

Digging Through Rob Nelson's Portfolio for Photos that Survive the Test of Time

BY VINCE CHERNIAK

THE WORLD OF fashion and celebrity photography is not a forum one would normally visit to consider higher aesthetics: flipping through a magazine, the craft tends not to draw attention to itself, but rather the subject of desire. But take those same photographs out of the commercial milieu of the media, strip away the logos and advertising, let them stand alone on the gallery wall, and a strange thing happens: the photographer's eye comes to life, and you're seeing through his lens, and the subject recedes.

Such is the case with a dramatic and yet intimate show of prints from the portfolio of London, Ontario based photographer Rob Nelson, opening at the McIntosh Gallery on September 12.

As the curator notes, it's a three-decade survey of Nelson's work that has a unique combination of sensitivity towards his subjects, yet contrasted with "an edgy, candid immediacy." With a distinguished career shooting for the country's leading magazines, his best work may be his unconventional but sympathetic, documentary-like images, often of anonymous subjects — friends, struggling actors, models and other creative types, "reinventing themselves for the camera."

And it is accomplished technique, exposing the essence of things, which brings William Blake to mind:

*This life's dim windows of the soul
Distort the Heavens, from pole to pole
And lead one to believe a lie
When one sees with, not through, the eye*

And look no further than Nelson's self-

portrait, *Rob* [see front cover of this issue], which brings the photographer's gaze head-to-head with its subject, reflected in a mirror. You're watching him watching her, who is watching us. A tour-de-force image.

It also reveals a bit of how Nelson works his camera magic: Nelson uses several cameras in his toolkit, with preference for natural light. Some of his better shots come from simple point-and-shoots, with minimal interference from lighting or equipment, and away from the controlled environ of the studio.

"Photography is mostly about the accidental," Canadian artist Jeff Wall said recently in a CBC documentary. "You can look at someone drinking a cup of coffee, and it'll be different every time. And if you took 10,000 pics of that, I know that one of them is going to be the best." It's a surprising statement from a pho-

tographer celebrated for large back-lit composed images, but Nelson agrees on the importance of serendipity in a shoot.

"Today everyone is a photographer of some sort. It is so easy to take a million images but the hard part is editing and showing the important photos ... the ones that will survive the test of time," he says. "I relate to his (Wall's) concept of capturing 'accidental' images ... some of the best photographs are not planned."

With minimal equipment, a preference for available light and four cameras (a Canon, Nikon, Fuji and a Panasonic, for different situations), Nelson is less encumbered by formal studio shoots, and can react more dynamically with his subjects.

"Each camera is a tool which is good for a different situation. I like to be nimble when I shoot and I don't like



Image: Rob Nelson, *Kirsten Dunst*, 1998, C-print from negative (detail). Commissioned by Interview Magazine. Photo courtesy of the artist.

ROB NELSON: Photographs 1977 to 2014

JANET WERNER: Another perfect day

Curated by Kent Archer
Circulated by Kenderdine Art Gallery

September 12 to November 1

OPENING RECEPTION: Friday, September 12 at 7:30 P.M.

M-F 10-5 Sat 12-4 Free admission

mcintoshgallery.ca



LEFT: A candid shot from 1977 of Prince Andrew (photographer Rob Nelson schooled with him at Lakefield College at the time) catches the prince taking a break from rehearsal for a school play. BELOW: Former Miss Universe Karen Baldwin with her niece, Lauren, in 1983.



Photos: © ROB NELSON

a lot of equipment between myself and the person I'm photographing . . . and I like to be able to work quickly. I seldom preconceive a shot. I like to collaborate with the person I am photographing and leave things open for great moments to happen and capture. I do believe in the decisive moment."

NELSON WAS working mainly for Canadian fashion magazines like *Flare*, *Toronto Life*, and *Chatelaine* in the '90s when he sent his portfolio in to Warhol's *Interview* magazine, and he was chosen to shoot the rising star of Kirsten Dunst. His shot here gets her in a moment of repose, perhaps getting a break from the media circus. (Nelson notes that it would be hard to get a shot like this today, when handlers steer the shoots.)

"Fashion and celebrity photography has become a blur in the past several years.

"There were the super models of the '80s and '90s . . . actors and actresses have replaced them to a major part . . . they are on the covers of all the magazines now.

"I feel lucky that I was able to photograph Kirsten without handlers and make some images of her with my point

and shoot film camera in a personal way. I think that is why *Interview* magazine gave me the job. Technology and the nature of working with celebrities has changed since I photographed her."

Serendipity – happenstance – is a big part of Nelson's success with these images. *Ashley* almost has a mug shot quality, which reveals Nelson's preference for catching his subjects with minimal makeup and unpampered tresses. An early candid shot from 1977 of Prince Andrew (Nelson schooled with him at Lakefield College at the time) catches the prince taking a break from rehearsal for a school play.

Other notables here include a portrait of fashion designer *Mizrahi*, here caught with a glorious emanating, Rembrandt-like quality of light. In a shoot done for *The National Ballet*, Karen Kain looks set to fly as Nelson catches her wing-like fabric spread out at just the right moment. Don Harron's comedic crusty farmer schtick is lovingly represented in Nelson's focus on his beat-up leather shoes. And in *Basia Bulat*, Nelson somehow captures the former London-based singer's vocal softness and sincerity — in a photograph!

"With painters you sometimes hear that less is more, that fewer strokes

convey more. That's how I feel about using black and white," Nelson has said about his landscape work, but it equally applies here in *Elm Street*, where the stark, near graphic lines of the model's chiseled cheeks correspond with the high contrast of the undulating wall behind her. Or, in *Celeste*, where he's emphasized line by drawing in ink on the photo.

The show also includes several diptych and triptychs. *Persona* and *Jennifer* were shot in the early days of digital cameras, yet the lower resolution of these split images isn't a limitation, and Nelson's subjects here are somehow enhanced in these multiple perspectives.

Nelson says he prefers to shoot his friends these days rather than the glam world models, and notes that two images here are particularly endearing to him for the intimacy he has with his subjects.

"One image I'm really proud of, *Persona*, is from a layout for *Elm Street* magazine and my wife Lisa is the model. And I'm really proud that I had the opportunity to photograph my friend Margaret Atwood for the 100th anniversary edition of *Saturday Night*. Working for that magazine in the day was one of the main reasons I moved from London

to Toronto. They had the best writers and photographers. I did several assignments with them and it was an honour to work with them.

"I spent a day with Atwood, driving up to her cottage in northern Ontario for the *Saturday Night* assignment," says Nelson. "We stopped in several places to take photos. One was at a lumberyard on Highway 11, which is where this is taken. At this time I was photographing her with 35 mm Polaroid slide film which I processed in the back of her car. It was a very casual and spontaneous shoot, which is the way I like to work. She just seemed to be right at home with all the lumber, as the great Canadian talent that she is."

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<http://mcintoshgallery.ca/exhibitions/future.html>

www.robnelsonphotography.com