a big crew of people to do it. There were tons of lights—a spot here and another there—and it needed a lot of retouching, and it was all very expensive and hard to do. It's probably a fantastic picture at the end, but there is something unreal and impersonal about it. You don't have the feeling that there was a person there who saw something and recorded it. I love photographs that are taken by photographers and not by committees.

NK: Is there a recent fashion shoot that you especially enjoyed?

RM: I love the photographs from Japan for The New York Times that I included in this book. They really came out of the camera pretty much the way they are. I had a fantastic model and a fantastic crew, and we just got extremely lucky with the weather. A huge storm came through the night we arrived in the mountains and dropped two feet of beautiful snow. The next day we started taking pictures, and the light was changing constantly. Snow clouds would come through, and then the sun would come out, and then more snow. Things just fell into place. We didn't fight the circumstances. Being open to what happened in front of the lens made the story so successful. The same principle can apply to still-life or studio shoots: take advantage of the moment. Everything is created, but sometimes you are lucky and get things for free. Another photographer might have brought tons of lights to Japan and lit the situation according to an initial vision for the story, but when you have the capability to adapt and take advantage of what is there, you can get so much more.

NK: You have done many shoots in Asia over the years, and recently you did two in China. How do you feel about China these days?

RM: I was last there to photograph the construction of the Olympic sites, and I was extremely impressed by the efficiency of the Chinese people, but I have to say that I find the current situation in Tibet deeply upsetting.

NK: Do you have any exciting projects in the works?

RM: I was assigned by Wallpaper to go Iran to document the beautiful town of Isfahan. I am looking forward to experiencing and photographing a city with such a long and rich history. I am also working on a project for Calvin Klein,

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photographing perfume bottles in ice. We have a big freezer in the studio, and we freeze these perfume bottles. Then we observe how the ice cracks. We spend days just studying cracks. I will put unlimited time and love into projects like these. That is the only way to make a good photograph in the end.

NK: You have been blessed with good clients over the years.

RM: I must say, I have been extremely lucky to have such fantastic clients. The industry has been very good to me, especially Vogue, which has supported my work for many years. Vogue is one of the last great luxuries in fashion photography. They do not stop until the job is right. It is a very American thing, really. Whatever it takes, it has to be the best. Early in my career I had the opportunity to work for Harper's Bazaar with Fabien Baron, and I continue to work with him on projects, including many years of shooting perfume bottles for Calvin Klein. These days I do a lot of work for The New York Times' T Magazine. I started to shoot celebrities, among other things, for them, and because T Magazine really respects my vision for their stories, it's a great relationship. I have been here in America for thirty years, and I continue to have just a wonderful time being here and working here.

NK: Tell me a little bit about your studio.

RM: I look forward to walking into the studio every morning. I feel like I am home with my family. We are a small studio—just six of us—but we make a product from beginning to end. We do it all: the negotiation, preproduction, shooting, and postproduction. We can just as easily produce fine art or commercial projects, make prints, exhibitions, or books. It took me years, and I have a beautifully fine-tuned machine, but I couldn't do it myself. Vanessa, my studio manager; her assistant, Caitlin; my assistant, Stephanie; TJ, our retoucher; and his assistant, Groana, make it all happen. Each time there is a job opening at the studio, I take my time hiring, because I know how important it is to be surrounded by the right people.

NK: You have two children. Are they interested in photography?

RM: Both of my children, Max and Eva, love to take pictures. In fact, the best lesson in photography that I have gotten recently was from Eva. Last summer my father was dying in the hospital—we all knew it might be the last time we were going to see him—and suddenly Eva said, "Papa, where is the camera? I want to take a picture of Grandpa." And I could not believe it. I hadn't realized that this was the moment to take a picture, but my seven-year-old daughter knew exactly.