

Interview with German photographer Martin Schoeller

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Martin Schoeller is a highly successful German portrait photographer who just finished a show called Portraits at the prestigious Hasted Kraeutler Art Gallery in New York City. I recently had the opportunity gain some unique insights into his history and working process.

How did you start with photography? How old were you when you started, and what were you doing before that?

I finished high school in Germany and didn't have an idea of what I wanted to be. Education in Germany is free, so I enrolled in college. Even so, I hardly ever went. I worked with a handicapped man who had multiple sclerosis. I took care of him, went on vacation with him, washed and fed him. I was basically a social worker. At night I was a bartender and a waiter. There are advantages in the European education system; you have health insurance, and you can earn money without paying taxes. A friend of mine was applying to a photography school in Berlin and said, "Why don't you apply with me? Maybe they'll take us both and we can go together."

I had thought of photographers being geeks until that point. Whenever I organized a high school party, the photographers would stand in the corner, wait for anyone to embarrass themselves, run out and take snapshots. I never liked photographers much; I always thought of them as voyeurs. But my friend applied for the school and I thought, "Why not? Maybe it will be cool." My attitude was that they were not likely to accept me anyway. The chances were one in twenty, and 800 people applied. They gave us certain assignments, and I fulfilled all of these assignments in the time they gave us. In the end they accepted me and not my friend.

You had a talent as a visual artist you never knew you had?

I was overwhelmed that they accepted me. Looking back, I don't think my pictures were any better than my friends. Yet for some reason, I was selected. I was flattered. I felt like, "Oh my god. Maybe this is something that I could be good at if I really try hard." My dad always said that I had a good eye. I didn't know what he meant by that, but he always felt I had a good sense for furniture and spaces and design; good taste.

Later you came to New York and assisted Annie Leibovitz. How did that come about, and what did you learn?

When I finished photography school I assisted a still life photographer in Frankfurt, and then I went on to work for a very famous photographer in Hamburg, who fired me after three months. I was completely overwhelmed by the situation. I had no idea that anyone could work that hard. The workload and responsibility was incredible. It was a combination of things that didn't work out. What I took away from that was since assisting is so much work for so little money, you need to work for someone you respect and would like to be like one day. My three favorite photographers at the time were Annie Leibovitz, Steven Meisel, and Irving Penn.



Kim Harris, 2003

I saved up \$2,000, moved to New York, and called them all up. Nothing happened. I ran out of money and had to return home and work for the handicapped man again. I came back a few months later after I had saved some money, and found a job working for free for a month for a still life photographer. He knew somebody who worked in Annie's studio, and things came together. I had sent so many applications and eventually somebody at Annie's told me to come by and introduce myself. And at the time, Annie had just fired somebody. The first assistant really liked me. He told Annie that he thought I would be a good assistant, so I started as a third assistant and worked for her for three years.

Did you become a second or first assistant later?

Yes. Shortly after I started the second assistant left, and not long after that the first assistant left. I was caught again in a situation where I was completely in over my head. That made for pretty tense work with Annie.

It was intense work as the first assistant?

Yeah, it was very intense. You learn so much working with Annie because she gives away so much responsibility. I was in charge of lighting for her. She's very peculiar about her lighting, but she's not very technical. She doesn't always know how to achieve what she wants, but she knows what she wants – which is the most important part. The issue was that sometimes I wasn't able to make her happy with it, and she would say,

"No I don't like this lighting." I tried very hard to please her, but wasn't always successful.

So you learned a lot from her. I heard she learned her lighting from her assistants.

Yeah, but my predecessors left so shortly after I started that I didn't have time to learn from them.

It was tough, but did you learn a lot?

I learned so much from her. I always say I would never have had the career that I had without having worked with her.

Did the contacts help parley into your first job?

No, I think contacts from working photographers are oftentimes overrated. Working with Annie, you're working with the kinds of magazines that would not be hiring you as a young photographer. No photographer gets their first job from Vanity Fair or advertising agencies. There might be an exception to it in the fashion world, but starting out as a photographer you start with business magazines and a smaller budget.

You were on your own, but her name didn't help in the beginning?

It helped me a little bit. People were always curious to hear what was occurring behind the scene at Annie's studio. It probably helped to get me more in-person interviews when they heard I worked with Annie Leibovitz. However, every photo editor is ultimately responsible for the pictures you deliver, and they don't want to show the editor-in-chief a mediocre photograph.

You had to have the work.

Yeah, you have to have the work.

Where did your fine art work ideas come from, such as the Twins and Female Body Builders? What was the motivation to do those series?

The female body builders came from an assistant of mine. He loved body building, though I couldn't say the same. He showed me a magazine one day and I came across these female body builders and I was just in shock. Why would a woman do something like that to themselves, to basically look more like a man? I went to a body building competition with my friend and spoke to some of the ladies. I saw that they were often mothers with kids and full time jobs. I felt very intrigued. I found the way they looked and their life stories interesting, so I spent five years finding these professional female body builders at all different competitions around the country.

Where did the idea for the twins come from?

The twins were an assignment for National Geographic. National Geographic did an issue on twins, and hired me to photograph them. When I first heard about the assignment I thought, "Oh my god, twins. Isn't that the oldest thing in photography?" But I don't say no to National

Geographic; they're a great magazine. They sent me to Twinsburg, Ohio, where they have a twin festival every year. When I took the first Polaroid's and put them side by side, the pull of two different people that looked so eerily similar made me I feel like, "Hmm, maybe this is something different." It was the idea of photographing twins separately and not together as one entity. I found it more and more fascinating. After the assignment was done, everybody seemed so intrigued by these twins, so I continued the work. I found two sets of twins where one of them had a sex change operation. I found identical quadruplets, which is extremely rare. Then I developed this whole thing into a book; that's how that book came about.

How rewarding do you find fine art work compared to commercial assignments?

I don't really think much about the terms fine art and artist and photographer. I see myself as a photographer. I think I'm more of a photographer than an artist, because I think the goal of a true artist should be to come up with an idea that's never been done before. That's my definition of an artist. I think there are very few photographers that I would call artists. I think most of them are just photographers. Well, not just photographers, but they don't fit the bill of artists. That's why there's not that much photography in museums.

Would you say the definitions are assignment-commercial, and then artist?

I think a lot of people take gratification from the fact that they consider themselves artists; it becomes a big part of their identity. I don't feel that need. I'm not ashamed of doing advertising work. I'm happy to see my work in museums and being sold in galleries. As a photographer, you just try to create the best work you can no matter what the assignment is.

What are the pros and cons of being so busy? Are there any cons to it?

I think what people underestimate is that the more assignments you have, the more crew you need. There's a responsibility you have for your employees. You find yourself in situations where you have to make a lot of money to keep this machine that you've built. I once heard, when I was working with Annie, that she had 50 or \$80,000 of overhead a month to clear just to break even. That was 20 years ago, too. You have to make a lot of money just to break even. You have to make even more to keep some for yourself. It does get easier, but not really. If someone is a one man operation, he gets to keep all the profits.

Is it hard to turn down work at that point?

I consider myself very fortunate that I have continuously had so much work. But it's often not the case that I have three jobs a week. As a photographer who's been around for a long time, you're a little bit taken for granted. People love your work, but that doesn't necessarily mean they give you work. You come with certain associations. For example, maybe you did an expensive shoot for somebody three years ago when magazines had more money. My fees are the same as everybody else's, but maybe I did a prop intense shoot. Now everybody thinks of you as



Lil' Kim in Pink Bikini, Miami, FL, 2002

being an expensive photographer. Also, people like to discover new people. They don't necessarily want to hire somebody who works for the competition.

So there's never a point where you can coast along – though Annie kind of has that, with her contracts. But that's very rare.

It's very rare, yeah. Those contracts can always expire at the end of a year. There are no guarantees in photography. I always tell young photographers, "Don't think you have a Vanity Fair cover and you're done; you're only as good as your last photograph." You can take ten great pictures and people will say you're good. However, that's what they expect from you. If you take two or three bad pictures, people remember those more than they remember the good ones.

Are you thinking about any personal fine art projects right now?

I had one project that I put on hold. I have a five-year-old at home, and I have a hard time leaving him for a long time. But maybe this coming year I might go and visit another indigenous group – hopefully for National Geographic – and put that together as a book one day.

What country would you visit?

We'll see. Probably the Amazon again. Or Brazil again. But we'll see.

What kind of equipment do you use in terms of cameras and lighting?

I still shoot all my close-ups on film with an RZ, 6×7 and 140, on Portra 800.

So film still gives you something you prefer.

Yeah. I also have a Phase One camera. I used to shoot everything on film until about three years ago. My favorite camera of all time must be the Fuji 6×9, with the 90mm lens.

Why is that?

Because it's super sharp, super light, you get a huge negative. It's a rangefinder camera. It's like an oversize Leica. I find it easy to focus. I just always loved that camera. I have five of them. I used to use them exclusively for all horizontal pictures. I used a RZ for verticals and Fuji 6×9 for horizontals.

Why do you have five?

I would take three on the road, but some would be broken. I have one in repair, one that I thought needed replacing, and then I gave one to my assistant when he left. I probably bought more like seven or eight.

Do you shoot digitally too?

Yeah, now I switched over to digital. I always preached analog photography because I felt that the skin tones are better with film; it's more forgiving and it's more natural looking; more three dimensional if you photograph on film. My former assistant talked me into trying these digital cameras, and we tried a bunch of them. I came across the Phase One – back then it was a Mamiya with the Phase One back – and I have to say that it was the first time I felt that the skin tones actually looked really good.

How long ago was that?

About three years ago.

So you use digital for medium format – you don't do 35mm?

I have a digital Nikon, but I rarely ever use it. I use it if I have to photograph anything high speed like running or jumping; things where you have to be able to shoot ten frames a second. Normally I shoot with the IQ280 film back of 80 megapixels. It's a big pain in the ass sometimes. But when the camera works and everything works, it's like shooting 4×5 almost.

Did you shoot 4×5 ever?

No, but I shot 8×10 a lot. All the body builders I shot on 8×10. That's why the project was so expensive.

What company do you use for lighting, and what specific lights do you

use? I know you use Kino's.

I use the Kino Flo's for my close-up. For strobe I use the Profoto Acute's. They're more lightweight and easier to travel with. But ultimately anything that flashes is fine by me.

Have you tried the Profoto monolights, the D1s?

No, I never tried those. I'm always worried that my lights might fall over.

How do you like living in the U.S. versus Germany? What do you like or not like about the U.S., and what do you miss about Germany?

Whenever I'm here I praise Germany, and the equality in Germany. The whole infrastructure works: 80% of people are in a union, everybody has health insurance, the economy is doing fantastic, you can go anywhere by train, the highways are better, and the discrepancy between rich and poor is not as drastic, and we don't have any wars. Living in New York City, I sometimes feel like I'm living in a third world country. There are deep potholes in the middle of New York. And when you go to Queens there's so much garbage on the road. I think, overall, that the European system is better than the American system; it's fairer. But whenever I'm in Germany I want to come back to the United States because I miss the feeling of optimism and humor. Germans love to complain. It's a little heavier and slower. It takes a half a day to fill out paperwork to rent equipment in Germany. It lacks the quickness and lightness of living in the States and the spontaneity that comes with it.

Are you a citizen now?

No, I still only have a green card. Germans don't like dual citizenship.

Why not?

So many foreigners have abused the social system there. Someone will come to Germany, become a German citizen, and not work, yet collect the benefits. At some point they cost the German society so much money that the government has told them they have to decide on one country or the other.

A lot of people assume that you're friends with celebrities when you shoot them. But it's rare that you are great friends with the subjects, correct?

Except for George Clooney. I can call him up any time. No, I'm just kidding. I don't know where people get that idea. They don't call me to photograph them; it doesn't work that way. Every single picture in my book is an assignment for a magazine. I couldn't get any of these people on the phone, except for a few instances which I call the publicist and explain why I need to talk to the subject.

You are probably asked, "Are you friends with so and so..? Do you hang out with..."

Yeah. I don't even want to hang out with them, because they're just like everybody else. Just because they're famous doesn't mean I have anything in common with them. I'm not friends with them, and I don't see the need to be.



Betty Pariso, 2003