A Wider Perspective on People

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Abstract

Environmental portraits and panoramic photography have existed since the 1800s but rarely have been used in combination. This project employs both techniques to produce ultrawide-perspective images of people in typical, everyday settings that illuminate some important aspect of their lives. Each digital image is stitched together from scores of photos into one, multi-gigabyte panorama. The image tells its story through human interaction with meaningful objects that share the space. This work pulls together themes and techniques from many notable photographers, including the intentionality of Arnold Newman and Wes Anderson, the thought-out narratives of David Hilliard, the drama and humanity of Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* exhibition, and Elliott Erwitt's instinctual observation of the "typical."

1. Introduction

I create environmental photographic portraits because I find people and their lived spaces compelling. In *A Wider Perspective on People*, I explore this subject by using a panoramic format of stitched-together digital images that create a sweeping multi-angled view from a fixed location in space. The result allows the viewer a cumulative act of seeing that cannot be achieved with one photograph. As elongated digital compositions, panoramas show a scene that could never be observed with a single glance of the naked eye. The space is laid out flat and is viewable in its entirety.

A panorama packs far more information into the artwork than a standard photographic frame. It's the same idea as an author producing a novel instead of a short story, or a composer writing for an orchestra instead of a string quartet. This project sought to find subjects that that would benefit from the exhaustive treatment of the panoramic photo. A photographer can tell a story with many separate pictures. I have chosen to tell a story with a single, information-rich image.

Incredible panoramas are common on the Internet– mountain ranges, sunsets, cityscapes, seaside villages, ballparks. But only a handful of these images feature a person. My project uses panoramas for environmental portraits, shooting people in settings that illuminate who they are by showing where they spend most of their time. The digital equivalent of the darkroom surprise, the complete composition cannot be seen until it is pieced together in the studio. One compelling aspect of panoramic photography is guessing what is real and what has been manufactured. For the artist, there's a balancing act of what to change and what to keep as is. What is most important about the space? What could one add or take away to make it more interesting or to tell a clearer story? For the activated viewer, my goal is to provide interesting material, visually and conceptually.

I chose photography as my art form for two main reasons. First, photography has a sense of truth to it. A photo is a slice of reality. When looking at a photograph of Abraham Lincoln, you sense that you are actually seeing the man, as if transported back to his time and space Photographers can play with this aspect of their art to engage viewers'

interest. If I show you a photo and say it shows Bigfoot, I expect you to fixate on the issue of authenticity. Was Bigfoot literally in front of the camera? If I show the viewer a painting or sculpture of the same scene, I cannot prompt the same reaction. A painting of Bigfoot would never be seen as potential evidence that such a creature exists. Second, and probably most important, the immediacy of photography appeals to me. One can begin to create art at any time and in any place. Click the shutter, and you have something to begin working with.

2. Data Collection and Manipulation

In my process, shooting photos is collecting data. I take many different pictures of the same person in preparation for one panorama. In the photo below, I had three individual pictures of the girl and of her mother in different positions with different expressions. Once I got the overall scene stitched together, I matched positions that would demonstrate their relationship. I chose the data points that best told my story.

A Child Lives Here, Anna Melton, 2015

Another aspect of data collecting involves shooting enough photos to convincingly recreate the scene. For example, if I am shooting through a window from inside and I want to include the interior wall around the window, five photographs may be needed of this area, each with slightly different camera settings. This process allows everything in the panorama to be in focus and properly exposed.

My process involves careful planning, but I must also react to the unexpected, putting myself in a position to get lucky. Elliott Erwitt, in the 1977 book "Interviews with Master Photographers," says great shooters notice things that other people miss. "It's just seeing – at least the photography I care about. You either see or don't see…," he says. "Photography, as I see it, is simply a function of noticing things, nothing more."[1]

3. Choosing People to Photograph

How do I choose subjects for these panoramas? People can be interesting in the way that they act, look or dress, or compelling for what they have accomplished. They can be friends, relatives or strangers. In this project, almost anyone can make a good photo, but they must be willing, cooperative, and patient. That provides the time and freedom to envision a great idea and shoot it.

The next step is uncovering the person's story, by talking with them, and if there's time, with people who know them. What feeling does this person add to a room? What legacy is she creating? In his book *People Pictures*, photographer Chris Orwig says building relationships is the constant task of every people photographer. The Key is "expressing real enthusiasm and interest in others," he writes. "The ability to make that connection is what differentiates mediocre pictures from something more profound."[2]

After deciding what story to tell, I select a physical setting. I pick a place where the subject goes often, around things that he has chosen. While in the space, I note elements that might help tell the story and look for visually intriguing angles. What the person does in the space is also important. I think ahead to the final composition: a panorama compiled from 25 to 80 photographs containing many gigabytes of data. The latest Internet slang for these huge digital compositions is "gigapans."

4. Influences: David Hilliard

Breaking News, Barcelona, 1997,
http://www.jacksonfineart.com/David-Hilliard-4997.html

Hulk, David Hilliard, 2003,
http://images.admin.1stdibs.com/editorial_images/bank_uploads/GB/1110/1837/draft_pages/david_hillard_page5.jpg

Norm's Birthday, David Hilliard, 2001
http://b-sidemg.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/david-hilliard-fotografia-panoramica-Norms_Birthday.jpg?d7d352

David Hilliard is one of the few well-known panoramic portrait photographers working today. I saw his work years before starting this project and since then have kept the panoramic portrait in the back of my mind. Hilliard began using multiple frames, he recalled in his 2005 book *David Hilliard Photography*, to construct a narrative. "I liked to make associations within a photograph and hint at an ambiguous event that may have occurred – or may occur."[3]

Most of his scenes are autobiographical. His artwork, in one sense, is Hilliard trying to understand the struggles he has endured. Many of his photos have a homoerotic element, either vague or straightforward. For Hilliard, the situation in the photo is what's important, not the specific people involved. They could be anyone. Hilliard's work seems to come from the people he is around and from the place he is taking the photograph, rather than originating in his imagination. He uses a lot of friends and relatives because they're nearby and cooperative. Many of his older photos are elaborately staged, but Hilliard has become more interested in natural scenes. "The uncanny exists in my life already. I just need to light it…,"[4] he said in the 2005 book.

While thinking of my project and studying Hilliard's work, I began asking these questions: What am I trying to say? What story am I trying to tell? How do I want to tell it? He made me aware of staging vs. authenticity. My work is

different from his because I am commenting not only on the human experience, but also on the specific person in the frame.

Arnold Newman

Arnold Newman's Truman Capote, 1977,
https://artblart.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/truman_capote-web.jpg

Arnold Newman's Leonard Bernstein, 1968,
http://www.arnoldnewmanarchive.com/media-gallery/detail/58/327

Arnold Newman's Igor Stravinski, 1966
http://arnoldnewman.com/media-gallery/detail/58/316

Arnold Newman is often called the father of environmental portraiture.[5] He photographed many of the major celebrities, artists and politicians of his time. "I found that people in their own environment…were more fascinating than the artificial atmosphere in the studios I had to work in," Newman says in his 2000 book *Arnold Newman*. "I began to envision photographing them in their homes and at their workplaces."[6]

He said creating portraits and capturing moments is similar to the archiving that anthropologists use to document people they're studying. "I am interested in what motivates individuals, what they do with their lives, their personalities, and how I perceive and interpret them," he writes.[7] I share Newman's curiosity. Getting to know the individuals and then trying to visually represent what I have learned is the most important part of my process.

Newman's work involved meticulous planning. He studied his subjects and carefully composed scenes that made them iconic. He photographed young Sen. John F. Kennedy on a balcony outside the U.S. Senate, standing beside gigantic fluted columns.[8] Kennedy gazes into the distance. The photo says power, heritage and vision. Newman shot filmmaker Woody Allen in bed, filling a notebook with dense notes, possibly his next screenplay.[9] Newman wasn't trying to make his subjects relatable to the viewer. He was trying to make them iconic. To do this, he positioned most of the subjects looking at the camera. The subjects knew they were on display, not vulnerable or caught by surprise or in the middle of something. In my work, the subjects rarely look into the camera. I aim for relatable rather than iconic. My panoramas feel like an ordinary moment in someone's life. For example, if I were shooting the portrait of Leonard Bernstein shown above, I might get him organizing the sheet music in front of him. The photograph would capture his thoughtful expression rather than the powerful stare you see here.

Elliott Erwitt

Untitled, Elliott Erwitt's,1995
http://img5.visualizeus.com/thumbs/60/d2/museum-60d2889dccbb0b4c823c24a4134d1bcc_h.jpg

Untitled, Untitled, Elliott Erwitt, 1952, 1955,
https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/originals/08/87/bd/0887bde1ad7d66cef0fcf2729fcc8f3f.jpg,
http://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=24PVHK0HT5UZA&SMLS=1&RW=1280&RH=709

Untitled, Elliott Erwitt, 1964,
http://www.artnet.com/artists/elliott-erwitt/hungary-girls-with-geese-2XFoOvAUXU99VFiX9j70ZA2

Untitled, Elliott Erwitt's, 1979,
https://www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&ALID=2K7O3RZ7T9S#/SearchResult&ALID=2K7O3RZ7T9S&VBID=24PVHEQFEV2_C&PN=9

Elliott Erwitt is best known for humorous and ironic photos about everyday life, including four books about dogs. He has a refreshing, no-nonsense approach to being a photographer. In *Interviews with Master Photographers*, Erwitt was asked how he could approach an assignment like photographing 10 people typical of the American West. "I rent a car and drive to the place and take the pictures. There's no great mystique," Erwitt said. "It's really very simple."[10]

Another question from author James Danziger: "What is the challenge of portrait photography?" Erwitt's response: "Trying to get something that is typical. It doesn't give me pleasure to just photograph a face…. The challenge is to photograph somebody in the mood that tells the viewer something more about that person that is typical."[11] For a half century, Erwitt has turned odd juxtapositions into great photographs. A dog joyfully rolls around on the grass in a cemetery.[12] A flock of geese waddle beside a flock of girls.[13] A lone woman admires a painting of a clothed woman, beside a cluster of men viewing a nude version of the same painting.[14] Erwitt's shots have no underlying mystery like Hilliard's, and no hyper-controlled set design like Newman's. He usually just shows up and shoots snapshots. He seldom poses his subjects. He catches people in naturally funny and relatable moments. Almost none of his subjects are looking at the camera. He is an observer, whereas Newman is a participant.

Capturing a typical moment as it unfolds is Erwitt's idea of good portraiture. I agree. I want viewers to simply feel they are watching something happen naturally in the space.

Along with his humor, the thing I like most about Erwitt is his philosophy of always being ready for the great shot to appear out of nowhere. Always have your photographic radar going, he advises, prepared at any moment to catch the greatest image of your life.

Comparing Erwitt's work to Newman's, they generally evoke different moods. Newman's portraits are almost always of people in their living or work space around things they handle every day. His portraits read as exclusively about one person. His pictures are never about you, or an everyman, or a comment on life in general. Erwitt's work is much more about circumstances, less about the specific people in the frame and more about the situation they are in. They could be anyone, including you. Example: a family on the beach with an umbrella that won't close. In a multi-frame sequence, Erwitt follows the man as he carries the open beach umbrella down a busy sidewalk to get home.[15] Note how these two innovative photographers chose to shoot Sen. John F.
Kennedy. Newman posed him alone on the Senate balcony, looking off-camera in a contemplative way. The scene says power and promise. Erwitt shot Kennedy in a candid moment, in a meeting with President Dwight Eisenhower, with an aide motioning the photographer away.[16] This picture captures the feeling of that room at that moment, nothing more.

Elliott Erwitt's Kennedy, 1960
http://australphoto.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/NYC17055.jpg

Arnold Newman's Kennedy, 1953
https://s3.amazonaws.com/attachments.readmedia.com/files/37300/original/14_KENNEDY.jpg?1326474590

Edward Steichen

Family of Man, Bechuanaland, Nat Farbmon,
http://metropolitician.blogs.com/scribblings_of_the_metrop/2007/03/the_politics_of.html

Family of Man, USA, Alfred Eisenstaedt,
http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/jul/05/family-of-man-photography-edward-steichen?cmp=wp-plugin

Family of Man, USA, Elliott Erwitt
https://people.creighton.edu/~amb68690/images/elliott%20erwitt%20images/New%20York%201953.jpg

Family of Man, England, Ralph Morse,
http://time.com/3800880/steichens-family-of-man-restored-new-life-for-a-photographic-touchstone/#4

The Family of Man was a groundbreaking 1955 exhibition curated by Edward Steichen, photo director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. It was the culmination of Steichen's career. Choosing among 2 million photos submitted from around the world, he chose 503 photos from 68 countries and 273 photographers. The exhibit toured the world for eight years and was published as a book[17] that sold 4 million copies. *The Family of Man* speaks to the universality of human experience. It is organized by topic: love, childbirth, the frivolity of childhood, the burdens of adult life, work, play, poverty, illness, death. Virtually every photograph is an environmental portrait. This book mixes playful, beautiful, candid moments, but it also has historical documentary weight. It includes some of the most famous photos depicting the Great Depression. It hits me as kind of a day in the life of the world. This book has the relatability of Erwitt's work. You can see yourself in almost all of the scenes. Like Steichen, I am striving to create a photographic experience that stimulates the viewer's emotional connection with humanity.

Sam Taylor-Johnson
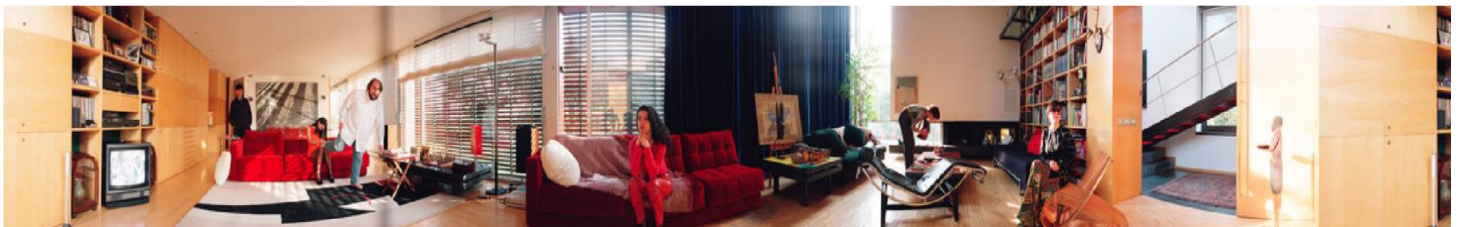
Five Revolutionary Seconds VII, Sam Taylor-Johnson,1997,
http://samtaylorjohnson.com/photography/art/five-revolutionary-seconds-1995-2000

Sam Taylor-Johnson is the first person I have found who creates panoramic portraits in the technical way that I do. Her works are huge. One is 28 inches tall and 25 feet long.[18] They're so long that you can get lost looking at them and have trouble keeping the first half of the frame in your head while looking at the second.

Unlike Hilliard, Taylor-Johnson digitally stitches her pictures together, but her people lack the connections that his people have. Her characters/groups of characters have no visible relationship. They exist on their own "island" in the scene. Her panoramas capture a 360-degree view. After looking at one for a while you feel your eyes connecting the two ends, completing the circle. You view the room as if you are spinning in the center of it.

An interior 360 flattened into a rectangle creates cubicles going from the surface of the picture back into the image's three-dimensional space. This creates sections of scenes divided by the areas closest to the camera. For example, imagine a circle drawn on a piece of paper. Now cut the circle in half and put the corners of the half circles together so that the two diameters form one line the length of two diameters. Imagine the perspective if you were standing in front of the straight line with the semicircles arching away from you. The closest points to you would be the corners of the arches. The midpoint of the arches would be the farthest away, creating two sections of space. This is how Taylor-Johnson's interior 360s work. Her long interior panoramas distort the horizontal lines and add energy to her work. As a viewer, you seem to be gliding up and down rolling hills.

After seeing Taylor-Johnson's work, I experimented with the size of the angle I was representing. Progressively my pieces got longer, adopting the fluid optical effects of Taylor-Johnson's 360s.

5. My Use of Panorama

Memories, Anna Melton, 2014

My own work stresses the variety of human living environments, since each of us creates a space where we feel at home. It can be a pond at your farm or a dark, over-packed apartment. Most of my portraits, tell their story through dozens of details. But in this more focused piece *Memories*, the face says everything. It reads as confident, satisfied and fulfilled. The woman is my 90-year-old grandmother, the humble rock of her family. She spends her days completing the daily crossword puzzle in the local newspaper, having food constantly ready for family and friends who drop by, and taking long walks along the paths around her farm. Her husband of 63 years passed away two years ago. In this photo, she appears to be remembering. This pond has been a part of their farm since the 1960s. Recently she spent some time cleaning the pond and restocking it with fish. We drove out a quarter mile from her house to take this photo. In this moment, her gaze fell on acres of meadow and forest across the pond. Memory is a type of reflection. The reflection in the water helps unify the message of the composition. Window light is a cherished tool for portrait photographers. In this photo, the diffused light coming from the cloudy sky through the break in the trees works in the same, soft way. Her neck and bottom-facing parts of her face are lit by the sky's reflection on the water. Again I chose to have her looking away from the camera because I want to create the feeling of looking in on a scene that's occurring naturally, one not affected by me or the viewer.

It's My Cave, Anna Melton, 2015

 The figure in *It's My Cave* is a classically trained oil painter who works from home. This portrait, like most of mine, is meant to be read through the details. In the previous photo, you linger on the subject's expression and body language. These elements are telling here too, but more significant to this complex photo are the appearance of chaos and detail. The glass doors of the well-used dresser in the bedroom are broken. The scene is dark. At the far left, in the kitchen, is a projector screen. Her work is lined up against the wall behind her. Her space is elaborately decorated with mannequins and feathers. Her place reads as intentional and original, like another piece of her art. It's not a found pattern from a magazine. It's her own creation.

A Child Lives Here, Anna Melton, 2015

 I knew the theme of this mother-daughter portrait, *A Child Lives Here*, as soon as I walked through the door. Everywhere you turn, there is something fantastical or some hand-crafted art project. The breakfast nook is a soft pink. Behind the little girl are butterflies attached to the wall and ceiling. To get this child-orbiting feel across, I chose to have the refrigerator art front and center and to keep the photograph simple and bright. I also chose to have the little girl aware of me as the viewer, and the mom in a different section doing her own thing, seemingly unaware of me. The girl seems to be playing a game with the viewer and knows "the secret" that her mom doesn't grasp. At this scale, they are hard to read but the details in the photograph help complete the conceptual message. The bulletin board at the far right of the frame holdsa picture of the mother and her newborn daughter in the hospital. On a shelf above the cabinets beside the girl is a princess lunchbox. An implied horizontal line guiding you through the portrait. It starts at the left with the doorknob, then the bowl, the tabletop, the shadow on the cabinets, the paper edges on the refrigerator, then on to the dent in the wall, the mother's forearm and curling iron, finishing with the bottom of the mirror and bulletin board.

6. Conclusion

I've learned a lot from my research into great photographers over the past two semesters. Hilliard and Taylor-Johnson are two of the only people doing something similar to my work. Newman, Erwitt and *The Family of Ma*n present environmental portraits whose narrative content is better than some of Hilliard's and all of Taylor-Johnson's. My challenge has been to create exceptional narrative content and display it in a panoramic format. I want to make the viewer care about the lives of the people in my portraits. The "typical" is something that Erwitt talks about often. It is found in the everyday life of humanity. This part of life is what I focus on in this project and what interests me about people.

My aspiration in this project has been to produce photos as connected as Hilliard's, as sweeping as Taylor-Johnson's, as iconic as Newman's, as meaningful as Steichen's, as eye-popping as Burkard's and Anderson's, and as relatable as Erwitt's. It is this ambition that carries me forward as an artist.

7. Acknowledgements

8. References

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4.   Ibid, 90.
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7.   Ibid., 25.
8.   Ibid., 126.
9.   Ibid., 249.
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