

# Olivier Meyer interviewed by Patricia Frischer, Founder and Coordinator of the San Diego Visual Arts Network, California

1. **Do you think your desire to be an artist had anything to do with your childhood? What in art, or in the artist's life, attracted you both as child and now?**

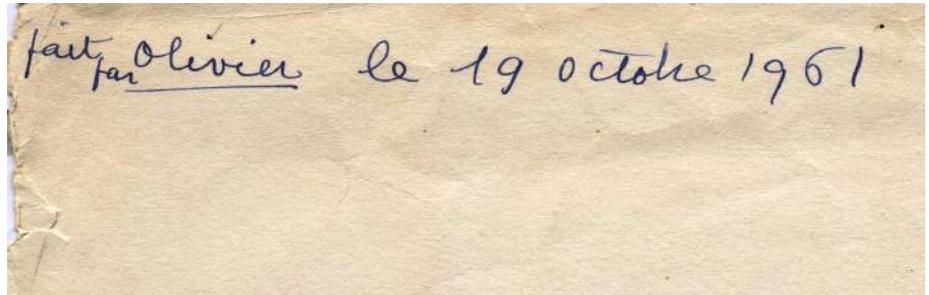
My mother Georgette Meyer (born 1916, sculptor, painter who now uses fabric instead of paints and is still working at 99) is an artist and I think she regards me as an artist too; she used to take me to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Saint-Ouen near Paris when I was 11 or 12. I like the idea that an artist can create something without being told what to do.

2. **What was the first image you created?**

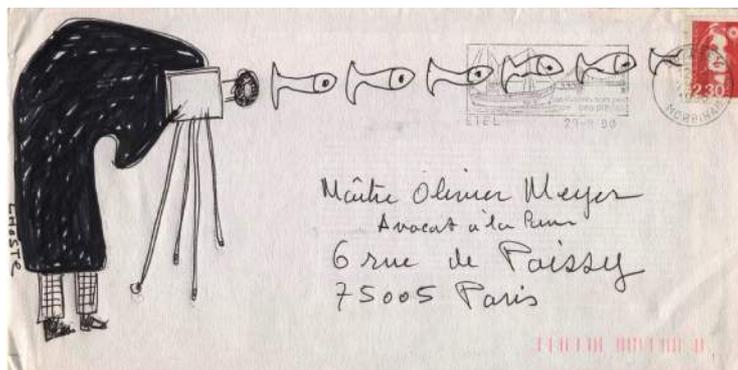
I started to take photography seriously when I bought my first 35mm camera in 1974. It was a Russian camera, a Zenit. I would say that one of my first photographs, rather my first attempt to reach an artistic effect, was in July 1974, a photography of two pegs.

3. **Who believed in you at a young age as an artist?**

My mother, my aunt Marie Lambert (1897-1992, painter). The drawing below, kept by my mother with a note on the back that it was drawn by Olivier on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1961 (I was then 4) seems to indicate that she believed in me as an artist.



The drawing on an envelope below by my teacher Claude Lhoste (1929-2010, sculptor and designer) indicates that he believed in me as a photographer.



**4. Why this medium of photography? When were you first exposed to it? Did you try any other mediums?**

My father was a professional photographer, although not an artist. We used to transform our bathroom into a darkroom for processing the films and printing; one of my brothers, Michel, had built a homemade enlarger using an old bellows camera. I have also tried drawing and sculpture, but I liked photography best right from the beginning.

**5. Tell us about your career as a lawyer and has that had an influence on your photos or vice versa?**

Photography started first, I was a photographer before I became a lawyer. I don't know whether one had an influence on the other, except perhaps the travelling which enables me discover various countries and different cultures. There is certainly one similarity: you need to be in empathy with your subject.

## Process:

**1. Has your process changed over time?**

I have always done the same thing, always taken the same sort of photographs. But I often kept some photographs without showing them, developed but not printed, assuming that nobody would be interested. Now I dare show them, especially since I heard Charles Zalber, owner of the gallery Lucie Weill & Seligmann, say that I was able to make a photograph "out of nothing" and that he liked them because "they are beautiful, simply". I value the idea that something can be beautiful "simply", it doesn't need to be complicated or sophisticated.

**2. Is there anything unique about your methods and can you explain anything that the non-photographer might find interesting about the process? What is special about silver bromide printed on baryta paper?**

Using the argentic films and paper is not unique, it has been used a lot. What is perhaps becoming unique is sticking to this process, which is time consuming, expensive and a lot more complicated than numeric. But the slow revelation of the image, the time elapsed between the shooting and the viewing of the print are for me essential steps in the process of artistic creation. I also find that it is easier to photograph a person holding an old Leica camera, with all the legend of photo-journalism behind it, rather than with a modern camera; it is not intrusive, almost friendly.

**3. Do you dream in black and white or color? Why are all the images in black and white and not in color?**

I dream in color. My photographs are in black & white because I find it interesting not to be disturbed by the colors, one can concentrate on the forms.

**4. What time of day is the best for you to work?**

I need the light of the sun because I never use a flash, but otherwise any time is good.

## Influences

**1. Can you tell me a personal story about meeting with Édouard Boubat?**

Edouard Boubat was a very nice man. The poet Jacques Prévert gave him the nickname “*peace correspondent*”, as opposed to “*war correspondent*”. I used to meet him quite often, by chance, either when we were taking photographs in the same areas of Paris or at the laboratory Publimod where we were both clients. I asked him once if I could show him some of my photographs, he accepted very kindly and told me after: “*at the end of the day, we are all doing the same thing...*”

**2. Henri Cartier-Bresson and Saul Leiter are influences in what way?**

Henri Cartier-Bresson is the forerunner of a style involving geometry, rigorous framing (the black line witnessing that the photograph has not been cropped) and of course, what is called “*The decisive moment*” named after the English title of his famous book “*Images à la sauvette*”. He still influences many photo-reporters or street photographers. Saul Leiter is different, he has a more poetic vision of the city, I would say that I learned from Saul Leiter that a photograph can work well even without sticking to the previous rules. I discovered Saul Leiter recently, when his work was shown for the first time in a European museum in 2008 at the Fondation Cartier-Bresson (Paris). With both influences, you have the framework which sets the limits, and within that framework you can choose not to follow the rules.

**3. How do you title your work?**

It is mainly informative: location, year, short description of the subject if needed.

## Concepts

**1. Are you purposing trying to make these works come from another period ie. 1950 and does this reflect a favorite point in history?**

No, definitely not. But I am deliberately avoiding what I dislike or find ugly: modern cars, plastic bags, tracksuits, etc. The subtitle “*nothing new*” is not a principle as such, it just happens to be like that.

**2. Do you purposely go out to take images or do you carry a camera at all times?**

I do both.

**3. You have worked on London and Paris. Are there other series you have in mind for the future?**

Yes of course, one advantage of the argentic is that I keep all my films and contact sheets since I had my first 35mm camera in 1974. I could therefore make a series on bicycles, on hats, whatever. I am also tempted by a series on “*Jerusalem, nothing new*”.

## Actual Art Works

Could you choose just a few pieces and be able to make some kind of comment on each:

- 1. information about the techniques**
- 2. the inspiration behind the piece**
- 3. What do you like most about it?**
- 4. What does it remind you of?**
- 5. What did you learn by doing this art work?**
- 6. Did this work lead you to make another work?**
- 7. Who bought or expressed a liking for the work and why do you think they bought or liked it?**

I suggest that we compare n° 1, Great Malborough Street and n° 39, Johnny’s bicycle in Pimlico.



Great Malborough Street, 2008



Johnnie's bicycle, 1992

N° 1 is, if I may say so, a “decisive moment”; I like it because there is a sort of tension emerging from the very fact that one second earlier would have been too early, one second later would have been too late, and this tension is telling something about the fact that the crowd and the city are busy.

N° 39 is the opposite: nothing happens, everything is quiet and peaceful, it could easily have been taken half an hour before or half an hour after; I don't know very much about this bicycle, although I have other photographs showing its owner. I like this one because the objects (bicycle and onions) are telling us the story of some men sailing from Roscoff (France) to England in order to sell their produce, they were nicknamed “*Onion Johnnies*”. The photograph is telling a story without showing too much.

N°1 reminds me of a photograph by Robert Frank taken in New Orleans, n° 39 reminds me of some photographs by Saul Leiter.

What I have learned is that you don't always need the tension of the decisive moment; it is good also to have some photographs which are more peaceful.

I am often trying to take the same photograph, therefore one leads to another.

Charles Zalber, the gallery owner, liked n° 1, I don't know about n° 39 because it has never been shown before. The miracle with argentic photography, is that a photograph taken 20 or 30 years ago may suddenly appear on you contact sheet when you were looking for something else. With numeric photography, a lot will be lost in 20 or 30 years, just because keeping a numeric file is a big issue. People don't realize.

## Additions:

**Was there a defining moment in your life as an artist?**

I would say 2007, when Charles Zalber called me “*artist*”.

**Where do you fit in the march of art history?**

I could probably be described as a humanist photographer and a street photographer, although these currents are more related to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; perhaps it would be right to say that my work is in the same style.

**How do you define artists' block and have you experienced this?**

An artist is a very sensitive person, therefore it might happen that the artist lacks inspiration. It may happen to me, although it wouldn't last.

**Where do you create?**

In the street, mostly in big cities.

**What do you hear or listen to when you create?**

The sounds of the city.

**If you have a classical studio, describe it.**

**If you have a non-traditional studio, describe it.**

I don't do the processing myself anymore, therefore I don't have a darkroom; it takes too much time and what I like best is to take the photographs.

**Who gets in your way if you try to create?**

Nobody would ever get in my way.

**What was the worst thing that anyone ever said about your work?**

People are kind enough not to say anything unpleasant in front of me. One day I was at the book shop in the Museum of Modern Art in Paris and I saw one American lady showing two of her friends one of my postcards, it was clear they were enjoying looking at it, that is a very nice memory. I am sorry, I think I didn't answer your question very well.

**What one thing would enable you to grow artistically?**

Mistakes; and seeing the work of other photographers, including what I like or not.

**Is there one other art form - like dance or music- that is like a brother to your work?**

Cinema perhaps, I find inspiration in a lot of old movies.

## **Non Art Questions:**

**What are your living arrangement?**

I am lucky enough not to rely on my photographs for living; therefore I can do exactly what I want, I don't have to sell my soul.

**What book are you reading now?**

The Anarchist's Tool Chest by Christopher Schwarz.

**What's on your mouse pad?**

Parallel lines, it's a cutting mat.

**Favorite board game?**

Chess.

**Favorite smells?**

Hot tar, freshly cut grass.

**Least favorite smells?**

Rotten kiwi.

**Favorite sound?**

Jazz.

**Worst feeling in the world?**

Being boring.

**What is the first thing you think of when you wake up in the morning?**

Turn off my alarm clock.

**Favorite color?**

Grey; by the way when we talk about black & white photography, there is no black and no white, there is just a large range of grey.

**How many rings before you answer the phone?**

I answer straight away, or not at all.

**Favorite foods?**

Bread, cheese and a glass of red wine.

**Chocolate or vanilla?**

No, thanks.

**Do you like to drive fast?**

Yes, but I don't.

**Storms - cool or scary?**

Cool.

**What type was your first car?**

Citroën Ami 6, a funny car, a cross between a Ford Anglia and a Citroën 2 CV.

**If you could meet one person dead or alive, who would it be?**

Saul Leiter, I regret I didn't have the opportunity to meet him before he died.

**Favorite alcoholic drink?**

Wine.

**What is your zodiac sign?**

Leo.

**Do you eat the stems of broccoli?**

Yes, my religion doesn't forbid it.

**If you could have any job you wanted what would it be?**

Photographer.

**If you could dye your hair any color?**

White. I am nearly there.

**Is the glass half empty or half full?**

It is never exactly a half.

**Favorite movies?**

A serious man, To have and have not, The man who shot Liberty Valance, Rio Bravo.

**What is your favorite number?**

35.

**Favorite sport to watch?**

Space diving (Felix Baumgartner). It is impressive, quick, and you don't have to watch too often.

**What is your greatest fear?**

Not to be able to answer your questions.

**What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?**

If there is something I don't like I try to change it.

**What is the trait you most deplore in others?**

I dislike people who do not care.

**What is your greatest extravagance?**

Using argentic process when numeric is so easy can probably be regarded as an extravagance. But riding a horse when it is easier to ride a motorbike is extravagant too, and I have noticed that there are people, including the police, who still ride horses in 2015.

**What is your favorite journey?**

Back home after a nice trip.

**What do you consider the most overrated virtue?**

Modesty.

**What do you dislike most about your appearance?**

Nothing. I got used to it.

**Which living person do you most despise?**

I don't despise anybody.

**Which words or phrases do you most overuse?**

Perversion and manipulation.

**What or who is the greatest love of your life?**

My wife.

**Who is your favorite hero of fiction?**

Rick in Casablanca: he loves Ilsa so much that he lets her go away with Victor Laszlo.

**What do you consider your greatest achievement?**

Yet to come.

**What is your most treasured possession?**

Some of my films with the photographs I like best; I keep them in a safe.

**What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?**

Being bored.

**Where would you like to live?**

In a log cabin right in the middle of a big city; not easy to find.

**Who are your favorite writers?**

Georges Perec, Jack London, Ionesco, Jules Verne.

**Who are your heroes in real life?**

I have been disappointed too often, I now think that heroes don't exist in real life.

**How would you like to die?**

In good health.

**What is your motto?**

One thing at a time.

**What is your greatest regret?**

No regret.

**If you were to die and come back as a person or thing, what do you think it would be?**

I don't think I would like to come back but if I had to, I would like to be a tree: a tree is nice and useful when alive, and when it is cut it can still be used for making paper or carpentry, even matches.

**Were you born an artist?**

No. But I believe I was born a photographer.