

Patrick Joust picks 20 of his favorite photographs from his life in Baltimore



If I ask you to characterize your life as a photographer with one word what would it be? Why?

I'm not very good at these kinds of questions. I can't characterize what I do in one word, but considering it's also difficult to do with many words, I'll give it a try. "Absorbing" partly describes what photography has been for me through the years. I started taking pictures mostly as a hobby. I never expected it to be such a big and fulfilling part of my life. It's become a way of looking at the world that goes beyond just taking pretty pictures. So basically I'm saying my life as a photographer is similar to being a sponge :)

I read on your tumblr that you are a librarian. Tell us about a book which changed your life. Have you read any interesting book lately?

The Brothers Karamazov is my favorite book. I read it, the first time, shortly after college and after quitting law school. It was the perfect book at the time. Trying to figure myself

out, it helped me concentrate on the things that mattered most. It's almost like a laboratory for determining how a person's life can be spent. The book helped me with some of the conundrums that used to dominate my thinking.

This was a couple years ago now, but I read Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow* and have recommended it to a lot of people. I think she does an amazing job of detailing the history of racism in the United States and how our "justice" system works as a vehicle for oppression. If you want to understand a crucial aspect of what the United States is all about, you should read it.

You are occasional pontificator. Tell us a little bit about it. Do you believe in God?

Ha! Well, I kind of put that on my tumblr as a joke. Occasionally I post things about policy topics and other things that interest me other than photography, particularly issues relating to education, class, and civil rights. I don't know how interesting those posts are to people, but no one has complained. They're pretty rare anyway. You might not know it from the general long-windedness of my answers here, but I generally like to err on the side of saying/writing too little than too much.

I don't believe in God. I was raised Catholic and my family went to church pretty regularly (I was even an altar boy for several years), but even as a kid, I had a problem with faith. I used to ask God to move an object in my room or some other task so that he/she/it could prove their existence. For a very short time I even thought about becoming a priest, hoping that, in the training, you'd be shown some definitive proof. Obviously that's not how things work and today, if someone were able to prove the existence of a Judeo-Christian God, I don't think I'd be that interested, though I might be scared. He seems like a pretty moody fellow.

To me the universe is too interesting to shrink things down to one set of mythological beliefs. Even the more abstract "deist" version of god doesn't interest me. I used to delve more into religion and its flaws when I was younger and angrier but now I'm just grateful that I don't have to think about it much. Sunday is just another day that I can spend with people I love and doing the things I love. I don't begrudge others for believing, as long as they don't try and convert me. If someone's faith actually helps them to do good practical things, in *this* world, for themselves and the people around them, then that's great. While I'm an atheist, I don't believe in being part of an anti-religion religion. Some people seem to need that kind of certainty and structure in their lives. I'm just glad I'm not one of them.

What makes Baltimore interesting for a photographer?

Baltimore is a special place for me because it's where my interest in photography started. Because it's a city, with people in it, it's automatically interesting, as far as I'm concerned, but it has become home for me. It can sometimes feel provincial and I get frustrated by

many of its seemingly interminable problems, but whenever I leave for a trip, I always look forward to coming back. It clearly has a draw for visitors too, beyond the standard tourist spots. I think *The Wire* has done a lot for people who are interested in the city. Obviously that series centered on many of Baltimore's (and America's) problems, but it also offered insight into the rich culture of the city.



One of your favorite directors is Luis Bunuel. How did you discover Bunuel's filmography? Tell us a little bit about how Bunuel influence your work

I came across Bunuel's work through my best friend in high school. We enjoyed watching "weird" movies and checked out *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* one night. I remember being kind of blown away by it. It had fun with social conventions, it was strange, and I kept thinking about it long after it was over. I've since seen just about all of Bunuel's movies. I haven't revisited them in a while though. I'm not sure how direct his influence has been on me, but his work has had a major impact on my worldview and since photography is such a big part of my life, it must be in there somewhere.

Make a top5 of your favorite movies

This list is always changing, but here are five off the top of my head

The Conversation

Alphaville

E.T.

Days of Heaven

Night of the Hunter

TV hit «The Wire» explored the bad side of Baltimore (drugs, corruption etc.)

After the end of «The Wire» I read an article in Guardian about the two sides of Baltimore. The complaint of the writer was that The Wire has no references to the good side of the city. Did you watch The Wire? Tell us more about the good and the bad side of the city.

I'm a big fan of *The Wire* and just about anything David Simon puts his hands on. I haven't read that Guardian article, but one of the things I like about *The Wire* is that it is multi-sided. It's a series that provides depth and perspective in a way I haven't seen before. I also thought that *Treme* and *Generation Kill* were excellent. I feel like *The Wire* has plenty of nuance and that anyone watching it will realize that there are good aspects of life in Baltimore. The series does enough by humanizing individuals who would normally be dismissed as "thugs" without romanticizing or fetishizing violence, so common to most crime series.

The city has plenty of good going on. It's so good, in fact, that there are only a few other cities in the US that I'd consider living in. I wish you could get a decent burrito here and that mass transit were better, but for me, it's a great place to live. The problem is that it's not so great for everyone who lives here. However, the issues of urban poverty are not unique to Baltimore and are found in every part of the U.S. Some cities get more attention for their problems because they're less able to tuck those problems away. When you look at the economic success in the U.S. over the last 20 years or so, only a small amount of it has helped the poor or middle class. We've made rich people richer and that's about all we have to show for it. I think shows like *The Wire* and *Treme* do an amazing job of shedding light on larger national problems through the experiences of individuals with their own unique history and culture. We need more of that kind of storytelling.

Tell us more about your work as a volunteer for an Aids organization. What is the most vibrant memory from that period?

What brought me to Baltimore originally was to work with children and adults for an organization that provides housing and services to victims of AIDS/HIV. I mostly worked as a tutor for the kids and as a tech trainer for adults. It was a very positive experience for

me. One of my greatest memories was working with a young man named Joseph who, in 6th grade, really couldn't read and had been held back in school. He was a bright and interesting kid, but he suffered from a lack of confidence when it came to reading and writing. I worked with him for months and his reading improved to the point that he could help his younger sister with her homework. I don't know if I can take much credit for his success, but I tried as best I could to take the pressure off and make reading approachable and interesting. In many ways things just clicked for him, but it was great to be involved in work where the outcome was tangible. He went on to complete high school and later join the military.

One of the challenges of the outsider coming into the big city to solve "other people's problems" is the naiveté he/she can bring with them. The word "ghetto" is not very politically correct anymore, but I think of the term more broadly in that there are the inner city "ghettos" that everyone thinks they know, but there is also the suburban privilege and largely white "ghetto" that is taken for granted because it's a perspective that's been made mainstream in the U.S. It's this narrow suburban perspective that we see most on television and other media. Most who come from that kind of background don't think of themselves as ghettoized. That's part of the problem. Their experiences often lead to a narrow and insular worldview that makes it difficult to empathize with people of other backgrounds in a thoughtful and non-condescending way. Going into that kind of work, I might have had a slight advantage in knowing that my point of view was limited. I knew I didn't really know very much. I try to remember that every day. I still made a lot of mistakes, but being able to step back, listen and learn from others whose experiences were so different from my own was immensely valuable. I certainly got a lot out of it. I hope that I gave back more than I took.



How did your baby change your life?

Having a child has been an amazing experience. I guess all or most parents say the same thing. It's hard to describe without dropping a lot of clichés. He was a very abstract idea to me until I actually saw him emerge into the world. I certainly had a great life before he was around but it's hard to imagine being without him now.

What is your opinion about the mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake? She promised better schools, safer streets and stronger neighborhoods. Does she keep her promises?

hmmm... I guess I can't say too many bad things since she's technically my boss. I will say that I don't think any mayor in America can make these kinds of grand promises and succeed. Many of these issues are beyond her control. You can make small statistical advances that are often meaningless, but without strong national attention, Baltimore can't shed the poverty, crime and drug problems that persist here. We can't gentrify enough to solve these problems. That's not a popular view. People don't want to think about large national programs and policies to improve life in our cities, but that's what we need to do. If you look at our wealthiest cities, problems with education, poverty, unemployment, etc. still persist. Minorities bear the brunt of these problems. We need to make an honest national assessment of ourselves. It's lazy thinking to point to cities like Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland or wherever and just say it's their responsibility alone to fix "their problems."

Another issue with politics on this level is that there are very few people who are willing to get involved. It's hard to get enough people in this city to vote let alone get engaged. I don't know anyone who wants to run for local office. It's not the kind of job that's looked upon with esteem. There are many individuals who could make great mayors, but they are not going to run for office. Many can make more money doing something else or they don't have the stomach for it or their views are considered too "liberal" or "progressive" to succeed as mainstream candidates. It's a dirty job, with so much money involved. Even if candidates are not involved in corruption in a strictly legal sense, we all know that the massive amount of money in politics has made the entire process rotten. It's hard to imagine keeping yourself clean in those circumstances. This is a serious problem, and a hard one to get around. I myself often feel hopeless about the political situation because so little attention is actually given to the problems I think are important. Poverty, for instance, is simply not part of our national conversation.

It's easy to just sit back and disengage from this messy business, but if we continue to function this way, these positions are going to be left only to those few who have the (not always laudable) desire to fill them. If we want candidates with good intentions and a more democratic society, we all have to get involved. The tough thing is figuring out how, without just stepping into an echo chamber.



What makes a photographer a good photographer?

Another tough one. It's very subjective. There is a lot of photography out there that I don't like. Only a small fraction of it grabs me. It's important for a photographer to be able to let their work speak for itself. I think a good photographer needs to be motivated to shoot and be open minded.

Tell us a little bit about the most interesting person you have photographed

Well it might be corny to say so, but my son is probably the most interesting person I've photographed. I've never photographed anyone else as much. It's been very interesting to see how he looks and expresses himself in pictures. Hopefully he won't grow too tired of my picture taking as he gets older.

I like so much the cover of your latest book "Still" Could you tell us more about the background of photography?

Thank you! Photography is something I picked up later than most I know. I didn't take it seriously until after college, when I first moved to Baltimore. I haven't had the chance to take any classes, but I've had a lot of help from friends and online sources over the years. My interest in night photography came even later.

What did you learn about life as a photographer?

I've gone into some of this already. I've posted this quote from James Nachtwey before and I think it really sums up, better than I can, my feelings about what photography has done for me:

I also had to learn in taking pictures how to develop a personal vision; how to express my own feelings about it, and in order to do that, I had to get in touch with my own feelings and...through photography, through the discipline of the frame, I learned about the world, it became the way I discovered the world, and it also became the way in which I discovered myself.

Make a question to yourself (Answer it if you want!)

I think I've written too much already ;)

