

Mary ellen mark

[Business](#), [Company](#)



The term ' photography' originated from the Greek words " drawing with light" (Grundberg, 2005). None could be a more apt name for this human creation. Indeed, when it flourished in the early 19th century, we have finally discovered a way to draw upon light and use it to freeze the ups and downs of our curious race. The photographers among us have taken pictures of scientific advancements and artistic marvels, of the great men and women that had greatly influenced our society, of sleepy villages and breathtaking vistas, offamilylife, and of anything else that appeals to our desire to immortalize the parts of our existence. We have realized that photography is a useful hobby.

But others find photography more than just a pastime. They are the ones who not only capture a moment, but also, more important, shed light to those few living beneath the cracks in society. Such photographers, for instance, would go to any war-torn country, where they will document the struggles of child soldiers and the people trapped in war, so that hopefully politicians would lend a sympathetic ear, or a sensitive heart.

And still other photographers would go to any undocumented region around the world to erase the bigotry and scorn with which so-called social outcasts —like prostitutes—are treated. Diane Arbus, a renowned American photographer, once said, " There are things nobody would see if I didn't photograph them". We have much to learn from the kind of societies we, as a whole, have made—and through photography we could make a difference.

Mary Ellen Mark, a photographer herself, embodies the same guiding principle in her line of work. She believes in the richness of humanity, no matter where it is found. Despite the lucrative promise in her kind of work,
<https://assignbuster.com/mary-ellen-mark/>

which some of her contemporaries enjoy, Mark often gets out of the corporate world and plunges into a more intimate one, to the kind of places where even taking a picture of a bystander might endanger her own life.

Yet she is willing to trade her safety for the story she gleans from the people around her. Many times, in 1978, while attempting to photograph the prostitutes of Falkland Road, Bombay, Mark have had to endure verbal insults and cascades of garbage thrown by people who felt threatened by her (Long, 2000). Others might call her style of photojournalism reckless, if not suicidal, but Mark trusts people, and they to her in return. She has had a great journey so far, and she'll definitely not stop.

More than thirty years had passed in her noble career. But, like every altruistic person who had chosen to get out of the rat-race, Mark's career started somewhat ordinarily, her revelation still at a distance. In the 1960's she began the long climb upwards to building a career, working for distinguished magazines such as Look and Life. A somewhat glamorous job compared to what she is doing right now. Yet even at that time she was already perfecting her photojournalism as she composed rich photoessays for both news and fashion periodicals. And her clients was impressive—Esquire, Holiday, The New York Times, Magazine, Vogue, and many others.

1965 was the year in which she finally got the chance to get out of the restrictive office space. Mark received a Fulbright Scholarship, which she used promptly as a stepping stone to travel for two years in various countries such as Greece, Italy, Germany, Spain, and England (Long, 2000). She was slowly removing the chains that bound her to just one place, a kind of freedom that would serve her later on.

<https://assignbuster.com/mary-ellen-mark/>

Within the same decade Mark began using her camera to illuminate the unseen-forgotten-neglected-prejudiced parts of society. Her viewpoint of things was changing. This time, instead of wallowing in glamour and news, she was immersing herself in the troubles of others—the transvestites, pro-women and anti-war demonstrators, and others which have often got less from the same society to which they give much of their empty cries forequality, justice, and understanding, and acceptance.

She was in the frontlines, and she documented it all using her camera. “What I want to do more than anything is acknowledge their existence,” she once said. One is considered a courteous host if one acknowledges the presence of another. But Mary Ellen Mark, even as she was building a career, was more than just a courteous person. More than that. In fact, by acknowledging the existence of those around her, she was actually empowering them, putting them in focus and perspective, in the same way that a microscope examines the germs on a crucible—although in this case she was examining the wounds in society. Her camera became her metaphorical extended eye, one that opens her understanding. And with understanding she would also discover compassion.

Production stills, used in Hollywood movies, came next in line for her. The work itself suited her photojournalism—on one hand she was taking pictures; on the other hand, telling the meaning behind the pictures. When she took stills of Milos Forman’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo Nest*, a film that was shot in an actual mental hospital, Mark delved deep into the minds of the deeply troubled. The year was 1973. Eventually, to bring herself closer to the patients, Mary Ellen Mark befriended the hospital’s director (Long, 2000).

" I've just always been interested in mentalhealth, mental illness," she once said. But her interest didn't border on a morbid fascination; she just did it out of her passion for her line of work. And instead of portraying the patients as an insane collective with no cure, Mark valued their individuality, their unique personalities that still hide beneath the deranged mask (Long, 2000).

That is one of her styles, her believing that not all things appear exactly as they are in photographs. She believes something will appear aside from what she believes to be real. Her belief is itself a style, for she incorporates it into her work. She may take a picture of a smiling child, for instance, and yet not know what the child really feels; she might not know that the child may be hiding a sadness deep within. Nevertheless, she still takes pictures because part of her sees—whether consciously or subconsciously—a certain kinship with strangers, a human being seeing herself in others. And if that were the case, then perhaps one could even say that her style is more spiritual than personal, a way to find a place for herself in this world.

To her, every person in the picture is a raconteur. A rodeo cowboy may appear masculine, but deep inside he tells a story of his struggles to maintain that machismo image, if only to bring food on to his family table. Or a female patient in a mental hospital may appear incapable of focusing on to anything and is merely limited to mumblings, but the clarity in her eyes or the pose at which her photo was taken suggest otherwise. Stories—each of us has a story to tell, and one of the ways to telling it is through photographs.

Mary Ellen Mark knows this well. Therefore, another of her style is to let her subjects tell their own stories, the attention away from her. " There's nothing

much interesting about me; what's interesting is the person I'm photographing, and that's what I try to show," she once said. The end result, of course, is pictures that show vividly the stories of people, who seem to leap out of the paper, telling "Look at my story" to viewers. Mark's photographs show the humanity in every human being, no matter where the photo was taken (Fulton).

Mary Ellen Mark also loves showing the ironies of life and its participants. Yet another of her style, which she has applied when she made a photo-essay of 8 different traveling circuses (Long, 2000). She focused on the outfits' characters, the runners of the show—the animals and the bizarre attractions such as the dwarf and the contortionists. For the first time in her life, she felt young again, a woman transported into a magical world. She beheld everything as though she were watching it through the eyes of an infant. She described it aptly: "It was full of ironies, often humorous and sometimes sad, beautiful and ugly, loving and at times cruel, but always human."

Life is full of colors, each unique unto itself. A painter or photographer blends these rich colors to great effect, oftentimes combining the real with the surreal. But even some painters and photographers do put away their color palettes at times. And why shouldn't they? After all, is it not true that the richness of colors can cause a sensory overload, too? Ellen Mark is such a person who thinks so. By using a black-and-white palette in her pictures, she enlarges the parts of life and reality that are often overlooked. In most of her pictures, for instance, everything is made clearer by the lack of a rich palette, like a brief pause in life. The viewer then sees things that were once buried under colors.

It is akin to the Zen concept of less is more—in this case, the lack of too many colors tells more story about the place, things, and people in the photographs. Mark once took pictures of the kind of life that goes on inside a home for the sick and the dying. Here, she stripped all the salient information brought about by clashing colors, and instead brought out quite extremely the shocking details of the metal cots, the emaciated bodies, and the human fancies in agony (Long, 2000).

Mary Ellen Mark is as unique as the characters in her photographs. But some couldn't help comparing her style to that of Diane Arbus. Both women enlarge life by reducing the colors to black-and-white; both sympathize with those living outside the accepted circles in society. But perhaps the thing that separates Mary Ellen Mark from her predecessor is her love of life, her constant looking forward to living. And it is perhaps for this same reason that she will continue acknowledging the existence of others—whereas Diane Arbus had already surrendered, after committing suicide in 1971 (Grundberg, 2005). Mark is now continuing where Arbus had left off.

Fulton, Marianne (2000?). Mary Ellen Mark: Some Thoughts.

Retrieved on May 30, 2007 from

digitaljournalist.org/issue9903/mark01.htm

Grundberg, Andy (2005). " Diane Arbus." Microsoft® Encarta® 2006 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2005. Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2006.

Grundberg, Andy (2005). " Photography." Microsoft® Encarta® 2006 [DVD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2005. Microsoft ® Encarta ® 2006. © 1993-2005 Microsoft Corporation

<https://assignbuster.com/mary-ellen-mark/>

Long, Andrew (2000). Brilliant Careers.

Retrieved on May 30, 2007 from