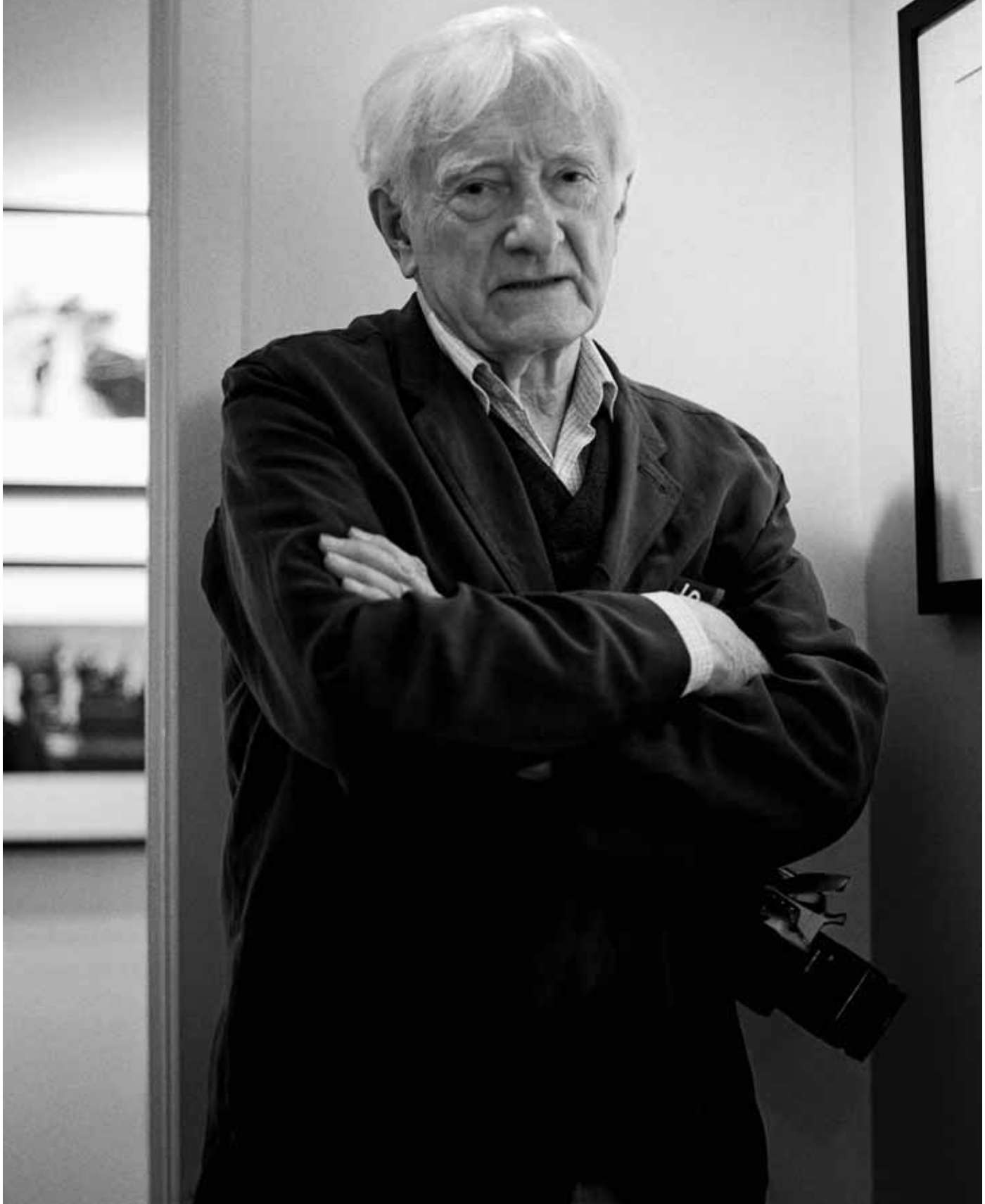


Marc Riboud Has Got the Eye

BY **AYSEGUL SERT** PHOTOGRAPHY **DAVID MIEZAL**



“Taking pictures is like savoring life at 125th of a second,” once said Marc Riboud, the legendary French photographer. At 83, he stands tall and firm, with his old companion hanging on his shoulder. As we walk to find seating, away from the noise of the overcrowded hotel lobby, Riboud stops, leans forward and whispers, “Photography cannot change the world, but it can show the world, especially when it is changing.” Secret revealed. Message transmitted. Without any other word, he continues walking.

Born in Lyon, France, in 1923, Riboud’s first camera was a Vest Pocket Kodak his father no longer used. He was 14 years old. The most shy of the seven siblings, he studied engineering but after graduation went on to frame reality in black and white. An avid observant of life, and an active youth in the French Resistance under the German occupation, he met the mighty Henri Cartier-Bresson, his “salutary tyrant,” who became his mentor. “Cartier-Bresson told me which books to read, what political ideas I should have, which museums and galleries to visit. He taught me about life, and about the art of photography.”

Soon after joining the prestigious Magnum Agency, Riboud began his journeys to countries associated with political unrest and war. From 1955 to 1960, he traveled the Near East, the Far East, India, Nepal, China, and the Soviet Union. From 1960 to 1970, he documented Africa, Algeria, North and South Vietnam, and Cambodia. From 1970 to 1980, he explored the Middle East, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. His frames—whether of a Pakistani boy holding a gun to his forehead, or a young girl facing dozens of guns with a flower in her hand in a 1963 peace protest—chronicle the eternal human struggle.

Venice sat in conversation with Riboud reminiscing about a life well lived through the lens. Here is the French master in his own images and words.

Venice: There is this ongoing rivalry between the French and the British about who discovered photography first.

Marc Riboud: And it is never going to end! *[laughs]* It was Niépce who made the discovery. Talbot in England came up with the same concept around 1830, but Niépce had already done it, the summer of 1826, in France. We are talking about one hundred and eighty-some years ago.

How did you get interested in photography?

I was about 14 years old and I was extremely shy. My father, who was in World War I, gave me his Vest Pocket Kodak camera. In mid 1930s, he bought one of the first Leica cameras and didn’t need his old little Kodak, which he passed on to me.

You were seven kids in the family. Why you? He must have seen the promise in you...

Why me? I have no clue. All my other siblings were bright! I was the lost one. *[laughs]* You know, two of my brothers became very successful industrialists. I guess my father didn’t know what to do with me, so he gave me a camera. When you are a kid, you love to do things that you can show to mummy and daddy. You draw and paint here and there. Youngsters adore creating things they can show around.

Interesting. We could even stretch that theory. Look at the Cavern of Lascaux, the Palaeolithic caves, with the drawings on the walls, made centuries ago.

Right! We have all done that, we have all been there. We might not remember it. Like you said, look at the history of mankind: those humans who have drawn on cave walls civilizations ago. It all reflects that childhood desire.

As a young boy, school wasn’t your strength. But there must have been something you were good at, something you enjoyed.

I was good in geometry. That was it. For the rest, I was a bad student. Geometry and photography are quite similar. The rules of the eye, observing light and shadow, those subjects have always fascinated me. The pleasure of the eye has always been my reason for pursuing photography. It is an extraordinary feeling to be able to cut and frame reality into moments.

“A good photograph is a surprise; my camera has to be ready to catch it,” you once said. Is that how you would describe this art form?

Photography is not about photographing a subject. I learned that through Henri Cartier-Bresson. It is the composition that makes this medium interesting. When for example I walk in a crowd, I don’t look for a face, I look for an image. Do you see the difference? When I look through my lens, I see a rectangle, and through that I see lines and harmonies. The key of the photograph is in geometry. I never believed in the word “talent.” I don’t believe in being talented. Talent doesn’t exist. Work, hard work, is everything.

I disagree. I view the true artist as the one who has the gift. Hard work is important but not enough. Hard work can never equal talent.

I believe that we are born predisposed to certain things. For me, it was the eye. I had a good eye. But in the end, it is hard work that counts. A pianist who doesn’t practice ten hours a day will never become a great pianist, I guarantee you. A painter who doesn’t spend twelve hours by his canvas will never be a good painter. Photography is the

same. The more we practice, the more we use our eye, the more we look, the better we will become, and the better we will see. I think that you can become visual, you can become a good photographer with practice. You don’t have to be born with it. Learning how to see is like learning how to read music notes. In photography, there are certain rules about composition that one has to learn and work on. You can go and buy the most expensive and high-tech camera you want and read the manual and know how to use the gadget. But that doesn’t mean you are a photographer. What takes time is becoming the eye. And that’s what is fascinating about this art form. You know, I consider myself extremely lucky to have met Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Extremely lucky indeed. But you often refer to him as your “salutary tyrant.” Isn’t it a little contradictory?

I always say that I had in my life a tyrant because he was one! It is nice that you ask about him because lately I have been thinking of him. Recently, I found and read some of the letters he had written to me. Cartier-Bresson never told me, “Marc, you did a good job today, good going kid!” Oh, not him! He would tell me, “Marc, that’s not good. This is how you should do it.”

Your latest exhibition at Duncan Miller Gallery is entitled “The World. His Lens.” How does the world look through your lens?

My vision of the world is simple. Tomorrow, each new day, I want to see the city, take photographs, meet people, and wander alone. I don’t have any big, existential world vision. I am interested in politics. Some people are captives of their past; they live in their memories. Not me. I am not one of those souls that keep talking about the past. I live for today and for tomorrow rather than yesterday.

You have seen the world change as a photographer. It’s hard to believe that you have no comments about it.

What makes me sad about this new world is that nobody does anything on his/her own. They don’t have a personal view of the world, they don’t have a personality, and they don’t have an individual taste. They are all following some trend, all homogeneous, all high tech. People don’t decorate their homes, they don’t take care of their gardens, they don’t even look after their kids. Instead they hire professionals, or specialists, whatever the name. They give up their freedom.

And is that the major difference between your times and nowadays?

Fifty years ago, when I started taking pictures professionally, those were hard times. We had the Depression, WWII, the Cold War. You had to know how to be self-suffi-



Los Angeles, 1958, vintage silver gelatin print

cient and you had to know how to economize. It is crucial to have concerns in life. When you have everything, when things are easy, you don't achieve much. When you can have 20 film rolls per shoot, you don't think as strongly about the picture or the composition. When you have to be careful about what you spend, then you think about each frame, hence, with each "click" you aim for excellence. We all prefer Roman Art to Art Baroque, don't we? Simplicity is key. Today, we live in times of surplus and excess. We live in a superficial world. While some countries have so little, others have too much.

Soon after you joined the prestigious Magnum Agency in 1953, you began traveling extensively instead of staying with Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa who had taken you under their wing. Why?

Imagine a boat leaving the harbor, leaving the shores and sailing away. That's what I did. I didn't like to be around photographers who kept talking about the craft, and the method, and the technique; all this intellectualization of the art form. I didn't understand what they were talking about! And you know, honestly speaking, I was very enthusiastic about leaving France. During WWII, you couldn't travel. So I had this desire to leave, and that's what I did.

How much does luck play a role in capturing a timeless photograph? In your words: "When luck comes my way, and offers me a good picture, joy is surely at hand."

When I talk about luck, I talk about it in terms of having the luck to encounter people. I was extremely lucky to have met Henri Cartier-Bresson; I was lucky to have witnessed his love for life, to have known his approach to the medium. His tireless passion for culture and life taught me more than any lesson. [Suddenly, Riboud seems lost. "Did you see my camera? What did I do with it?" he exclaims. His hand quickly reaches behind him, and the mystery is resolved. His face lightens up. He emits a sigh of revelation.] What was I saying? Oh yes. You should always try to have luck on your side.

You strongly believe that photography must not try to be persuasive. If not to persuade, what is its role?

I have learned a lot about life through photography. The world we inhabit is worth knowing; it is worth exploring. I've been throughout the globe, and I've realized that the more you travel, the more cultures and countries you get exposed to, the more you see that people are alike. We are all the same. You know what else I've learned? The poorest are always the nicest and the most willing to share and help. No matter what

your ethnicity or skin color, jealousy, revenge, humiliation, desire for money and power are everywhere. I've always been drawn by the Orient and the Middle East. And I'll tell you that these regions have changed enormously in the past fifteen years. The Orient has become a Westernized version of the Orient. Culture and family values don't exist anymore. They are losing their traditions and belief systems, and all that for the sake of becoming more modern! How unfortunate!

Would it be fair to say that photography is here to chronicle the world as it unfolds, with its conflicts, and beauty?

A photographer should not make the mistake that he or she will change the world. No image can achieve that. The photographer ought not to believe that he has a message to convey. If the photographer assigns himself such a responsibility, he will lose his freedom, and the moment you lose that, you lose everything. We take good pictures, we become good photographers by living life, by talking to people, avoiding preconceived ideas, and being open. That's how we get to take pictures that matter.

I found this quote of yours, which is intriguing and amusing. But I couldn't quite make sense of it in terms of photography. "We are attracted by danger, the

way we are attracted by beautiful women. It is physiological."

Let me ask you this: Why would anyone in his right mind want to climb a mountain? It is in order to see the view from the top, where it is supposed to be the best. It's for its promised beauty. But to climb that mountain is dangerous, and the more danger is involved, the more we crystallize what is up there. It's all about being drawn to the unknown, to the unattainable. When I am getting ready to take a picture, sometimes I am torn between the fear of getting too close and another force that eggs me on to get closer. We are all drawn by danger as if the danger were a beautiful woman.

Looking and seeing... Is there any difference?

People talk for hours at panels and dinner parties about the difference between the two. I don't see any. For me it is the same thing. In the world of photography, we have our own language. To say that a fellow is good, we say he has got the eye.

Before our interview you said, "I photograph the way musicians hum." What did you mean by that?

It is hard to describe. I absolutely have no idea, no recollection of those moments when I photograph. We call this the memory of the eye. Whatever memory I have, they are in my photographs. Other than that, I don't remember anything.

Could you talk a little about the French Resistance in WWII? You were an adolescent during the German occupation.

That's a long story. Death has passed close to me. I've seen people die, and I've seen them get killed. We were clandestine, we did hide here and there. France was liberated in 1944, but the war wasn't over. It was tough times.

You've witnessed the world change: WWII, Cold War, the emergence of African independence, the Civil Rights movement, and the rise of globalization. Any particular event or time frame that has touched you?

Not really. I would like to say this: I wish France had brought its wealth and knowledge to Africa instead of its colonizer mindset. If only it had spread the good! Also, we have been disillusioned by Communism. We were all disappointed by it. Communism seemed to be a hope for a world that would be just. You don't seem to agree...

Well, somewhat, yes, you are right. But I am also extremely disappointed by Capitalism...

Good point. Which brings us to the conclusion that anything that is extremely pure brings fanaticism. The only thing that can make the world a better place is culture.



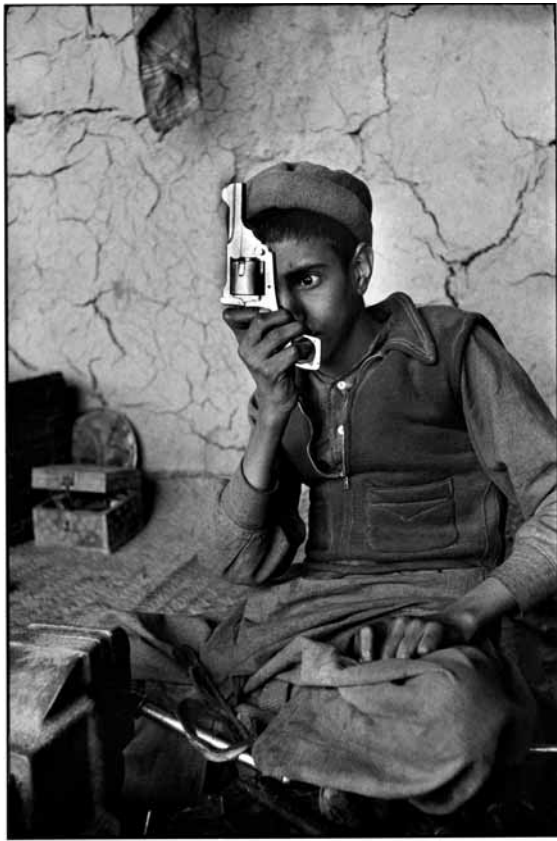
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Afghanistan, 1955, 16 x 20 signed silver gelatin print. A tribal munitions factory near Kohat Pass on Afghanistan's lawless border with Pakistan



The Eiffel Tower, 1953, 16 x 20 signed silver gelatin print



Beijing, China, 1957, view of the street through antique shop's windows, silver gelatin print



Washington, D.C., 1967, 16 x 20 signed silver gelatin print

Money, ambition, jealousy, those will take us nowhere. In the contemporary world everything is defined by money. Where are our values? Culture—arts, writing, photography—that's what can make this world better and brighter.

You were one of the few Western photographers able to get into Communist China.

It's true that I've spent a lot of time in the Orient. I don't like China, I like the Chinese. I love the people there. But China has no respect for human rights, and no freedom of expression.

Do you have any words of wisdom for aspiring photographers?

Nothing is simple. There is no formula. The enemy of a photographer, what would prevent one from taking good pictures, is to have a stomachache, having worries, or a dark cloud in your soul—physical and mentally. That will prevent you from capturing the moment.

When you take pictures, you have to be 100% present. Some days we look less well. To see well is difficult; it takes time, training, and luck. But once you achieve it, the joy is tremendous.

After all these years, travels, books, exhibitions— what still attracts you to photography?

I don't know anything else to do. [laughs] It is like what attracts you to breathe? It is in me. Taking pictures is like breathing for me. Natural. Vital. It is a reflex. You should have the instinct of the instant. Photography is instant. To get the right instant, you should have the right instinct. And to get that you need to nurture, cultivate, practice and love doing it. ▼

Marc Riboud's exhibition, "The World: His Lens," at Duncan Miller Gallery, 10959 Venice Boulevard, Los Angeles, through May 15. For more information, visit www.duncanmillergallery.com or call (310) 838-2440.