An Interview with

Amy Touchette

Masters of street photography

by CATALIN CROITORU

"With Pete," from Shoot the Arrow: A Portrait of The World Famous *BOB*
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"Marquee Night Club, Chelsea," from Shoot the Arrow: A Portrait of The World Famous *BOB*
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Hello, Amy Touchette! And thank you for accepting to share your thoughts with LENS MAGAZINE!

My pleasure. Thank you for having me!

You are a reputable photographer from New York City. Your "playground" is the streets of the metropolis. Please tell us how everything started.

Well, it was a pretty dramatic and emotional start, actually. I was working in New York City as a writer, editor, then managing editor and found the more my career progressed in corporate America, the emptier it felt. I remember feeling so depressed about the realization, because I loved writing from an early age, and I thought I was building the life I should. My solution was to not work so much overtime and instead spend more time on a large scale painting series I was working on at home, which was a really soothing experience at the time, a great departure from office life.

But then a few months later, September 11th happened, and everything changed. I was living in the West Village, just a few subway stops from the Twin Towers. Outside was a city I did not recognize. My neighborhood was blocked off from traffic, odors of the most putrid smell of death and destruction constantly wafted in the air, and everywhere were posters with pictures of people's loved ones they desperately hoped to find—all of whom were dead.

Once I got over the immediate shock of the event, the meaning of life and its gifts were suddenly so clear to me, and it caused me to completely reevaluate my life. Within a month I started taking photography classes, not even knowing what an f-stop was, but having a hunch photographing would offer me the life I desperately sought to have. And I it did. I quit my job after securing some freelance work and slowly started building a life as a photographer. It's so strange to me that an event so tragic produced one of the best things that ever happened to me, but it did.

What do you feel when you are "on duty," walking on the sidewalks and spotting your subjects? How do you choose your shooting spots or subjects?

When I'm out with the sole purpose of making pictures, I mostly feel alert and happy. Walking the streets aimlessly and taking everything in is my favorite thing to do. But as soon as I see someone I want to photograph, I feel nervous and excited, almost like having too much caffeine. There's definitely always an underlying fear of rejection at that point too, but photography forces me to confront that, which I love.

"Circus Sideshow Dressing Room, Coney Island," from Shoot the Arrow: A Portrait of The World Famous *BOB*
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*That night, among all the dancers, The World Famous *BOB* really stood out to me. She was larger than life, a perfect candidate for the camera. A week or so later, when she performed again, I introduced myself, told her how much I enjoyed her last show and asked if I could photograph her. A week later, we met at a café where I brought the pictures and asked if we could do a project together, a documentary, mostly fly-on-the-wall series of her both at home and at work. And thankfully, she said yes.*

I'm not sure how to explain who and where I photograph. I know I love photographing in New York City because the population is so diverse and individuality is so expected here. But my reasons for making portraits—why I choose one person over the other—it's not something I can put my finger on exactly. It starts with an intuition, a feeling of wanting to remember someone, and that's all I really know about it.

Can you describe what means "a day" for Amy Touchette? Please do a description of it from the morning to the evening/night.

I support my fine art photography career largely as a freelance writer. Having no boss or set schedule means that I can keep photography my focus without having to rely on it to make money. So my days are really different from one to the next. This morning I finalized a writing document, then began responding to this interview. At some point in the afternoon my boyfriend will wake up (he's a musician) so I'll take a little break then. Later I'll start framing some prints for a pop-up exhibition I'm having next weekend, go to a yoga class, return home to try to get more work done, make a post on Instagram, and then maybe meet a friend out for a drink. But tomorrow will be totally different, aside from yoga and Instagram, both of which I do almost every day.

"Winter Morning," from Shoot the Arrow: A Portrait of The World Famous *BOB*
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I do have a more regular schedule in the summer, though, because that's when I make a lot of my photography. In New York City, people are so much more open and colorful and accessible during the warmer months, so I concentrate on making work then and looking at the work—editing, sequencing, presenting, marketing, etc.—in the colder months. During summer days, I photograph from 3 pm to sundown every day, if possible, and try to fit everything else in around that. Working with the seasons this way is super relaxing; just being able to focus on certain parts of the process for long periods of time feels healthy and I think I can get deeper as a result, too.

Did you ever happen to have confrontational situations while you were taking pictures on the streets? What happened? How did you solve it?

It's funny, so many people ask me this question! I understand why, but for the most part, my experience making street photography is far more amiable than it is caustic. Often people like being photographed (as Diane Arbus said, it's a reasonable amount of attention to pay a person) or they're unaware they're being photographed, so 95 percent of the time, I photograph without incident.

That said, I have had a few interactions that have stayed with me, some of which I resolved well and others I failed at miserably. I try not to be too hard on myself when I don't handle things the best way and just concentrate on receiving the lesson. But when my photographing does make someone angry, it's because I'm using my iPhone and I didn't ask permission beforehand. I usually start by telling them I'll delete the photo if they want, but that I made it because the light was so nice, or they looked so beautiful, or happy, or peaceful—whatever was true for me at the time. This usually disarms them at least a little bit, because most people don't know what street photography is or why someone would want to photograph a stranger.

I never photograph people who are in an unfair moment (picking their nose, crying, etc.) or who are down and out, so my reason for photographing is always respectful, a celebration of someone to some degree. This helps my case a lot, but some people still feel I've invaded their privacy—that I shouldn't make their picture without their permission.

"G train, Brooklyn, 2016" from Street Dailies
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"Flushing Ave, Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, 2016" from Street Dailies
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"Dekalb Ave, Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, 2015" from Street Dailies
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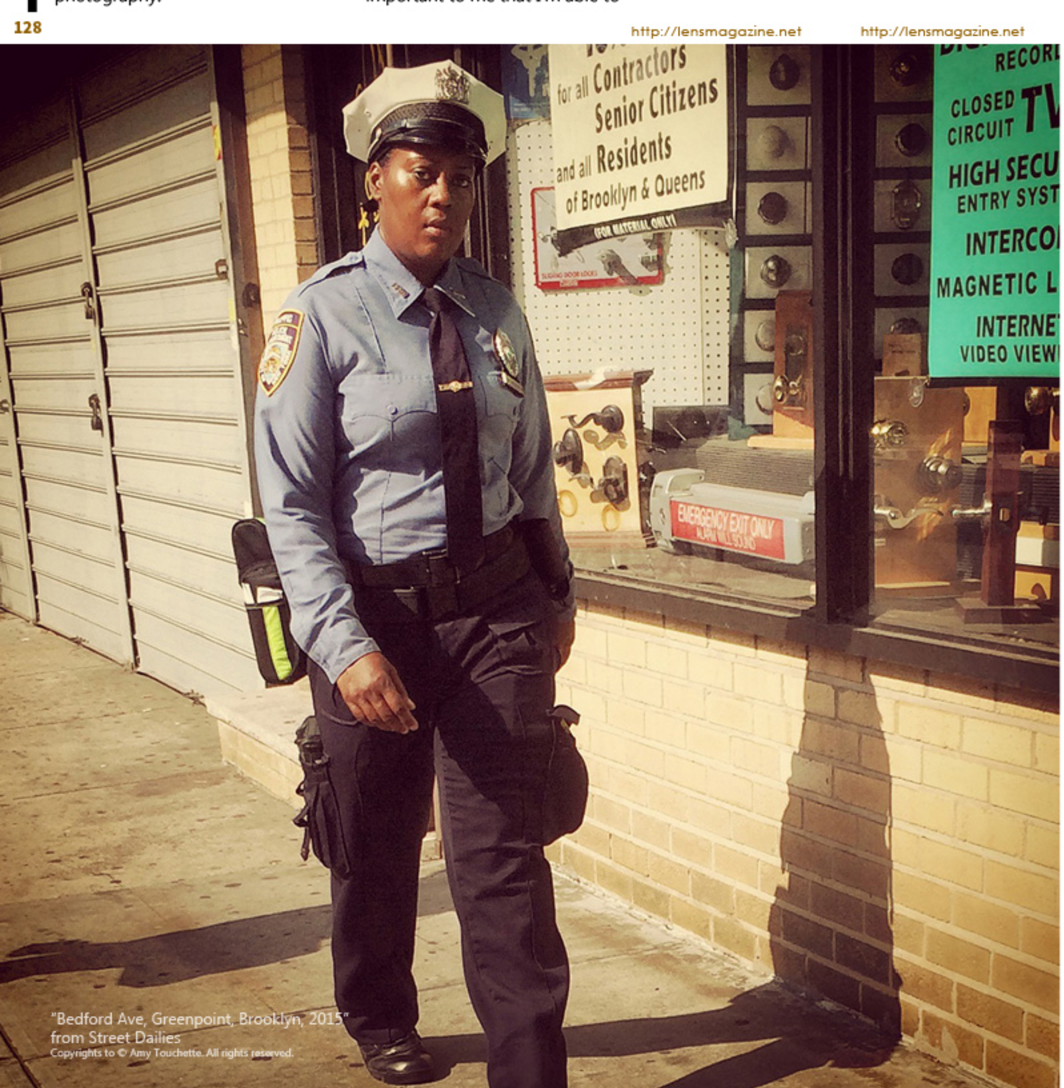
If that happens, I'll explain why candid moments are special and tell them the last thing I wanted to do was upset them. Throughout the conversation, it helps to restate their opinions so that they feel heard ("I understand you feel such-and-such a way") and to be calm, and genuine, and friendly, and also articulate and secure about my passion for photography.

These interactions can be really tough, but actually, they're the conversations I want to have. My camera is not a gun; it's a piece of equipment I use to see other people and connect with them, even if it's just for 1/125 of a second. I photograph people because I admire them for one reason or another, and I want to remember them. It's important to me that I'm able to say that to another human being, that I can muster up the courage to say something that is ultimately so positive and constructive.

Tell us what is in your backpack/bag. What gear do you use? What is your favorite camera and why?

The two cameras I've been using most during the last several years are a Rolleiflex 3.5f Planar and my iPhone. I use the former when I'm making formal pictures of people, asking permission beforehand, and the latter for quick,



"Bedford Ave, Greenpoint, Brooklyn, 2015" from Street Dailies
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"Flushing Ave, Bed-Stuy, Brooklyn, 2016" from Street Dailies
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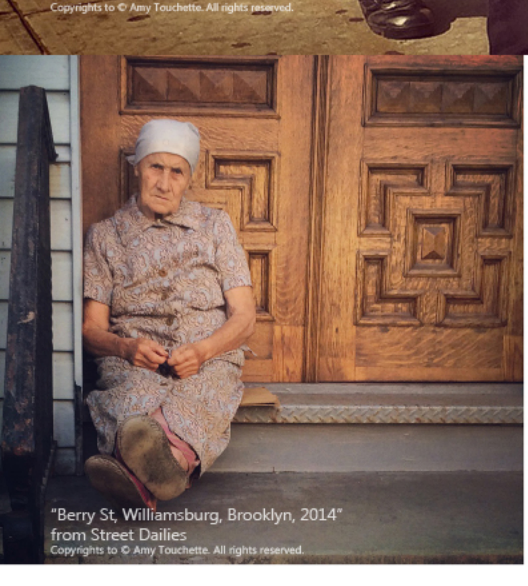
candid images of people, which I make every day and post on Instagram for my series Street Dailies.

My Rolleiflex makes really warm, soulful images on film, and I love how the square format isolates a person, making the picture mostly about them as opposed to their environment. It's also a really special "old school" camera that the public tends to react to very positively. So that's my all-time favorite camera at the moment. Second, comes my iPhone; as frustrating as it can be to work (I much prefer knobs and buttons to touch screen), it's the one camera I always have with me, and that means just about everything. It's also fun to shoot liberally and quickly without worrying about depleting my resources (time and money) and to be able to manipulate and share the images so soon after I make them.

In the past, my favorite camera was my Leica M7, a super quiet rangefinder with an incredible lens that is beloved by many street photographers, but when I started focusing on street portraits I stopped using it, preferring a portrait camera like the Rolleiflex instead.



"Berry St, Williamsburg, Brooklyn, 2014" from Street Dailies
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One of your famous projects is called Shoot the Arrow: A Portrait of the World Famous *BOB*; could you share with us the story behind it?

I started making this series while I was learning how to photograph. I went to a burlesque show one night and arrived late, so the only space for me was by the stage wings. From that perspective, I could see the dancers as they performed for the audience, as well as when they turned their back on them and let down their guard. It got me thinking about the public and private life of a performer and how disparate they can be.

That night, among all the dancers, The World Famous *BOB* really stood out to me. She was larger than life, a perfect candidate for the camera. A week or so later, when she performed again, I introduced myself, told her how much I enjoyed her last show and asked if I could photograph her. A week later, we met at a café where I brought the pictures and asked if we could do a project together, a documentary, mostly fly-on-the-wall series of her both at home and at work. And thankfully, she said yes.

So we started meeting for three-hour periods wherein I would just photograph her doing whatever it was she had scheduled, whether that was going to the laundromat, doing dishes in her apartment, or performing. It was pretty awkward—I remember being so nervous—and I knew I wanted to go deeper, but I didn't want to scare her by coming on too strongly with my objectives. So several months later, when I felt we had gotten close enough, I asked if I could photograph her during 24-hour periods. Much to my delight, she said yes. So I slept in her bed, ate what she ate, went wherever she went, and just focused on photographing her for those 24 hours.

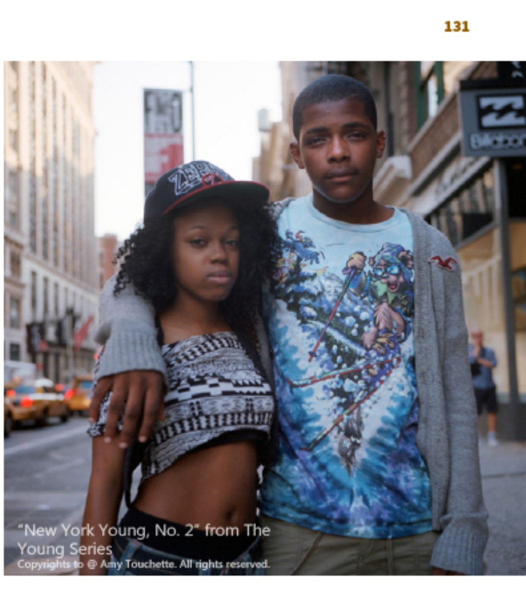
This approach worked really well, and it made us very close. I started photographing because I wanted to learn how to gain someone's trust. The World Famous *BOB* was so different than me, she seemed the ultimate challenge. But then I began forging a relationship with her based on, as Susan Meiselas once put so well, "the deep connection of not being capable of doing what my subject is doing"—an incredible experience that gave me so much faith in humanity.

After a few years of periodic 24-hour sessions, I felt I had the images I needed and that I should move on to the next challenge: assessing the images, making a selection of them, sequencing them, captioning them, coming up with a name for the series, finding the best format—the really difficult part of photographing, like an unsolvable puzzle until it isn't. After another four years, I had a presentation I was happy with and found a book publisher and had an exhibition.

The spring of 2017 was full of events for you. Tell us, please, about your exhibitions and books.

Well, published this spring was Jason Eskenazi's book, Americans List II. He asked me and a ton of other photographers I admire to choose a picture from Robert Frank's seminal book The Americans and explain why it was our favorite. For me, it was very easy, despite their being so many compelling ones, because the first image I ever looked at as an aspiring photographer was "Trolley—New Orleans," thanks to my first teacher, street photographer Jeff Mermelstein. The way that picture makes order of chaos—I just hadn't been privy to photography's powers until then, and stepping into that relationship with it for the first time was memorable, to say the least.

Also, this spring, as I mentioned earlier, I'm having a pop-up exhibition next weekend of Street Dailies that's organized by Greenpoint Open Studios in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Later I'll be guest Instagramming for LensCulture, making pictures similar to those in Street



"New York Young, No. 2" from The Young Series
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"New York Young, No. 1" from The Young Series
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Dailies, but in Arles, France instead of New York City. I'll be attending Arles Photography Festival then, so I'll meet with professionals in the industry for portfolio reviews and make images on the side, which I'm really looking forward to. I've never been!

I will go back to your work that reflects street life; what advice would you give to a beginner who would like to choose street photography as an art style?

I would first of all wholeheartedly encourage them. Photographing real life is incredibly engaging and it helps you see that, ultimately, humanity is super beautiful and kind. It also forces you to be sensitive and aware, and the gifts from honing those skills never stop giving. So for sure, it can be a worthwhile, extremely meaningful path that should, by all means, be explored if the inspiration is there.

Second I would say to be very clear on why you want to photograph the street. Motivations and intentions, they are the foundation of personal vision, and once you're clear about them (they can be more elusive than you'd think, so it can take some time), it allows you to photograph more intuitively, and that experience is just extraordinary—what it's all about—and it results in pictures that are distinctly your own.

Last I would say it's important to solve practical matters that can get in the way of exploring street photography, meaning: figure out how to make a living doing something that doesn't exhaust you so you have the time to photograph and be truly present. You might eventually make money from street photography, but it's not common to do so, and it's definitely not the point.

What projects do you have for the next months?

This summer I'll continue making portraits of people in my neighborhood, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, with my Rolleiflex. I moved to the neighborhood two years ago, and of all my 20 years living in New York City, I've never experienced a neighborhood so special. I began the series last summer, and I'm still in the throws of figuring out what all the portraits are saying, collectively, so my plan is to keep feeling it out, to see what's at the root without interfering with labels and desires at this point.

"New York Young, No. 11" from The Young Series
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"New York Young, No. 3" from The Young Series
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In the fall, I'll be preparing for a solo exhibition of The Young Series, a new project I haven't released yet of teenagers in New York City, O'ahu, and Tokyo. It'll take place in California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo's gallery in February, 2018. I'll give a short workshop to the students and a little talk about the work when the exhibition goes up as well.

Amy Touchette
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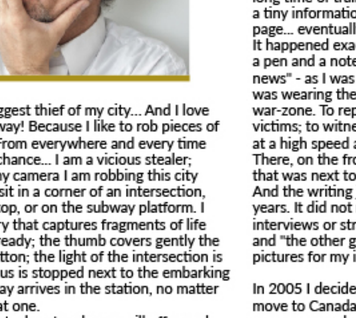
CATALIN CROITORU
- A COMPULSIVE THIEF -

CONTRIBUTOR



I am the biggest thief of my city... And I love being this way! Because I like to rob pieces of Montreal. From everywhere and every time I have the chance... I am a vicious stealer; with the help of my camera I am robbing this city the images of it. I sit in a corner of an intersection, or next to a bus stop, or on the subway platform. I hold that accessory that captures fragments of life in my right hand, ready; the thumb covers gently the shutter release button; the light of the intersection is changing, or the bus is stopped next to the embarking zone; or the subway arrives in the station, no matter what station is that one.
That is the moment when two lovers will offer each other a "goodbye" kiss; and that is the moment when the teenager will check his cell phone before he or she will get on... And because I was ready before anyone else I am pressing the trigger! Once, twice, or many times in a row. I never check what I captured with my camera right there, right after I have stolen the image of my city. I wait, again, patiently for the next moment to become a thief again... and again...
A smile, or a kiss, or a face, or an attitude - I collect all of those. I am like a magician that will stuff all his rabbits and his pigeons and his colored fabrics into his high-hat at the end of the show. Except the magician owns the rabbits and the fabrics; I don't own any - I am stealing! And except the magician has his magic hat; I don't wear one... I am just using my camera...

This passion for taking pictures grew up inside of me little by little. I didn't dream of becoming a photographer; actually when I graduated the high school back there, in Europe, at the very end of the 80s, I wanted to become a writer. A short-stories teller. However the times were rough and I decided to follow a technical vocation, to become an engineer. So once I enrolled at the University I started to learn about how to prepare the concrete and what are the best additives for it...
In 1992 I have visited a friend of mine who worked for a local newspaper. I wanted to ask him to train me for the same job that he performed. Because I was thinking to get your story and your news published in a section of any journal takes a lot of time to be prepared; so I imagined I had to start from the bottom - like undusting the typewriters, like changing the ribbons for the typing machines, and after that, after a long time of training, someone will be allowed to write a tiny information that will be published on the last page... eventually...
It happened exactly the opposite for me: armed with a pen and a notepad I was sent to collect "news, good news" - as I was told. Even more, after a month I was wearing the skin of a journalist. I was sent into a war-zone. To report about the killings and about the victims; to witness how the machine guns were firing at a high speed and the tanks were burning in flames. There, on the frontline, I was the writer. The other guy that was next to me was the photographer...
And the writing job continued for more than fifteen years. It did not matter whether they were stories, or interviews or straight news - I always was the writer and "the other guy" next to me was the one who took pictures for my interviews or stories.

In 2005 I decided to leave everything behind and to move to Canada. That was an ABSOLUTE ZERO for me: new people, no friends or relatives, two new (or almost new...) languages, different habits. Because of the languages barriers I felt myself restrained and unable to communicate properly my thoughts with the others. That was the moment when I decided to express myself through the images I was taking. They used to say that a photo is "worth a thousand words"; but I really think it is a language as well. When you feel crippled and the words limit you, just grab a camera: it will open for you a new horizon and a new life!

I am attracted by everything that is odd or that looks unusual. Patterns, amalgam of weird colors, faces and attitudes, an unusual sock wearing a leg, a used pair of snickers, a wrinkle on a skirt, a man absorbed by the screen of his device... Everything!
This is the world I live in. Together with me there are so many others that are doing the same thing. Except that I see the pieces in a different light. There, on the streets of Montreal, I see the world with my own eyes. And I love what I see! And that's why I became a thief: to keep those skirt wrinkles and faces and attitudes forever.

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