
5 Minutes with a ViewPoint Member

An Interview with Kathleen Flanagan

by Angela Creaser, September 2015

Angela: You taught at the [New Brunswick College of Craft & Design](#) for 3 years and then at the [Nova Scotia College of Art & Design](#) for 15 years. How has teaching influenced your photography?

Kathleen: *Most teachers learn from teaching. That definitely happened to me. I learned so much from other people. In order to teach technical information, you really need to understand the techniques. I found that my technical knowledge improved because of teaching. Another aspect is when you're teaching you are exposed to a lot of different ideas and perspectives on photography. In a classroom setting, you talk a lot about photographs. I found that teaching sharpened my capacity to talk about images. It improved my ability to develop and use a lexicon around photography. As a teacher, you are often put on the spot, you are expected to say something insightful about images that the class is discussing – so you have to step up your game. Often I wouldn't know what I was going to say until I started saying it. But I learned to enjoy trusting my intuition and instincts. I think teaching is absolutely the right way to increase your capacity to think about photographs.*



Angela: Is there one student or student's body of work that stands out to you even today?

Kathleen: *Many, many. And I hate to single out one person as it would be unfair to all the others. But... Lorraine Field – who recently gave a lecture at ViewPoint – was one of the "students" whose work I respect tremendously. I put the word "student" in quotation marks because I definitely learned as much from her as she probably did from me. But this is the wonderful thing about working in a creative context where people are learning from each other.*

Angela: Lorraine has a similar style or interest in photography as you. I am thinking of your documentary work?



Kathleen: Yes, that is probably true. I have a strong interest in social issues. A lot of the work that Lorraine has done is around the environment of photography, and how things look in the open landscape. She is very ingenious with how she layers things. If you know her work, she has this wonderful way of photographing things and projecting the images onto landscapes which are then photographed. That is not a technique that I've ever used, but I find it so interesting. The human eye sees actual objects but through a filter of memory.

Another photographer whose work I really admire is Camille Zakharia. Who again, I say is one of my "students", because I learned much more from him than he did from me. He is such an inventive, interesting photographer. He was born in Lebanon and now lives in Bahrain - a very gentle and nice person, and so perceptive about cultural influences from his own Middle East culture as well as the western culture. A very meticulous photographer. Both Lorraine and Camille are extremely meticulous.

Angela: You have worked on some powerful projects. Do you have a dream project that you are working on, or going to work on?

Kathleen: I have several ideas on the go, but I'm a little reluctant to say a whole lot about them because you never know how these things are going to pan out. In some ways, "[Sacrifices on the Job](#)" was a dream project for me because it reflected a lot of my interests. The idea for the project came to me because of something I saw at the corner of Summer Street and Veteran's Memorial Lane. It was [a plaque on the ground that acknowledged the death of a paramedic](#) who was killed on the job during Hurricane Juan in 2003. I found it very moving to see that, and it started me thinking about other public monuments to people who have been killed on the job. Broadly speaking, I'm very interested in the built landscape, how cultural concepts are communicated through buildings and other objects that surround us in urban areas. I am interested in how such monuments stir emotions. And I am interested in heroic actions of ordinary people. And I am moved by tragedies.



Angela: Do you have a favorite image of all time or series of images?

Kathleen: Do you mean from my own work? [Yes.] I was very happy with the "Sacrifices on the Job" exhibit. And I felt that the photograph that was used on the poster was particularly

effective. It is a picture of a large monument in Stollerton known as the Miners' Monument. It records the names of 198 people who were killed in eight separate tragedies between 1880 and 1992. The monument has a sculpture of one miner at the top of the monument who is depicted in a heroic pose. The combination of all the names and the sheer mammoth size of the monument is very moving. I'm interested in the emotions that are awakened when people look at photographs. That photograph had a very poignant effect, it really spoke to heroes in our midst.

Angela: Along those lines, for you, what makes an image stand out from the average? Is it that emotive effect?

Kathleen: Yes, I would say that a photograph stands out when it affects people emotionally. Basically, that's why I'm so interested in photography, because it has the capacity to have an impact on people's emotions. Photographs are a way of communicating, sometimes with people you may never have an opportunity to meet. I'm always amazed when people respond viscerally to a photograph that I've taken, and I'm interested in hearing what it means to them. Photography is really about storytelling and that is why I think "Sacrifices on the Job" project was effective because it dealt specifically with and went right to the emotions evoked by people dying on the job. It's a very powerful concept.

Angela: We're running out of time, and I have five quick questions. What is your...

Favorite colour?	Blue
Favorite animal?	Dog [Kathleen has a dog]
Favorite Season?	Spring
Favorite movie?	Salt of the Earth by Sebastião Salgado
Favorite book?	Blindness by José Saramago

For more information about Kathleen Flanagan and her exhibition titled "Sacrifices on the Job", please visit her website at www.kathleenflanagan.ca.