

Lisa Cutler Artist Statement

Photography became my voice at a time when I was searching for something of my own, providing me with a new way of looking at and moving through the world. Liberated from the demands of everyday life, the camera allows me to become one with the landscape that unfolds as I chart new paths through places both foreign and familiar. No longer confined by the notion of “the known,” I move with a freedom that comes from getting lost.

I follow my intuition, engaging in the process of discovery and looking with fresh eyes at the world to try to make sense of it. Without an agenda, I can be fully present, bearing witness to the moment as it unfolds, watching and waiting until the image is revealed. In that instant, everything stops, then the shutter clicks, and what remains is the ephemeral beauty of our world, preserved like a fly in amber. I see majesty within the mundane, spellbound by the power of the prosaic scenes that surround us when we simply stop and look. Mesmerized by the quiet drama of simplicity, I take pleasure in the classical beauty of pure geometry, color, shape, form, and light, using photography to write straightforward descriptions of contemporary life. With the camera, I document the world as I see it with precision and clarity, searching for an objective truth yet knowing such a thing is always just out of reach.

From a very early age, art held me spellbound, creating a silent space for meditation and communion with worlds far beyond my own. I can remember waiting with breathless anticipation for the latest issue of *Life* magazine to arrive in the mail, then eagerly perusing the works of Robert Capa, Gordon Parks, and Henri Cartier-Bresson. I was fascinated by the way photography could forge a sense of connection across time and space — a sensation I experienced as a young girl looking through our family photos. In the back of my childhood bedroom closet was a dresser filled to the brim with photos of long lost family members, weddings, and gatherings. I would climb into the back of my closet and spend hours going through pictures, trying to imagine who the people were and what the occasions might have been. I still remember the mix of curiosity and comfort I found, wondering about the story behind the pictures themselves.

I brought that same passion for archival photography to my work as a television producer, delving into the deep reaches of archives at agencies like Magnum Photos, Black Star, and Contact Press, losing myself in the search for images to fulfill storyboards and scripts. But despite my lifelong love for photography I did not pursue it in earnest until 2008. At 50, my life had taken unexpected turns and I was searching for something of my very own — a way to both find and lose myself in the creation of art.

No longer constrained by expectations, demands, or restraints, I was finally free to discover my own vision. I began my first major project while teaching photography to underprivileged children who were receiving psychiatric treatment at Pleasantville Cottage Campus in New York. Over two years, I made portraits of the students, many of whom had never been photographed before, for the series *Our Children* — which became the focus of a fundraiser for the Jewish Child Care Agency that raised over \$200,000 to support the program. In this moment, I realized the fundamental principle of intent. Art for art's sake was simply not enough; to make a difference, we must move through life with purpose. I began seeing photography as a means, and not an end — an opportunity to connect with larger communities and use my work to explore deeper truths about the world.

My next project, *Red Hook*, found me by pure happenstance after I accidentally stumbled into the famed Brooklyn neighborhood. Not having my bearings, I moved by instinct, using the camera to guide my way and in doing so came upon a place destroyed by systemic racism. The once flourishing immigrant community was torn asunder by practices of “urban renewal,” the landscape decimated by pollution with the Gowanus Canal added to the EPA's Superfund list in 2010. To create *Red Hook*, I adopted documentary, landscape, or street photography practices to explore the multilayered history of the community.

I imagine my photographs to be “neutral” but of course they are not. They are expressions of my instincts, sensitivities, and sensibilities layered one on top of another. I look to photographers like Dorothea Lange, Robert Adams, Mary Ellen Mark, Eugène Atget, and Bruce Davidson — visionaries who use the camera to pen sonnets and soliloquies of life. In seeing not only what they photograph, but what they choose to show, I am moved by the ways in which picture making becomes a form of autobiography.

My most recent series, *Hidden Homes*, forms a striking counterpoint to *Red Hook*, offering a lyrical and lighthearted look at the landscape. Traveling across New York City, eastern Long Island, Vermont, Florida, California, Minnesota, Portugal, and Peru, I once again lose myself in a place where nature is cultivated as a canopy and a veil. When I work on a project, I am searching for the essence of a place, trying to distill it in its more pure, formal terms. I try to treat the photographs as sculptures that are visceral expressions of the emotions the landscape evokes.

Sometimes it feels like we walk through life with blinders — but photography strips all that away. The camera has taught me how to slow down, savor life, cultivate my own point of view, while also allowing me to ask questions, consider conundrums, and record my impressions of the moment. The world is ever changing and yet the photograph preserves something universal that speaks every language without ever saying a word.