

PROJECT NAME: THEATER OF THE MIND	FIRST NAME: ARTHUR	LAST NAME: TRESS
	LOCATION: NEW YORK + CALIFORNIA	DATE: / / 03-13
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:		
SILVIA BOMBARDINI IN CONVERSATION WITH ARTHUR TRESS		DM

Silvia - Let us start from the very beginning: it's Coney Island and 1952, you are a thoughtful preteen explorer with a Rolleicord camera, adrift among the ruins of Victorian funfairs. Not yet on this side of puberty, and already a taste of the themes that will come to define decades of work - curiosity, melancholia, and a dreamlike atmosphere. How much do you believe those tenderfooted years to have influenced your style and technique, your creative growth? Do you ever go back these days, to visit such formative grounds?

Arthur - Well what was extraordinary about that time was how well formed in style and spirit were those photos for a kid just starting out. It was already set what I was to become and do with the rest of my life. It was like a magical gift... I won most of the first prizes in several categories at the National Scholastic High School Photography Awards even though I was entirely self-taught.

Often photographers have this mature vision from the get-go, like Bresson or Lartigue. It was an essential creative combination of a young man's energetic enthusiasm and an old man's weary soul, subject and sensitive to the themes of abandonment and decay. Some teens, perhaps more than we realize, carry that within themselves, unrecognized or unmet in the busy flurry of school activities and sports. Perhaps being gay already gave me that sense of isolated distance and self reliance that I retain to this day, where I live as a bit of a recluse in my Big Sur hideaway. Coney Island, where I grew up, especially late in the autumn or early winter, seemed to reflect the tender sadness of a faded wonderland gone to seed. It was also a metaphor for the failed aspirations of an immigrant American generation - Arthur Miller went to my high school - just like a sinister Ray Bradbury or Stephen King short story where this sense of an indefinable evil haunts the pages.

I do go back to visit my old haunts every time I return to New York, about once a year. I take the long subway ride out to Brooklyn and first visit the "Nathan's Famous" food stand, noting the change in price from those 15 cents of 1956 to the current 3 dollars for a kosher and very delicious hot dog.

Then I will wander about taking pictures for a few hours of the mostly empty parking lots where once stood the great amusements parks, the roller coasters of the past. There's a preview on my website of an upcoming documentary that starts with such a visit. I think it's important to get back in touch with my authentic adolescent self, my inner core, that might have been distorted by the glittering prizes of the art world's rewards or the manipulating techniques of achieving career success.

Silvia - Most professional photographers, even when they aren't from Glasgow, could drown in their confidence and self-esteem.

Yet you often speak of your timid approach, of how you shoot then disappear, blending in with the crowd. Those who have met you describe you as courteous and jovial, and it's almost as if you've poured all of your shades into the dark room, and all that's left is this morning light. But do you think of a photographer's work as a mirror to their soul, or more as an outlet for their subconscious?

Arthur - Actually, I am very affected by the phases of the moon, I have a sort of creative menstrual cycle. My time of the month when I have the most energy and creative genius is during the lunar half moon, during its first or last quarter when it's lit equally dark and light on both sides. It truly reflects my split personality - think of my famous photograph "Bride and Groom," the schism of black and white, male and female, in a perpetual shifting imbalance.

So for much of my work I'm seeing how far I can get into the darker side of the human psyche, but I also have other bodies of work that are more bright and

childlike, filled with color and humor such as "Tea Pot Opera" or "Fish Tank Sonata." On the surface, day to day, I have compared to other artists I know, a rather quite pleasant and non egoistical way of dealing with people.

I am helpful in mentoring others and I even have become "a sweet old man" in my senior years. But when I have my Hasselblad in my hand or I am dealing with a staged directorial set up image, Jekyll and Hyde-like, my personality changes and I become much more aggressive and assertive. In terms of my own sex life also, which very closely parallels the creative one, I often seem on the edge of a certain violent domination of my boyfriends, which kind of surprises me, but that they erotically enjoy too. You might say that photography for me is a kind of "whipping" into shape the soft cheeks of reality by channelling a kind of unconscious anger into the firm, hardened form of a simulated response.

Silvia - You've once said indeed that "photographs are a projection of the mind onto the world, not vice versa". This suggests this kind of introspection as a *fil rouge* in an artist's oeuvre, and yet you've shot such a multitude of subjects, from all around the world - Mexico and Egypt, Italy, India, Japan, Thailand, Sweden. Did you see a bit of yourself in all of them, or what is it, in a character or a scene, that tempts you to click the shutter?

Arthur - When I am photographing different cultures I try to capture the zeitgeist of each particular place, through an intellectual investigation of the mini-civilization that I am attempting to pin down, with a variety of visual means. In Mexico for example I wanted to show the various levels of old and new: the pre-Columbian, the Spanish, and the Revolutionary are somehow interacting and affecting each other. And the same with Egypt, where all layers of history exist underneath the play of ordinary life.

I do this through a careful distillation of the subject matter, and also via the routes of a particular set of geometrical and spatial compositions. It is a mental contemplation before hand, and the typical daily scenes before me are quickly scanned to see which ones might fit the categories in my mind... a kind of instantaneous matching up. Perhaps this habit of thoughtful pre-analyses is what led me a few years later to my more elaborate mental constructs of personal interior states of being that I would find exteriorized while documenting our banal everyday world.

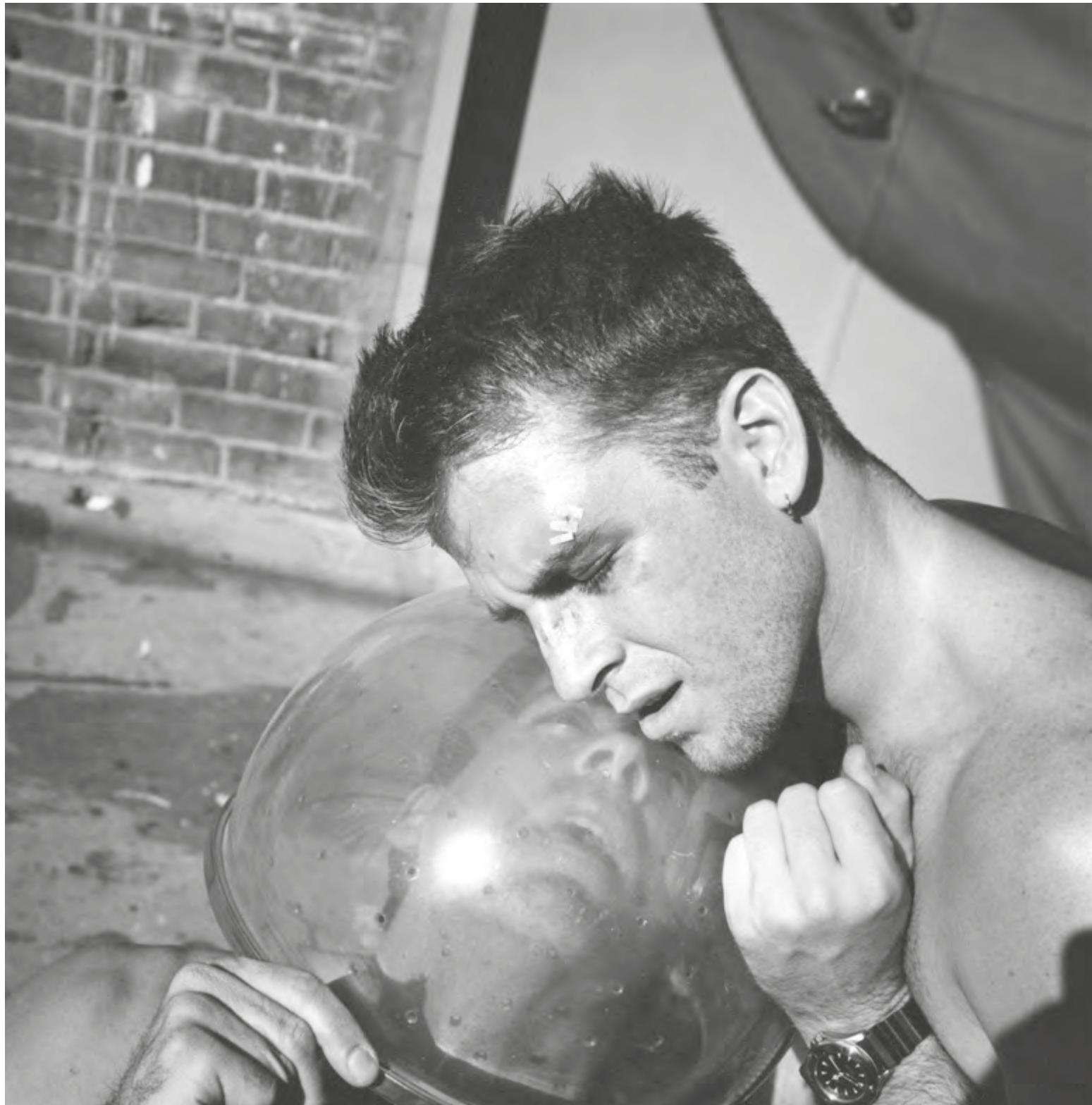
Silvia - This unique balance of curiosity and inner focus that you have tends to give way to surprisingly intimate portraits, unguarded and layered with their own tensions and juxtapositions. Was this perhaps what drew you to San Francisco back in 1964, the contrast in the air, this collision between the 28th Republican National Convention and the Beatles' first North American tour, those early promises of a "Summer of Love"?

Arthur - My recent book "San Francisco 1964," published by Prestel, recounts the six months I spent there as a young photographer, wandering the streets and back alleyways, and tells the story of the amazingly accidental juxtapositions of people, places, and objects that I found, in this my first visit to a fantastical city caught in a shifting shimmer of fog and sunshine.

It was some kind of "street surrealism", fanned by the upcoming changes of an ultra conservative America beginning to clash against a new radical vision of anarchic freedom.

Silvia - In such a context, a young and concerned photographer of the street would be hard-pressed not to become somewhat political. You've mentioned





you were inspired by the work of Robert Frank, Walker Evans, Bruce Davidson and Danny Lyon, beautiful pictures suffused with social criticism. Looking back now, at the recently unearthed negatives of those months, would you say that your sentiment has remained unchanged, throughout the years and genres?

Arthur - I was brought up within a liberal Jewish family with left-wing tendencies. My sister Madeline, who lived in San Francisco at the time, marched in May Day parades during her high school years, and that gave me a sense of social injustice and the need to work for social change.

I have always admired the artists of social reform, like George Grosz and Käthe Kollwitz... their concern for the tragedy of the common man and the frailty of the human condition in general.

Even my work today, like my recent portraits series, follows these same sympathetic sentiments on the difficulty of living a decent life in the unfair structures of today's economy, and the crushing burdens it places upon aspiring individuals.

Silvia - I know that not long after that summer, in the unlikely but certainly fitting location of a Zen temple in Kyoto, you've had the chance to meet another great influence of yours, none else but Henri Cartier-Bresson. What was he doing there, what were you both actually? What about this encounter do you now remember most fondly?

Arthur - I was a student at the Zen Study Centre for a few months in the fall of 1965, studying flower arrangement, *Ikebana*. The Zen master, Rev. Shaku Ogata, also spoke very good English and allowed a few of his empty pilgrimage rooms to be used by foreign visitors. Cartier-Bresson arrived in the space next to mine as he was going to spend a few days in Kyoto visiting temples and doing some photography: I introduced myself and by chance I had with me some of my Mexican Mayan images that I had done the previous year in the Yucatan, that I showed him. He did not like them and thought they were too posed and also in the square format which he thought was much too static...

The Zen monasteries were still suffering economically after World War II and their gardens were in poor shape, so I was restoring some of them for the priests. I showed my dry rock waterfall to Cartier and he was very amused by the idea of this young American doing such a thing on his own initiative. I gave him a set of old Japanese woodblock books from 1835 called "100 Views of Mt. Fuji" by Hokusai as a gift. Many of the images in that book were similar to his own photography in juxtaposing human activity and a geometrical landscape background, so it was a present that he said he enjoyed for many years in a letter to me in 1976.

Silvia - Your education, extensive knowledge and passion for the medium of painting as well can indeed be glimpsed at in your pictures. I've heard you were trained early on as a painter in fact, and that shows somehow in your trademark, almost pictorial magic-realism, and even as a documentary shooter, in that spontaneous awareness of forms and lines. Do you reckon there might be a connection to your lifetime preference of a 2 1/4 square format too?

Arthur - I did train as an oil painter, and I spilt my time between painting and photography until I was about 26 years old, when I realized that my photography was much better and that this was what I should concentrate on. Studying other visual arts teaches you the ways of visual organizations, plus studying the lives of these great artists shows you the value of developing a sustained lifetime vision. The 2 1/4 format has great flexibility. It can be used quickly and casually like a 35 mm camera but it has the detail and dignity of a larger 4x5 inch studio camera. I like to have access to both worlds.

Silvia - If squared pictures, mostly thanks to Instagram, are certainly back in vogue these days, street photographers on the other hand seem to be now a seriously endangered species - and last year's documentary on the subject, *Everybody Street*, was tinged with nostalgia. But how do you personally relate to the digital world and what are your thoughts, your hopes and fears for the future of photography?

Arthur - There seems to be a bit of a return to analogue amongst students and others, especially when doing black and white. I think digital is really excellent for color, and the new digital cameras seem to be able to work in very low light. Analogue color films were difficult to use when there was a variety of color temperatures to deal with, and digital can cope with great contrasts and changes.

At the moment there is a vast explosion of photography around the world with many photo fairs, photo revues and photo competitions involving serious amateurs from many countries. A kind of globalization and rediscovery of other photographic traditions and creators outside the United States and western Europe has been long overdue. It is an exciting time to be a photographer with many books being published and a whole new awareness of photography amongst museums and galleries.

Silvia - We are featuring in this issue a yet unpublished collection of recent portraits, and they all somehow seem to have in common the narration of an interaction, often between different generations. If this is what an external eye can perceive, what in your mind connects these images? What can you tell us about these moments you captured, and what is the meaning of a portrait to you?

Arthur - These portraits from the last ten years are a continuation of a project that began in 1975 called "Theater of the Mind." In that group of images, I tried to capture the psychological spaces and tense relationships that exist between different people, whether they are family, lovers, or just friends. Perhaps we are all play-acting certain internal dramas, as though we were actors in a TV soap opera or from the covers of a cheap paperback novel of the 1950s.

The participants in the photos can be my own family members or people I just casually run into on the street, or also my boyfriends or couples that I meet at parties or art openings. I chat with the participants of the shoot for a few minutes to get a sense of how they feel towards each other and get them to act out that relationship in a physical way so that it can be caught on camera. More often than not I rely on intuitions, derived from my first impressions of the emotional script that holds the subjects together in their particular form of interaction. The photographic frame is no longer used as a documentary window into undisturbed private lives, but as a stage on which the subjects consciously direct themselves to bring forward hidden information that is not usually displayed on the surface. The photographer hopes not only to show us what people look like, which we already know, but to penetrate deeper into their thoughts and emotions.

However, after hundreds of these sessions I often find myself confronted with the amazing fact that I have made all these "actors" into a mental projection of myself. They have become a mirror to my own fears, anxieties and insecurities that I face with the failures of my own personal relationships. I project myself upon them so that their gestures and facial expressions mimic my own painful and highly sensitized way of being in the world with others that I come in contact with. It's the awareness of my own loneliness, isolation and incapacity to reach out that I've found in these so-called portraits of others. And therefore to my eyes they are all recognizably me. I have in a sense created them to be self-surrogates in a kind of pleading for understanding or sympathy - with the ironically painful, and perhaps tragic sense I have of being human in this harsh contemporary world, one that is so cruel to the genuine aspirations of the young. And being 73 and close to the edge of death myself, these images are suffused with the idea of an upcoming dark departure.





