

Old Guys

Now that I've hit exactly the mid-50s, the idea of staleness looms large. It's a dirty secret among photographers that Ansel didn't make many outstanding images after about 1970. Even he admitted that he'd "lost the passion" to photograph. I talk to other photographers afflicted with similar age, and we secretly fear lapsing into sameness, making the same picture over and over, saying nothing new. I dread becoming an Old Guy, a photographic corpse.

On the other hand, I think some of Strand's Oregeval garden pictures are among his best work. Atget continued to get it done. Weston was struck down by illness at his peak. How did they stay fresh? How did they keep the passion? They never became Old Guys. What about me?

Enter cellist Eugene Friesen. Eugene, a couple or three years older than me, owns four Grammys, and careful readers of LensWork will recognize his inspiration in my LensWork #77 article "Rigor and Surrender." Well, it's October as I write this, and Eugene just released his fourth CD of the year. Let's take stock of them.

First off, says my wife, he completed and released all of them. There's inspiration just in that, for those of us who have extreme difficulty achieving closure, and seem always to leave the last five percent unfinished.

Eugene's first release, "Colorful Transitions," consists of duets with the extraordinary pianist Tim Ray, in more-or-less traditional jazz mode, from South American tunes to blues. It feels like seduction music – play it with a warm fire in the fireplace, and snuggle with someone you care about. "Steering by the Stars" puts Eugene with his long-time group Trio Globo: percussionist Glenn Velez and Pianist/Harmonica genius Howard Levy, with energetic music that spans multiple genres, from a middle-eastern flavor to "This Land Is Your Land." It's perhaps less accessible than "Colorful Transitions," but musically seems even more challenging. In "Three-Part Inventions," Eugene teams with pianist Philip Aaberg and violinist Tracey Silverman, recording improvisations in different musical styles (jazz, blues, and Brazilian, for example) on themes by Bach. You can hear them smiling, they're having so much fun. The latest, "Love Songs of the Americas," puts Eugene with Tim Ray, Latina vocalist Mili Bernejo, and bassist Dan Greenspan, performing a lush, gorgeous collection of love songs from Latin and North America. It is Eugene's finest recording, in my opinion. He has never played with as much heart.

One year, four very different recordings. Eugene as the common denominator, stretching himself, experimenting, trying new things. And not a dud in sight. So not only is he stretching, he's tough on himself. No relaxing standards, or saying "good enough." No trace of being an Old Guy.

Good friend Richard Ritter worked in a precision machine shop early in his career, making parts for Bell Labs as they invented fiber optic networks. There was an 80-year-old man who

still came into work every day. Why? Said he: "The day you stop learning is the day you get old." Not bad. 80, and still not an Old Guy.

It may be my advancing age, but I keep trying to convince myself that my "hit rate" for photographs has improved above my traditional five-out-of-a-hundred. That may be the wrong way to think. Instead, I should enforce the five-out-of-a-hundred no matter what, ensuring that those five are truly my best. I should be tough on myself if I want to improve.

I look at my prints, and I can see how I could do better. Brooks Jensen says that printing the whites and blacks is easy, it's getting the mid-tones right that's hard. He's right, again. I should spend time learning how to make the mid-tones more expressive of what I want, be tougher on myself. Learn to see better. Fight becoming an Old Guy.

But reprinting old work bores me. It doesn't feel like real progress. So it's making more photographs. But of what? I've got rocks down pretty well. I do want to return to Pemaquid Point in Maine with large format (last time I was there I was limited to 35mm because of a bad hip, but exposed 14 rolls of 36 in one day), and I have magical rock walls on my land. But it's time to branch out.

Moving water has always interested me, and my best work with it is in 35mm (because I've made a couple thousand, with almost exactly five out of a hundred keepers). Time to use 4x5 and 5x7, and maybe even 8x10. That would extend both my aesthetic and technical abilities. I am in no way a fully-accomplished 5x7 or 8x10 photographer. I need a couple thousand more exposures. And I feel I have much more to say about moving water.

Snow and ice. A favorite subject, with too few "keepers" in large format, especially 8x10. We have prime subject matter within 5 miles of my house, and usually many perfect winter days of near-freezing, windless sunshine. Time to up the inventory of negatives. Time to explore the mystery I find in this subject.

Portraits. I made two 5x7 portraits last weekend and remembered that there's nothing as much fun in photography as making large format portraits. I do pretty well, but my 19-year-old son has recently eclipsed me with his digital camera. I oughtta take that as fightin' words, and earn back the top spot by doing more. If it's as much fun as I have experienced, it ought to be easy.

Mike's farm. A nearby friend has a beautiful old New England farm, with a lifetime of pictures. It has already yielded the best picture I've ever made, and an 8x10 negative to boot. Beautiful in any light, and two miles away, I should spend a lot of time there, photographing the old barns and miscellany.

My house. I live in the middle of 147 acres of beautiful woods, rocks, and stone walls. Long ago, I defined a dormant project called "Finding the Soul of a Place," which was supposed to do just that on my land. I have less than one keeper for it, and only poor excuses. After all, this is

literally right outside my back door! I've recently tried to rekindle it, renaming it a less-pretentious "My House." I have a few 8x10 exposures, but not nearly enough.

Maybe I can learn to photograph beaver ponds as well as my friend Richard Ritter.

Exercises. There are things I want to know. For instance, there's a lovely picture out my office window, and I love to watch it change with the sunlight. I should set up the 5x7 aimed out the window, and spend a sunny day making one exposure every hour on the hour. Develop and print, and line them up. I would learn a lot. I have many composition exercises that we use in Fine Focus Workshops, such as One-A-Day, Three-For-One, Toss a Rock, and Pic-From-A-Hat. I should do these, collecting samples to show workshop students, but mainly to push myself.

Friend Richard once hung a show of 8x10 One-A-Days from a year's worth. About 20 photographs, as I recall. About five out of a hundred.

There's a project I ran away from that I called The Cantata Project. Bach wrote a cantata each week for over a year. I thought: why not a keeper-a-week for a year? 5x7, photographed, developed, printed, matted, framed, and displayed. Well, it implies a weekly minimum of 20 negatives, a huge commitment of time, and extraordinary discipline.

I should study Bruce Block's fine book "The Visual Story," the finest book on composition I have seen, even though it is about cinematography. I need to be familiar enough with the ideas that they are automatic, subliminal, as I compose with a camera. I can study when it's dark.

I should refresh my skills by doing some of Betty Edwards' right brain exercises from her extraordinary book "Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain." Her work has been extremely important to improving my photographs. Those, too, require no daylight.

I have a huge load of new, wonderful contact printing paper. I should take time to really learn this material, doing some darkroom exercises for a day, trying several different developers, looking hard at my negative development times. To have that part tuned up would help me in the field. It would also save me paper, since the contact printing setup is fixed. Weston wrote that he rarely needed a second piece of paper to get a final print. Now there's a target. I can't imagine achieving it, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't try.

I use my 210mm lens almost exclusively on my 4x5 camera. I should put it away for a year and make photographs with my 120mm to learn what it sees and how to use it.

Dang! This list is long. And it rubs up against my nemesis. Gumption. Or more accurately, lack of gumption. I find it all too easy to fill my days with the other parts of life that get in the way of photography. Even though I'm retired, there's still a lot of life outside photography, and I find it all too easy for my school board work to push photography aside, for instance, or

attend to my other community service, or manage our finances, or watch NetFlix streamed over the internet. Oops. Guilty of sloth and indolence. An Old Guy characteristic.

Deadlines. How to set them, how to keep them. I recently hosted an Open Studio, displaying 75 prints. I know I'll do it again next year, same time, same place. I should set a target of, say, 20 new photographs to show. That requires at least 400 negatives, which would be not bad, but not great. More restrictions: only large format, only 5x7 or larger. No more rocks, for a while, except for my own stone walls.

Ted Orland, in his book "The View from the Studio Door" talks of his tradition of the "Salonistas," where he gathers a group of artists once a month for a pot-luck supper and discussion of each guest's current artistic activity. The attendees discuss each artist's work, with gentleness but candor. To do less serves no one. Done well, it sounds truly inspirational, educational, fun, and a goal to accomplish something regularly. I would be embarrassed to stand in front of my peers and have my hands in my pockets with nothing to show or talk about. It might goad me. And I know a number of working artists nearby, all of whom happen to be really interesting, nice people. Pretty much all my own age, too.

Let's sum up. It looks like my prescription for overcoming staleness encompasses exploring new subjects, new techniques, deeper knowledge of materials, and self-discipline. Not stopping learning, and thereby getting old. The self-discipline will be the hardest, and I'm open to suggestions. A book I read on the subject said to figure out what needs to be done, and do the first thing on the list, just to get going. Sounds like my "Priming the Pump" exercise, where I advocate stopping the car after exactly five minutes when out photographing and making an exposure, just to get the juices flowing. I find that when I do that, I see many more photographs the rest of the day. Worth a try in other areas. I need to form good habits.

I may just find that if I get busier with photography, and challenge myself with new things, I'll feel younger. Maybe I won't become an Old Guy.