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## Swimming upstream to Ground Zero

In the second in an occasional series of interviews with noted photographers, Joel Meyerowitz explains his path to the 9/11 clear-up site.



Joel Meyerowitz

"We as human beings are faced with the rawness and hard reality of everyday life - we need beauty," explains Joel Meyerowitz.

In the 1960s Meyerowitz worked as an art director until the desire to be outside, rather than inside, overwhelmed him.

He realised that photography was his vocation. Rejecting the obvious move from art directing to commercial photography, he took to the streets.

### Becoming invisible

"When a photographer works on the street, I think most of us try to be invisible to those around us - the Henri Cartier-Bresson approach, which means you can work without bruising the situation in front of you.

"You're invisible and you don't transform it by your presence. Yes, one can argue that being there is a transformation but at least you don't try and direct it bluntly, or by aggressively challenging somebody which some photographers do because they want that effect."



Ballston Beach. © Joel Meyerowitz

And it is this technique of invisibility that both liberated and concentrated his approach to capturing those moments of gesture, emotion and confluence.

### Pushing colour

However, it was Meyerowitz's commitment to colour and it's overtly descriptive quality that set the tone for the majority of his work throughout the 1970s and propelled him towards making photography as art.

"I wanted the fullest

description I could make and 35mm was just giving me a short-change result. I wanted all the description and I wanted it big so I took a leap in the dark in 1976 and I bought a view-camera.



Florida, 1971 © Joel Meyerowitz

"I went to Cape Cod with my kids for the summer and there I discovered another side to myself - maybe all the energy of the street teaches you to respect speed but to also see the spaces."

### **Mixing mediums**

Since the 1970s, Meyerowitz's work has shifted seamlessly from city projects to landscapes, both approaches merged together in *Aftermath: World Trade Centre Archive*, a documentary project covering the nine month clear-up following the September 11 attacks.

"I was lucky that my experience has allowed me to work both as a street photographer and as a view-camera photographer, so I was comfortable with both vocabularies. That's one of my gifts, I speak two languages, the classical and the jazz - street photography is jazz."

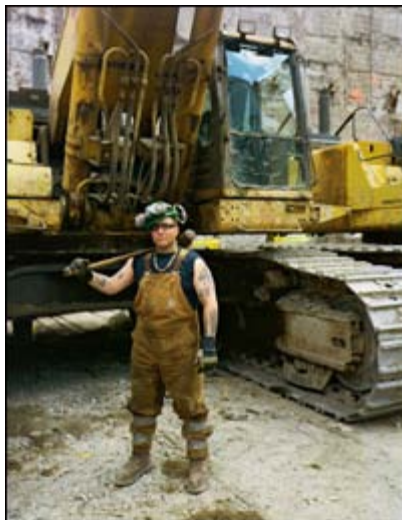
### **Aftermath: Ground Zero**

Meyerowitz took both of these "vocabularies" to Ground Zero, both the instinctual and the meditative.

"When you are on the street with the crowds passing you by, you take things as you go and by the time you have finished you've swum up that stream.

"But inside Ground Zero I was in the stream for 14 hours a day. The first thing that happened to me on each morning actually set the tone for the rest of the day.

"I drifted into it, melting and flowing as I was making my way round the site and sometimes things just kept deepening and the next layer exposed itself. Someone would do something and I would go with them on instinct.



Eddie © Joel Meyerowitz

"So it was very instructive for an artist that has always been, in a sense, self-serving - all artists are self-serving - here I was 'other-serving'. For the first time in a long time I sublimated myself to the larger thing and was blown about with the winds of chance."

Stitched together with the moments of chance encounter are majestic landscape images of the site, monumental depictions

of the physical ruin.

Some of images specifically challenge people's perceptions of what they thought the site should look like.

### **Beauty out of tragedy**

"When you saw it [Ground Zero] in the late afternoon light it was unbelievably beautiful, and getting your mind around the nature of beauty in a situation derived from a horrific act, how do you equate these two things? It was an issue for me.

"There were certainly people who have been offended by the nature of beauty in these images or at least questioned my intentions - it's not supposed to be beautiful it's supposed to be tragic, those people would like it to have been shot in black and white.

"Black and white is tragic because it doesn't give you a blue sky!


"I didn't make it beautiful, I had nothing to do with it. It's just like that. I'm a realist, I just take pictures of reality.

"I don't tinker with it, I don't tell people to go back and act out something and that's been my discipline for 44 years.

"When reality comes up and shines it on, if you're not smart enough to take the picture, if you're going to wait for it to go ugly that's your problem."



The beauty of particular images from Aftermath proved challenging for some viewers

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