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Dear Laura Gilpin,

It has been a long time since I wrote to you and even longer since I visited in 1977. At the time we spoke for several hours and recorded the enclosed interview. I remember your saying then that you had been "interviewed out," but as I have reviewed several of the publications written about you, I have continued to find merit and even something a little different in this exchange we had.

In my own slow way (really, I work on "Vermont" time and am always shocked, though exhilarated, by the rapidity of change in New York's commercial world!) I have pursued this little collection of interviews to the end, and now, on the eve of departing for a half year of living and working in Berlin, West Germany, I am giving my manuscripts to an agent here in New York. In a sense, I have done it all backwards by contemporary standards, writing the book first, and then trying to find a publisher, but this has been my first attempt at this sort of thing, and I admit to having had a desire to blunder along at it in my own way, according to my own time.

Anyway, I would like you to have a copy of the interview. If there are any errors or significant "updates" required, I would appreciate your letting me know. It is my own assessment that most of the things said were of a timeless nature, so aside from changing an "ing" or two to an "ed", I don't think there is much to be done.

If this book does find a publisher, there will be a need for some photographs. As we discussed way back when, I would like eight prints, preferably selected from over the span of your years as a photographer and, if possible, out of your previously unpublished collection. I would like to lend visibility to images largely unseen by the public and perhaps you will regard this as an opportunity to show some of your favorites that to date have been left out! Also, at the time that I visited you, you did not want any portraits made of you, but you did think you could supply me with one. Again, all I ask is that you be on "standby" with these requests. I think it is best for you to hold onto all these things until I get a green light. I wouldn't want anything to get lost or damaged in the transferrals from agent to publishers.

If you have any questions about the interview, the photographs, or anything, please write me through this New York address. Everything will be forwarded to me from here to Europe.

I hope the interview gives you some pleasure and that all is well with you in New Mexico.

Very best,

Alicia Wille
Alicia Wille

LAURA GILPIN

Question. Do you recall the first thing which you consciously created as an artwork?

Answer. I had a camera from the time I was eleven and, of course, I was fussing with it all the time. I don't know if you can call it being conscious of creating, but I made some feeble effort in art classes.

Question. Were you intent on being an artist as a child?

Answer. I wanted to be a musician more than anything.

Question. On the violin?

Answer. Yes, but that didn't pan out.

Question. Is there a correlation between music and photography?

Answer. Yes, there's no question about it. One is continuous audio tone and the other is continuous visual tone.

Question. What is it about photography that drew you to it?

Answer. I have been asked this a great many times, and I don't think you can go back and analyze these things. The one thing that comes to mind is the visit I paid to a great friend of my mother's when I was thirteen. This woman, for whom I was named, was blind. I spent several weeks with her in St. Louis leading her through

the Exposition. The experience trained me visually. It taught me how to describe something to somebody who could not see.

Question. At what point did you realize that you were committed to being a photographer?

Answer. When I photographed at the San Francisco Exposition in 1915. That was when I knew I wanted to learn more, and it was following that that I went to the Clarence White School of Photography. I felt I was doing the right thing the minute I got to that school.

Question. Did you study with Gertrude Kasebier?

Answer. No, I knew her slightly because she had done some portraits of my mother, my brother, and myself when I was about fourteen. I wrote to her when I decided I was ready to go to New York and it was she who recommended Mr. White's school. I saw a lot of her from then on. We had quite a correspondence. I would send her proofs and she would criticize them, but I never really studied with her.

Question. After studying at Mr. White's school, did you go through a period of feeling you needed to be independent of the influence of other photographers?

Answer. No.

When I was there, the faculty included Mr. White, who coordinated everything, Paul Andersson, who was the technical man, and Max Webber, who gave

a series of lectures to the whole school on the history of art and design. I valued working under him greatly.

Question. You have said that "design is the fundamental issue in photography."

Answer. Design is the fundamental of everything, isn't it?

Question. You might be able to say that about a lot of things.

Answer. Any good book, any good novel, all good architecture, any painting, any good piece of music has design to it. One of the great losses of the present day is that young people just don't know the first thing about design.

Question. Where do you think a sense of design comes from? Do you think it's something which can be taught?

Answer. Yes, I think it can because I learned an awful lot from Max Webber.

Question. You don't think it's something intuitive? I'm not sure it's part of a rational process.

Answer. Well, one of the things which is important to a sense of design in photography is working with a large format camera, where you cover your head so that all you see is the image on your ground glass, then you create a design on that.

Question. Do you think that contemporary photography is somewhat limited because of the format of a thirty-five millimeter camera?

Answer. Yes, very much limited. Usually the good people with a thirty-five millimeter camera have worked with a large format first.

Question. Were there qualities about the Southwest or the era in which you matured, that taught you the discipline you've needed to work on your own?

Answer. You have to be disciplined. I studied in New York and did quite a bit of work there, but I'm a westerner, and I didn't want to run that rat race to earn money. I made up my mind, well, my mind was kind of made up for me, to go home when I got the flu in the big epidemic. That knocked me haywire, and I was put to bed for six months with a heart lesion. When I was able to get back to work, I was in the west.

Question. Was your determination as a photographer influenced by the women's movement?

Answer. You never heard a word about that here in my era. That was an eastern thing.

Question. You said that in 1942 you learned the invaluable technique of making "one good negative." Does that mean that you carefully select one angle and one exposure before you shoot a subject and that's the shot you go with?

Answer. No, not always.

During the war I took a job with the Boeing Aircraft Company in Wichita, Kansas. The load was so heavy that I never made more than one exposure simply to save the labor of having to process more. It was a question

of getting it the first time.

I had a lot of hack work to do there, but I found some very interesting problems to solve. It was excellent discipline. To go back to the design question, I was given a number of assignments to do, and there was a constant challenge in making a good composition out of the things I saw. For example, they sent me out to photograph a crew working on the body of a bomber plane. I suddenly found a very wonderful subject in circles. Discoveries like that held me together during all the humdrum work that was part of that job.

Question. It takes a lively curiosity not to be overwhelmed by redundant subject matter.

Answer. That's true. I've always been interested in all kinds of subjects. I haven't just stuck to one particular line the way lots of people have. I need to find compelling questions. I've learned in my photography, in both the portraiture and the architectural work I've done, to set little problems for myself and solve them each as best I could.

On my Boeing job, I had an incredible work out with flash. I didn't do what the ordinary photographer would do: put one flash bulb right up on the camera. I often did multiple flash because I knew I'd get better form and better design that way. I got to the point where I never wanted to see another flash bulb again.

Question. Many committed photographers don't want to use their photographic skills to do commercial work...

Answer. That's ridiculous. I fight this with a lot of young people. Get busy and earn your own living first, then you can do the other things which you're very much moved to do. I think this is a lot of hooey myself. I've learned a lot ^{from} doing things I didn't always want to do.

Question. When you get into the darkroom, are there limitations to the amount of cropping and manipulation you will do?

Answer. I don't crop. That was lesson number one from Mr. White. I learned at the school to fill my space. It all comes back to design again.

I do a certain amount of burning and dodging because it's frequently necessary. Light does funny things and there are areas which you have to print more deeply. A fine quality print is the result of correct values. That's all it boils down to. Sometimes you get it right off the bat, but not always.

Question. Although most of your work is in black and white, you began photographing in color quite early.

Answer. Yes, I did. Color wasn't my first interest, but the Lumière autochrome was one of my most serious interests in photography.

You couldn't get the plates for Lumière autochromes after 1930 or so. There was only about a two year period between the time those went off the market and the time Leopold and Gradowski created the Kodachrome.

Question. It's nice that you can live with an autochrome.

Answer. Yes, and they're just as lovely as they ever were, but slides can be made into prints. Look at Eliot Porter's work. He's doing more with the smaller camera than he ever did.

Question. But you did make prints from some of your early autochromes.

Answer. When I was trying to get my retrospective show together, it occurred to me that I might copy them on color negative material. You have to illuminate autochromes properly. That's the technical difficulty. A very excellent technical fellow made the negatives for me and I just sent them into the laboratories. They made straight prints for me.

Question. Are there specific instances when you feel black and white is consistently more suitable than color?

Answer. It's a question of light. You can't handle extremes of light satisfactorily with color, at least, not to the degree you can with black and white.

Question. What about when it comes to photographing people?

Answer. It's entirely up to the photographer and how he gets people to respond to him. There has been awfully little good color portraiture done. It's a completely different medium and there isn't the control that there is in black and white. You don't have the contrasts that you do in black and white, and if you do, generally you're in trouble. Things are developing so fast, there's no telling what will work next.

Question. You began your photographic study of the Navajo by taking pictures of the ruins. I believe this was because you didn't want to approach the people until you felt you knew them. Is it important to you to feel familiar with your subjects?

Answer. Of course it is! I would no more think of photographing Indians whom I knew nothing about than flying to the moon. I wanted to befriend them first, and show them what I was doing. I needed their cooperation to get to first base.

Question. Is this also true for the people you photograph in your studio?

Answer. Well, I've never run a professional studio. I work in a simple place of my own or in people's homes. I'd rather photograph people in their surroundings.

Question. Were you motivated to do your studies of the Navajo and Pueblo people by a concern that their cultures were being denigrated and they were being treated unjustly?

Answer. Yes. I did that whole book from their point of view and not from the point of view of an anthropologist. There is some sort of wall that comes down in front of an Indian when he knows he's talking to an anthropologist. And they do know!

A friend of mine was a demonstration nurse on the Navajo reservation and when I went down to visit her I became intensely interested in the people. I made a number of portraits, but then the Depression came along

and the private organization that was supporting my friend, ran out of money. It was twenty-five years before we got back and then I saw the changes. I felt I had to do something because I'd seen the beauty in their earlier life. It took me fifteen years to put that book together. We went on two or three camping trips a year and eventually covered the whole reservation.

Question. Do you generally set out on a project with a theme in mind?

Answer. Not necessarily. Things grow out of other things.

The Pueblos: A Camera Chronicle came out of some things I did in the state guide book. I got a letter from Hastings House asking if I had other material that would make a book. I made trips to fill in what was needed as far as archaeology was concerned.

A little book, the story of Mesa Verde, I did myself.

Question. Even though you plan to fulfill a theme, do you still 'see' in single images?

Answer. Yes, because what I photograph sort of hits me in the face, like my storm at La Bajada. I was down in a valley when I saw an incredible cloud forming. I tore up the hill to get it. There are some things you search out and attempt from different angles, but there are the strong individual images too.

Question. What do you do when someone doesn't want to

be photographed?

Answer. I don't think I get myself into that position very much. I think that's the answer to that.

Question. So you're not willing to resort to any deviousness to get a shot you really want?

Answer. No. I didn't want to resort to that kind of thing. That's one of the reasons I left New York.

Question. I read a comment by you that you now think some of your Indian photographs from the Thirties and Forties are too posed.

Answer. Some of the early things I did were. The photographs I took over at Mesa Verde, more or less under the influence of the first Mrs. Neusbaum, who was putting on a play in the ruins, are just corny now.

My Navajo portraits are not posed, but in the Pueblo ones, I did some arranging. Things fell into place so nicely, I don't think they seem too posed.

Question. So you aren't very concerned about whether or not your photographs show things in the exact way that you found them?

Answer. Not always, no.

I have one print here (she pulls out the Pueblo book to show me an interior shot) which is posed, of course, but something happened when I was ready to shoot which interested me no end. When I looked to focus,

I found this dirty towel hanging on the wall. I went over and took it down. An older woman disappeared into another room and returned with this headdress. She hung it up, and of course, it was just the right thing. In a sense, that was an arranged photograph, but then again it wasn't, for she was using her own fine sense in deciding what was needed.

(Laura Gilpin shows me another photograph from her Pueblo book, this time of an Indian wrapped in a blanket and pointing off into the distance.) Now this is corny because an Indian doesn't point. I didn't know that. I needed it composition wise, but it just doesn't make any sense now that I know more (she chuckles).

It was a natural thing to compose things conscientiously in the early days when the exposures were so much slower and you had to work with people a little longer. That's the advantage of the modern fast cameras and film. On the other hand, I find it terribly stupid when someone makes twenty or thirty exposures which are exactly identical. I've seen it a dozen times: click, click, click, without even thinking. People just trust to luck that they're going to get one. Why not choose what is right?

Question. That could be a confidence problem.

Answer. It could be. If only they would study more with a larger camera. There's a great difference now with the kind of spontaneity which is desired, prevalent,

and good, but you can ruin a photograph by being in too much of a hurry and trying too hard to get something to look spontaneous. One has to make choices. There's always this terrible question of choices in this world.

Question. Is it important to you to feel an element of admiration for the subjects you photograph?

Answer. It's a question of response and attitude. You have to have a certain understanding of the people you photograph.

I recently received an announcement from a gallery in New York. On it were three photographs by different photographers, and every one of them were excellent examples of photography, but who in heaven would want to look at them? One was of this pair on a beach, photographed from the torso down, and another was of the most bedraggled looking man, beautifully composed and printed, but I'm not interested in looking at a guy like that. I wouldn't have photographed that person, but maybe that's just the times. That's where I'm 86.

I want to do things that, well, I don't know that I 'd use the word admire, but things that I'm sympatico with.

Question. The times may effect what people choose to photograph, but also the way they see.

Answer. Bad use of the wide angle lenses causes frightful distortions. Most people don't know how to use a wide angle properly and too many use it and the fish eye in a self conscious attempt to be different. I don't

like to judge. You have to do the thing that appeals to you.

Question. What are some of the valuable results of an exhibit for you?

Answer. I did a great deal of it in the early days. I thought it was the thing to do. Eleanor Caponigro just found the first print I ever did. It was called "Prelude," and it's of a trio I got to know. It was my first exhibition print and on the back of the mount is a long list of the places where I showed it. It went all over Europe and everywhere.

Sometimes I was asked to send things into exhibits, but all along I've found exhibiting a good way to keep in touch with things.

The first show I ever had outside of Colorado was in San Diego in 1922. A long time ago.

Question. Now Santa Fe has become a substantial artistic community in it's own right, but you must have felt rather isolated for a long time.

Answer. I've always been isolated, but I think it's a good thing in many ways. It's made me stick to my own way of seeing. I'm not influenced much by other people, although everybody is influenced by somebody.

Question. I don't think there's anything wrong with that.

Answer. I don't either, but I've been somewhat bothered recently by interference and by being copied. I don't like that. I remember the last time I was in the Yucatan.

I was waiting for the light to change. My camera was all set up and some guy came along and held his camera right over mine and snapped. This is so insulting and so ignorant for someone to think that just because they photograph where you photograph, their picture is going to come out the same way.

People say that a camera is just a mechanical thing and all you have to do is take a similar subject to the next guy's and... well, just try taking things someone else has done and see how differently we see. That's what makes photography an art form.

Question. You and Nell Dorr and Clara Sipprell all say that you "make" pictures instead of taking them.

Answer. You do "make them," of course, because it's your choice of light and everything about it is your decision.

Question. Saying "I take pictures" seems to stem from the fact that people nowadays do not feel responsible for what they've done.

Answer. It's all because of Eastman's slogan from years ago: "you push the button, we do the rest."

Question. I remember some of your photographs from a show at the Janus Gallery of women photographers, and they were the only ones with any sky in them.

Answer. That must have been the show that Anne Noggle and Marjoy Manning did. I was getting my big show together at the time and I had to send them whatever I had

ready. When I saw the show, I wished that I'd sent them five great big landscapes. There was hardly a landscape in the entire show.

Question. Yes, someone might have deduced from that show that Erikson's theory about women preferring interior spaces is absolutely true.

Answer. (laughs) Well, the sky is one of the things that draws you to New Mexico.

Many people don't know how to analyze a landscape. The most important thing, believe it or not, is the foreground. That will either make or break your picture. Your foreground has got to lead you into your picture.

Question. Vastness is one of the toughest things to photograph. I guess that's because framing vastness is almost a contradiction.

Answer. It is difficult. Scale is a terrific challenge.

Question. In one of your earlier interviews, there is mention of a Chinese scroll you have here. Is the notion of emptiness in Oriental art...

Answer. I've always admired it greatly and studied it whenever I could.

Question. You've said that you like working from the air more than anywhere. I know one can learn a lot about the patterns that nature and humanity create from that perspective.

Answer. Yes, absolutely. It's the most terrific challenge going. I should modify that by saying there

are just as many things on the ground that you can get a big kick out of. The challenge in the air is to see if you can get things quickly enough. I think Bill Garnett is a super aerial photographer.

(A friend of Laura's enters) All right Roy!

Roy. Is Laura being immortalized? (To me) Are you from heaven? (To Laura, who's laughing) You're looking all right.

Answer. If I could walk, I'd be fine.

Roy. Hop on my back. The recorder isn't going, is it?

Question (me). Sure, say whatever you want.

Roy. Brigitte had worked for this family for forty years and one morning she wouldn't get out of bed. The family said "where's Brigitte, where's Brigitte? No coffee. No biscuits!" They called the doctor who drove the madam out of the room, closing the door. "What's the matter?" he asked her. "I haven't been paid for three years," she said. "Well, move over," he said, "they owe me money too."

(Laura laughs as he begins to back out the door) I'll be by to see you later. I discovered a batch of your transparencies that I made in Europe twenty years ago. I thought I'd thrown them out and they're honey in the comb. It made my day this morning. I'm sorry you don't look wan and pale.

Answer (Laura). He's quite a card. Roy Rosen has a beautiful sense of color.

Question. Didn't you practice portrait photography

by taking pictures of sculpted heads?

Answer. I practiced on Brenda Putnam's sculptures. I cut my teeth photographically with her sculptures. It was wonderful because you can learn just as much working on a clay head as you can with a live person, only you don't have to deal with the personality. It was an opportunity to study light and also, I learned a tremendous amount from Brenda Putnam about form. I worked in one of her classes all one winter just to acquire a sense of form.

I remember that she used to say, "without shadow, there is no form." That's quite nearly true. I've got some examples that fit that quite nicely. Some are from the White Sands in southern New Mexico, an area where none of the wonderful soil erosion is visible when the sands are in total shadow. Then everything looks like one tone until you pick up the light in the back. There's only form between the shade of one and the light of the other. You get value, but you don't get form in the shade. These are the things that you pick up in the course of a life if you keep your eyes and ears open.

I've photographed a lot of sculpture work and hundreds of paintings, some of them badly. I've taken the jobs because there wasn't anybody here in Santa Fe for years to copy the painter's paintings for them. It was always a terrible headache because I wasn't set up properly, but I've learned a great deal from that too.

Question. Do you feel publications are the best means available for displaying your work?

Answer. Not always, because I've suffered a lot from the quality of what's been done. Everything I've had published so far has had some sort of grief the matter with it. I'm just hoping that this Canyon de Chelly book will come closer to my ideals of the book I'd like to turn out before I finish.

I haven't done much for magazines. I'm usually turned down. "Popular Photography" never mentioned my name until 1977.

Question. David Vestal's article?

Answer. Yes. I haven't hunted for a career. I just like to work, that's all.

Question. Are you receptive to criticism?

Answer. I welcome it. I don't mind it a bit. You don't have to accept it.

I think I criticize myself first, even on the corny things I was talking about.

Question. Is solitude important to you in getting your work done?

Answer. I've always done it on my own. I've tried once or twice having somebody help me, but I can't do it. I can't concentrate.

At times I've worked under the most cramped and difficult conditions as far as darkroom facilities are concerned, but I've discovered one photographer who has us all beat. Her name was Kate Cory, and this fellow

got a hold of a whole box of her negatives that a friend of hers had stored away without even knowing what they were.

Question. IT's one of those wonderful grandmother's attic stories?

Answer. Almost. She was once a painter in New York.

Some friends told her that she should go to the Hopi country and paint the desert. She went in 1905 and lived with the Hopis for twelve years. She became part of the community and did work that is far more extensive than what Curtis or ^{Woman}~~Roman~~ ever did.

Somewhere along the way she got a camera and she processed her plates from water dripping off the roof. That was the only water there was. When she left the Hopis she went to Flagstaff and lived the rest of her life there. She never married and left all her possessions to this friend. It's a miracle anything is left of it.

I've been asked to write a forward for a book on her. I hope things are going to be well enough printed, because it's going to be a difficult job. Her photographs are just amazing. She was so much a part of the Hopi life and she knew design and lighting - well, it's all there.

Question. Have you ever collaborated on a book and let someone else do the writing?

Answer. No. I think doing it all the way is the only way you can do it. Otherwise the work gets split.

Question. Do you ever explain in your writing what you

were attempting photographically or artistically?

Answer. I give information about the subject. I don't explain what I've done artistically or try to interpret for people.

Question. You have said, "I'm not a precise photographer. I don't think that's the most important thing, or I wouldn't be like that, but I think that's what most people want nowadays."

Answer. I'm not the kind of precision photographer that Paul Caponigro or Ansel Adams is. I wouldn't say this regarding Paul, I haven't seen him at work, but I have seen Ansel, of course, and I think his zone system is wonderful. He's given us a great tool for precise work, but I think the danger is to have that rule you rather than be your tool. One shouldn't do things to fit a formula.

Question. The technical side of photography could be some people's joy. Is that the reason you photograph, because it's a joy to you?

Answer. Yes. I just can't imagine doing anything else.

Question. And when it's hard work and not just joy?

Answer. I've had to work. I can always find projects to work on.

Question. Have you ever questioned the value of photography for the world at large?

Answer. No, I don't think I have.

The ridiculous thing is that even though I've had a print cabinet full of platinum prints for fifty

years, and hardly anyone was interested enough to look at them, now suddenly they're valuable. Why are they any different now?

Question Aren't you making some portfolio's now with hand coated platinum papers?

Answer. Yes. It'll be the first time I've made a limited edition, although some of the images I've already done. I'll be making fifteen portfolios with six images plus five artist's proofs for Witkin. I've got to get going on it.

Question. Art is mostly valued on the basis of its exclusiveness, but it seems to me to be one of the greatest qualities about photography that it can be reproduced fairly easily.

Answer. Yes. What I think is important is that the collector's item be a print that was produced by the photographer and not a reproduction by someone else.

There are thousands of photographers who work only to get their photographs published, and that's the end of it. I don't think it should be the end of it, not if the photograph was worth doing in the first place. A worthwhile photograph deserves a fine print.

Question. Do you feel you've had to make great sacrifices to photograph in the way you've wanted to?

Answer. Yes. Some I'd rather not discuss. Sometimes work is the greatest thing one can do, that is, to keep on working when things get rough.

Question. Does it concern you when you don't feel inspired to shoot anything?

Answer. I've been that way recently because I get so knocked out. My physical powers are definitely diminishing. Usually, I move along from episode to episode. In between, I believe in working on still life problems. That's an excellent form of training for design.

Question. David Vestal said you never run dry. (She laughs.)

Did you used to have difficulty promoting your own work?

Answer. I'm not a promotor of my own work. Sena does that for me. I always see all the things that are wrong with it.

You may not believe it, but I've always been very shy with people. I've gotten over it somewhat and don't mind talking with people anymore. If I have anything to teach anyone, I'm glad to do it, but I think you teach more by doing than any other way.

Question. I love what you once said about failure...

Answer. ...that it doesn't have to hurt to fail because you always learn what you should have done.

Question. Yes. It can still hurt, but it might be worth it!