
5 Minutes with a ViewPoint Member

An Interview with Allan Neilsen

by Madison Bragg, August 2016

Madison: Your biography on the ViewPoint website tells us that you began a new chapter in your career when you began studying Miksang photography. Can you tell me more about what that is and how it influences your work?

Allan: *I came upon it by accident in my doctor's office, I saw these photographs which were like none I had ever seen before and I asked about them, she said they were something called Miksang and said that if I was interested I should pursue it at the Shambhala Centre, which I did. Essentially, it's a form of Buddhist practice, a meditation with the camera, if you will, that emphasizes being present, being here, and not being distracted by all that is around us; not having our vision shaped by the general cultural framework given to us by Life Magazine or National Geographic, advertisements, post cards etc. You kind of wander -- looking, becoming more aware of your surroundings. And if something stops equivalent as a photograph.*



Madison: Would you say the way you choose to find a photograph is not deliberate, but the way you choose to photograph is deliberate?

Allan: *Sure, there's no question about it.*

Madison: Would you say that taking those classes enhanced your skill to make your subject appear more natural when abstracted from its true form?

Allan: *I don't think so. I think it's the unpremeditated way I like to shoot. If something captures me I engage with it. I never think to try and capture things naturally, if anything I try to capture things differently. I love strong graphic elements but I can't draw, I can't paint, so a lot of the work I create has an abstract bent.*

Madison: Do you think that the nature of your methods gives you more control over image making?

Allan: *No, it only affects the way I go about making images. I think the main thing is that my method is wandering with an open mind, and see what engages me. It's sort of happenstance in a lot of ways. And then I shoot what I think is interesting. I experiment with different takes and perspectives, but it must please my own eye.*



Madison: We also know that you are not just a photographer; you are a professor at MSVU. Can you tell us about what you teach and what you hope your students will get out of their education?

Allan: *I work in literacy education. With all the constraints that are on public school teachers these days, what I've always tried to do is encourage my students to make sense of things on their own terms. I hope they begin to trust their own ideas and competencies and not just colour between the lines for others. I also stress the importance of making mistakes and falling on your face – which is the advice I attempt to embrace in my own photographic practices. If you can't mess up, then how do you get any better? If you don't make mistakes then you just remain the same.*

Madison: Have you always wanted to teach?

Allan: *I never wanted to teach. I fell into it. There was free tuition at the University of Manitoba in 1969 and I didn't know what else to do at age 21. There was a teacher shortage at the time; they offered free tuition in the Education Faculty, so I thought I would give it a go. And I was lucky, I worked with really good people and I did make a career of teaching. I've loved it and I think I'm pretty good at it.*

Madison: How does being a photographer compare to being a teacher for you?

Allan: *I don't compare them at all. Except my approach for teaching which allows students to explore, make mistakes and make connections, and that is what I try to do.*

Madison: Your biography on Viewpoint's website also tells us that you have been photographing for nearly fifty years. Who are your influences and what made you pursue photography as more than just a hobby?

Allan: *I use to look at Life Magazine and of course National Geographic, and all the rest. Along the way I became exposed to and captivated by the everyday subject matter in the work of Cartier-Bresson, Doisneau, Ronis, Evans, Levitt and others. But the people who have had the most direct, lasting and, I think, obvious impact on my work are Stephen Patterson, Richard Martin, Freeman Patterson, Michael Wood, my Miksang teacher) – and Curtis Steele whose images were the ones I*

saw in my doctor's office years ago and which started the processes of change and growth in my sensibilities and image making. But, without question, the real turning point in my photographic life was becoming a member of ViewPoint. I've been a member for 8 or 9 years. There is a rich history and culture here that I have become part of. It's a way of thinking, a way of being and has helped me to o care about my work in new ways.



Madison: Before you got into Miksang photography, how would you describe your work before that?



Allan: *When I was younger I did everything. I did flowers and landscapes. I don't do landscapes anymore and I don't enjoy them the same as other things. I can make them okay, but they don't give me a great deal of pleasure. My interest and passion is doing urban photography and being in the city. I don't wander totally aimlessly; if I wander downtown it's because I want to shoot something downtown. I know that I will likely find things that will interest me more than plants and animals.*

Madison: What would you think your goal is when you take a photograph?

Allan: *It has to please myself first. I guess that's not unusual. If I'm perfectly honest I would hope other people find it pleasing or at least interesting. I never put up anything that I don't think is worthy. I think I'm becoming less concerned with making things that are pretty, and I'm finding myself drawn more to photographic documentary. I've done lots of pretty photographs but I want more than that.*

Madison: Here's your last five questions; what is your favorite...

Season? Fall

Song (or band if that is too broad)? The Tedeschi Trucks Band (Midnight in Harlem)

Place in Halifax? downtown, the waterfront

Childhood game? Baseball (still is)

Holiday? Thanksgiving