

Diane arbus and weegee photography essay



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As a “ people watcher,” documentary photography has always been intriguing to me. I remember thinking how wonderful it was for photographers to be in the right place at the right time and wondered how they knew where to be for that perfect shot. I began carrying my camera everywhere, and started looking at my surroundings and the people in them differently. As if that perfect shot was just waiting for me to show up, but I still was not getting that “ life changing” remarkable shot. As I began to study photography, I began to discover, that while some documentary photographers did happen to be in the “ right place at the right time,” like Arthur Felig (Weegee), most of those photographers planned and set up their remarkable and sometimes scandalous shots, like Diane Arbus did. While most historians would say that these two photographers had obvious differences in style and techniques, I found that both had many similarities.

Diane Arbus was born in 1923 to a wealthy Jewish family. Diane was one of three fortunate children growing up in the Central Park West and Park Avenue areas of New York City. She once told an author, writing about The Great Depression that she “ grew up feeling immune and exempt from circumstance. One of the things she suffered from was that she never felt adversity.”

Weegee was born in 1899 in Austria, shortly after his birth, his father left Austria for America where he would work as a Rabbi saving enough money for the rest of his family to join him. Finally at the age of ten, Weegee along with his mother and three brothers arrived at Ellis Island in America.

Weegee’s family was very poor, so he quit school after the eighth grade and worked to help his family financially.

At the age of thirteen, Diane met Allan Arbus, an advertising department employee in her parents department store. After turning eighteen, Diane married Allan and was soon introduced to the world of photography. Allan gave Diane her first camera, and they worked side by side doing fashion spreads until with Allan's support, Diane decided to leave the fashion industry and follow her own interests.

While working several odd jobs with his father, a street tintype photographer took Weegee's photograph. After that, Weegee decided that photography was his calling. He ordered a tintype camera from a Chicago mail-order house, and after a few months got his first job as a photographer. At the age of twenty four, Weegee landed a job at Acme Newsprint.. His new job was in the darkroom, but occasionally he would get the opportunity to go out at night and take pictures of emergencies. After a while, he started to get called for assignments and cover stories, but because he was an employee of Acme, he never got credit for the photos he took. In 1935, Weegee left the Acme company to do freelance work.

Not long after leaving the fashion industry to pursue her own photography interest, two significant events happened to Diane, the first was her marriage to Allan failed, the second was a class she took with Lisette Model, a European photographer who encouraged her to push her thematic unorthodox interest further, along with, mastering the conventional technical aspects of photography. By the early sixties, Diane's work began to assume a distinctive look. Not only did Diane set up the shots she would take of her subjects, she would actually follow them to their homes and offices observing every aspect of their lives. While doing this, she would listen and

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visit with them “softening” them up until the public facade disappeared, then she would set up the photo shoot. In almost every case, Diane’s subject would be posed in their most natural setting, wide eyed facing straight ahead looking into the center of the camera lens with the same curious expression. Almost like they were seeking some unspoken understanding from the observer. Diane’s photography work impacts the world leaving us to ponder what is considered “proper” or “tasteful” in art. . In 1972, Diane Arbus was the first American photographer to be exhibited at the Venice Biennale.

After leaving the Acme company, Weegee began checking in with the Manhattan Police Headquarters around midnight, becoming familiar to the police force. He would wait by the teletype for something to happen, then would rush to the scene of the crime to take his photographs. After years of this procedure, Weegee finally decided that waiting by the teletype was too cumbersome. He bought himself a chevy coupe and a press card, and became the only press photographer ever permitted to have a police radio in their car. His car became his home away from home and contained not only a police radio, but also a portable darkroom, extra cameras, flash bulbs, extra loaded holders, a typewriter, cigars, salami and a change of clothes. Weegee stated in his book *Weegee by Weegee*, “I was no longer glued to the Teletype machine at police headquarters. I had my wings. I no longer had to wait for crime to come to me; I could go after it. The police radio was my life line. My camera... my life and my love... was my Aladdin’s lamp.” After ten years of working freelance on the New York City streets after hours, Weegee published his first book, *The Naked City*, which was inspired by the

work and city he loved. It was during this ten years that Weegee produced some of his best and most expressive photographs.

. In 1962, Diane met John Szarkowski, the curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art. He brought with him a romantic, subjective aesthetic of photography. And in 1967, Szarkowski featured Diane's New Documents . That show, more than any other, established her reputation. In 1962 and again in 1966, Diane received the Guggenheim Fellowship for some of her non-commercial work, a couple on a park bench, a young Republican, identical twin girls and the marginal: dwarves, drag queens, circus performers.

Weegee never had any formal photographic training. He never heard of any of the greats like Alfred Stieglitz, or Ansel Adams. The photographs Weegee took came strictly from his soul. None of his photos were planned, and were all taken with the same preset setting at f/16 @ 1/200 of a second, with a focal distance of ten feet with a flash. Style, texture, and quality did not matter to Weegee; he focused more on capturing a moment of time on film. He had mere seconds to capture the emotions of each event as they happened. Being a freelance photographer was not easy, Weegee confronted murder, viciousness children in need, street brawls, the homeless, fires and victims. However, he also confronted happiness, lovers, celebrations and the end of the War. His work is strong and stands on its own and is meant to be viewed one at a time and not as a group of work. With each shot, Weegee captured a truth that can never be recreated.

In July of 1971, at the age of 48, and while suffering from depression, Diane Arbus took a lethal dose of pills and used a razor blade to end her own life. Her story, fits the popular '60s pattern of the romantic, tragic, brilliant, eccentric, tortured artist. Even now, Diane's work continues to fascinate. Her photos are amazing and startling to look at, even now.

In December of 1968, Weegee died from a brain tumor. He is credited with ushering in the age of tabloid culture, while at the same time being revered for elevating the sordid side of human life to that of high art.