

Portrait Photography

WHAT DO YOU PHOTOGRAPH
WHEN YOU SHOOT A PORTRAIT?

Two aspects of our competence as portrait photographers tend to develop in parallel:

- * the ease of establishing harmonious relationships with those we portray
- * the ability to focus on a nuance of their state of mind

These skills need to be cultivated and have little to do with our technical proficiency. And then there are other skills that contribute to the success of a portrait, such as managing our attention or the ability to maintain a calm mind, feeling present and being able to focus even when shooting in stressful situations. These aspects are not discussed in instruction booklets or technical tutorials, yet they are crucial for a photographer.

«For me, a portrait is something from which you feel the person, their inner quality, what it is that makes them who they are»

Herb Ritts

«The best thing about a picture is that it never changes, even when the people in it do»

Andy Warhol

In the next few pages, we will explore together some of the less talked about topics around portrait photography and ask ourselves some simple questions that might seem obvious but... perhaps are not entirely so. For example: what do we photograph when we take a portrait?

«In a portrait, I'm looking for the silence in somebody»

Henri Cartier-Bresson

«A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion»

Richard Avedon

«A portrait is never the person. What is captured, I think, is your relationship with the person»

Peter Lindbergh

«A good portrait ought to tell something of the subject's past and suggest something of his future»

Bill Brandt



Hello, my name is Enzo Dal Verme.

I am an Italian photographer specializing in portraits. You might have seen some of my images online or in magazines, such as Vanity Fair, l'Uomo Vogue, The Times, Marie Claire, Grazia, GQ, Elle...

Since 2011, I have been teaching my successful portrait workshops and retreats, where I share the approach that allows me to photograph celebrities in minutes and take the portraits I am known for.

In this guide, I want to share some of the things I consider important when photographing. Don't expect rules or anything technical. In my opinion, the act of photography needs sensitivity and interpersonal skills more than rules.

Of course, technique is essential, but it is only a medium that allows us to speak the language of photography. To be clear, it's a bit like grammar for a writer: by itself, it's not enough to write a novel.

A portrait arises from the consensual encounter between photographer and subject. It is a testimony, capturing one or more facets of the person being photographed, showing a state of mind, highlighting a more or less explicit characteristic.

The photographer frames according to their preferences and focuses on the aspect that interests them the most. Usually, it is always something different; in fact, portraits of the same subject taken by different photographers are unlikely to look alike.

«The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera»

Dorothea Lange

Getting to know yourself better by photographing others

«We don't see things as they are we see them as we are»

Anais Nin

One of the wonderful things about being a portrait photographer is that we have the opportunity to meet and get to know so many interesting people and also to realize how we respond to different stimuli. So, in addition to the privilege of discovering something about another human being every time we take a portrait, we also have the opportunity to learn more about ourselves.

It is not only the subjects of
our portraits who need to
be listened to and
understood while we shoot.
We can learn to listen to
ourselves as well.

When we ask ourselves, "How am I feeling right now? What is getting me excited?
What is making me feel challenged or disturbed?" we become more aware of our
limitations – the first step in overcoming them.



While it is true that observing a portrait can touch, excite and make the viewer participate, it's equally true that shooting it can be a profoundly intense experience. Indeed, the people we photograph have the power to evoke in us passions, fears, curiosity, insecurities and more. The quality of the relationship we are able to establish with them is always a bit of an unknown and is decisive for the result we get.

When photographing, it is important to intuit what the situation needs. It's a matter of calibrating our manners to develop a good understanding with our subjects, reassuring them and making them feel comfortable.

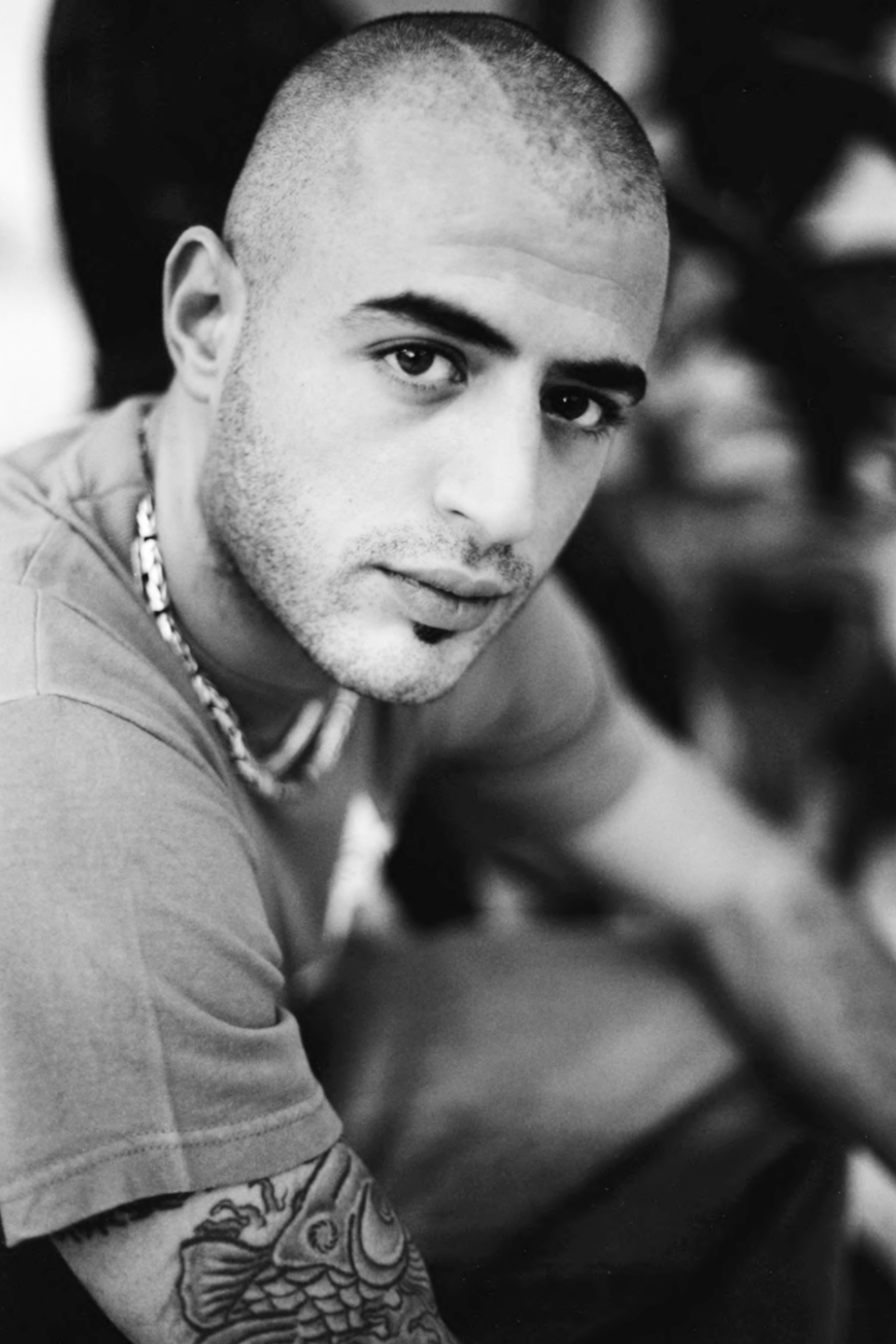
This is not always easy, partly because the behaviors of the people we photograph are not necessarily predictable. A camera pointed at them rarely leaves them indifferent.

There are those who love to show off and exaggerate their exuberance, or those who, in front of the lens, prefer to hide, and to make a breach in their inexpressiveness, we have to sweat our guts out. There are those who want to tell us how to photograph them, those we feel tenderness for and those we really can't stand... Each time is different, and each time we have to deal not only with the peculiarities of our subject but also with what they stimulate in us. And this is a really important aspect. If, for example, we feel embarrassed, our ability to photograph will also be affected. Not to mention when we get performance anxiety or are so busy handling difficult people that we can't focus enough on everything else.

Fortunately, we also sometimes meet extraordinary people whom we admire and are overjoyed to photograph. But... how did I miss that red spot? Ah, I felt so happy taking those portraits that I forgot to check the background!

Gregory Robert and Françoise Sturdza fotografati per l'Uomo Vogue © enzo dal verme





Lorenzo fotografato per Gioia @ enzo dal verme

The portrait you take
will help define
others' perceptions
of the photographed subject.

What a responsibility, right?
Your image is a testimony and will connect the curiosity of the
viewer to a feeling, a state of mind, and not just a past moment.
So, how do you create good harmony on set
and shoot impactful portraits?

1

Prepare. If you have to photograph someone and you feel some uncertainty, prepare yourself with a few test shots. During the preliminary photos, you can allow yourself to make all the mistakes in the world. Experiment with new shots, and find the best light that – then – you will use more casually.

2

Convey confidence. Would you trust an indecisive, unsure or hesitant photographer? You would probably be more inclined to let someone photograph you who knows how to put you at ease and convey confidence. For photographers, however, this is not always easy; it's a skill that is acquired over time and also cultivated by getting used to directing with polite firmness the subjects with whom you feel most comfortable. At the same time, there is no need to pretend to be perfectly confident when you are not. Rather, it helps to be aware of one's own insecurities and try to identify the action best suited to the limitations of the situation.

3

Make yourself understood. It is important to keep the focus on the quality of your relationship with the subject and to choose a way of expressing yourself that can be easily understood by the person in front of you. Try to put yourself in their shoes: how would you like to be addressed?

4

Take action without explaining. If you notice that your subject is nervous, impatient or doesn't trust you too much, don't waste time explaining that you are taking care of every detail: show it. After you fix a crease in their shirt or suggest they raise their chin a little, your smile expressing "that's better" will be more effective than many words.

5

Indulge (or not). If your subject insists on being photographed in a way you know is not appropriate, you may feel like saying it's not a good idea. We are the photographers – we know that! But, how would that person feel? Perhaps devalued, not taken into consideration, and as a result, they might shut down. Sometimes it's preferable to go along with it and say, "Good idea!", shoot as they suggested, and afterward propose a variation. This encourages harmony. Of course, if requests keep coming, it's essential to make it clear with gentle firmness that it is the photographer who decides. Are you able to find the most appropriate ways and words? When in doubt, your mantra should be: respond, don't react.

6

Develop your style. Technique can be learned, but technique alone is useless. Your personal style and photographic language also need to develop. And there are several techniques to train creativity. It takes time; be patient.

7

Respect the subject. The moments when you shoot can be incredibly intimate because the subject reveals something of themselves. Perhaps the only thing shown is the way they don't want to reveal themselves, the way they're defending themselves from the photographer's gaze. Or they open up and give a glimpse of a state of mind that they may not show to just anyone, but only if they feel comfortable. In those cases, let's appreciate the opportunity to photograph an aspect – perhaps just a very small one – of the depth of the person we have in front of us, and let's take responsibility for not betraying their trust.

When photographing, we have the power to assign more or less importance to certain details, to highlight or hide them. It is a privilege we must not abuse.

If you press the shutter button a little earlier or a little later, or if you frame from below instead of above, the result may be markedly different. Will the person you are photographing be happy with the image that represents them?

Marina Abramovic fotografata per Vanity Fair © enzo dal verme



8

Invite a state of mind. To encourage the manifestation of a certain quality in our subjects, it helps if we ourselves feel it. Do we want to photograph calmness in a person? Then it's best if we feel calm. Laughter? We know it's contagious, kind of like yawning. So is everything else. Also, tune in – at least a little – to the state of mind you'd like to capture, and you'll invite it onto the set.

9

Consider the whole and the details. When shooting, it helps to have the habit of perceiving the image's overall impact at a glance and, simultaneously, checking all the details while avoiding letting any single detail absorb too much of our attention. Basically, it's about having an overview with attention to detail. Lights, camera settings, subject position, clothes, hair, expression – these are all "ingredients" of our portrait. What do we tend to forget? The relationship with the subject, of course. We can monitor it just like everything else. For example, there's an element in the background that might be distracting, and the person I'm photographing is a bit obnoxious: I have to be careful that both things don't ruin the photo.

10

Monitor. Ask yourself, "Is there anything I could say or do to improve the quality of the relationship between me and the subject? What kind of attitude do I have right now?" Perhaps there is something you can change about your attitude?

11

Is the subject impatient? A recurring discomfort is the fear that the person we are photographing is getting impatient, which can push us to do everything in a hurry and forget something. More often than not, the photographer's fear is greater than the subject's (supposed) impatience. If we dig a little, perhaps something else will emerge; for example, that the photographer feels insecure about their ability to frame. By improving that aspect, magically, the subjects also become less impatient! See how this works? And if, on the other hand, it really is the subject who is impatient, let's remember that our patience can be contagious.

Composing. When it comes to composing an image, first look for harmony in the overall scene and only then check the details. Trying to adhere to the rules of composition may prove to be a distraction that gets in the way between you and your subject. Rather, look at your subject from multiple vantage points and trust your glance.

12

13

Destabilize. If your subject is not so natural, try saying something destabilizing and unexpected, something that makes you laugh or worry: "What is this stink?". A moment of disorientation can work wonders on an expression.

Play with contrasts. Perhaps some people expect a tattooed boxing coach to think only of throwing punches, however, if we photograph him with his son, we show another side of him, a tenderness at odds with stereotypes. Even tattoos in front of an antique brocade tapestry disorient a little because one might perhaps expect wire mesh or suburbia. In your portraits, show what is not obvious.

Claude , serie Pugili Procreatori © enzo dal verme



15

Listen to your own inspiration. Trust the immediacy of your intuition. Try to take the pictures you feel the desire to take, not the ones you think others would like to see. Forget the likes on social media and the judgments that might come. Just listen to your inspiration. It may take years of trial and error. So what?

Be curious. Almost always, we look without really seeing. We are in front of a flower, and our brain tells us "it's a flower" because we have learned and cataloged it, and we move on. "Flower" has become a concept; little remains of direct experience. A small child, on the other hand, is fascinated. They look at it, smell it, touch it, put it in their mouth – they are curious as hell, don't know what it is and want to experience it. Children are not racist; they learn that later from adults. Their fresh and curious view of the world is an example for any photographer who wants to learn to observe without too many filters and prejudices, that is, without associating the present experience so much with other past experiences.

16

17

Learn the technique. Study the instruction booklet, watch tutorials, rehearse. Learn the technique so you can forget it and focus your attention on everything else.

18

Learn from your own experience. After a day of shooting, make notes on your reflections, doubts and emotions, or talk to someone about them. Describing in detail how you feel will help you focus, even what is only a vague feeling. Explain it in a way that even an outsider can understand. If a stranger can understand it, you will understand it better yourself and perhaps discover that it is something different from what you first thought.



Vera, serie Halos © enzo dal verme

19

Manage your attention.

Especially when shooting in stressful situations, it's important to have a calm mind and be able to focus and evaluate every detail. To learn how to manage one's attention, some photographers meditate. Others practice in different ways. Find what works best for you and... learn to appreciate empty spaces and silence.

When is the next Portrait Photography Retreat?

[Click here](#) to read the program, articles and comments from those who have already participated.

The relationship with subjects

Every time we take pictures, we can learn a lot, and with experience, our ability to interact also improves. We could consider so many aspects, but the points listed so far are already a good start to establishing smooth interactions during shots. Not to forget everything else, of course. For example, it is useful to minimize the opportunity for distractions on the set. It helps to inquire about the tastes and habits of those we are to photograph, and it can help to decide in advance what style you want to use to photograph the subject.

Clearly, our amiable disposition is not enough to ensure that subjects never give us a hard time. However, we can do our part and try to set the stage for a harmonious relationship and for interesting portraits to emerge.

By the way: are you clear in your mind about what impact you want your photographs to have? What would you like to see happen as a result of your shots? What changes might occur? After all, the results can be very different if you are photographing with the intention of taking a good picture or creating positive memories. Your motivation will have an impact on the quality of your work, your experience and – probably – even the experience of those you photograph.

While photographing, it is important to be able to perceive the other person, to know how they feel, what they need, and – as a result – also to know how to say or do the right thing at the right time to create an atmosphere in which it's easy to open up and bring forth an interesting portrait. What's next? What do we want to focus our lens on?

The person we are framing is a highly complex being. They are an organism and a consciousness with a history, a social life, an education, many experiences, traumas, good and bad memories, dreams and affections that invariably include sorrows. They have clothes, perhaps means of transportation, houses, romantic relationships, emotions, instincts and a culture. They may have a spiritual life.

What do we photograph when shooting a portrait?

Like everyone else, they have known joys and difficulties, have preferences, fears, beliefs, perhaps ideals, and a whole set of limitations with which they identify and which can be quantified and measured: money, power, social position, career, health.

They have a body and a face that may or may not match the beauty standards of the place where they live, simplify their life or be a source of pain. Whether they are at peace with themselves or not depends much on the childhood and experiences they have had. Of course, the color of their skin, their social class, their sexual orientation and the way these things are accepted or not by the community in which they live also have a profound bearing because they help define them.



Marina, serie Bald Is Beautiful @ enzo dal verme

Then there are a number of things that cannot be seen, but play an essential role in determining how our subject feels: the idea they have of themselves, the idea of how others see them and how they would like to be perceived, the idea of what is possible and what is not, how they should be to feel happier or to make others happy, the idea of what will happen if they fail to achieve their goals, the idea of what capabilities they have or don't have, what is right and what is wrong...

And we, faced with all this complexity, wield our cameras to take a portrait that represents our subject. Are we temerarious?

It seems unbelievable that striking photographs capable of moving an audience are, after all, nothing but two-dimensional surfaces with a few spots of color. In fact, sometimes only black and white. Yet they are, and looking at those images, we have the impression that we are observing some nuance of the subject's world.

So, to return to the original question, what do we photograph when we take a portrait? We photograph what the subject lets us see, observed from our point of view. It is difficult to say whether the reality of the subject or the photographer's gaze will prevail in the final image. Let's say that in that portrait, there is an instant of our relationship, so the photograph may reflect the mood of the subject and also that of the photographer.

In any case, those observing the photo will not necessarily see either; they will see their own interpretation.

«The picture is not made by the photographer, the picture is more good or less good in function of the relationship that you have with the people you photograph»

Sebastiao Salgado

«If I create anything, I create the atmosphere of trust and openness»

Sante D'Orazio

David, serie Portraits In Silence © enzo dal verme



«There is no truth in photography. There is no truth about anyone's person. My portraits are much more about me than they are about the people I photograph. I used to think that it was a collaboration, that it was something that happened as a result of what the subject wanted to project and what the photographer wanted to photograph. I no longer think it is that at all»

Richard Avedon

«Contrary to common belief, it is impossible to make a representative photograph of someone. A human in all its complexity cannot be represented by a single image. This is absolutely naive and misleading. You can photograph what appears in a magic space you have to create between sitter and photographer»

Peter Lindbergh

As for myself, when I start shooting, my subjects often try to entice my lens to look pretty, interesting, special, sexy... In short, they want to show me an idealized part of themselves; they try to be photographed as they would like others to see them. It happens that they perform real pieces of bravura: comedies, dramas, pantomimes and other genres. Other times, it's something so well disguised as to be unnoticeable.

I indulge them. It is important to give space to their need to show what they think is their best side. And in what they show me, it's almost always implied what they are hiding.

I simply remain open and vulnerable to invite the same in them. If I notice that they insist on showing me only a social mask, I try to identify the right moment to create a distraction, to say or do something a little destabilizing. It is my way, one of my ways, to break through the idealized image they are presenting to me. If I succeed, I'll see what's down there and take a portrait that shows something more intimate.

Usually, when the subject relaxes a little, they let me perceive what they were trying to hide. For example, an insecurity or something about themselves that they considered best not to show. I like to go even deeper, though, and when I catch even a glimpse of that silence beneath the layers of what a person wants or doesn't want me to see, I shoot again.

«I like to photograph anyone before they know what their best angles are»

Ellen Von Unwerth

Photographing silence

I am not always successful in my intent, and so I don't insist and just photograph what is there. Still, it is interesting to focus on a slight shyness, a hesitation, a bit of tenderness or a special determination. Or, more simply, a moment of understanding between me and the subject.

Other times, I manage to photograph a transparent, open expression from which attempts to appear a certain way seem to have evaporated. In those cases, I feel a great privilege.

Bibi, fotografata per Flair © enzo dal verme





What I am looking for is an expression that is as transparent as possible, no more than the subject is willing or able to show.

If I can photograph a nuance of my subject's inner silence – that silence that lies beneath the noise of our thoughts – then those who look at the picture will have a chance to perceive it. And everyone will interpret the image from their own unique and personal point of view: some will like that silence immensely, others will find it frightening, and still others will not see it...

In these pages, I have given you a taste of my approach to photography. Now, however, I want to introduce you to some photographers who have studied with me at the portrait photography workshops and retreats I have been teaching since 2011.

As you may have guessed, in my classes, we talk little about technique and a lot about how to improve one's ability to interact with subjects, compose photos quickly and intuitively, and stay sharply focused while shooting. The atmosphere is relaxed and informal – there is plenty of laughter, and it is an opportunity to put aside competitiveness and appreciate the company of creative people who share the same passion. Professional photographers, amateur photographers and photography students participate, each at their own level.

It's an intense and fun retreat that for many has been a turning point in the way they photograph. If you are curious, you can read about the program [on the website](#).

In the following pages, you will find interviews and photos of some of my students. Each used what they learned in a different, unique and personal way.





Rubina © uta theile

After one of my first workshops, a photographer who had attended told me in a solemn tone, "Thanks to your classes, I finally understood the difference between a photo of a person and a portrait."

I didn't remember making this distinction while teaching and asked her, "Explain to me, what is it?"

Her answer: *«A portrait gives me a sense of something intimate about the person, not just their outward appearance.»*

Bingo. She could not have expressed it better. Since that day, I often quote her when I teach.

That photographer's name is Uta Theile. She now has a studio and photographs private portraits. I asked her to share something about the way she photographs.

Uta Theile



«When I take a portrait, I try to capture something intimate about the person I am photographing and, first, create a safe space in which she can feel comfortable and be herself.

It pleases me to make the women I photograph feel beautiful and to give them the opportunity to see themselves through my photographs in a way they may not have seen before.

Women's portraiture for me is a mission of empowerment – I love revealing the feminine beauty and uniqueness hidden in each person. By showing them what I see, I try to connect them with their inner self, enhance them and stimulate confidence and self-love.

“ *Shooting portraits means knowing how to leave your comfort zone once in a while. For the subjects and also for me.* ”



Every photo shoot is a new challenge, a journey out of our comfort zone, a discovery. When you give people a chance to be seen and appreciated, to feel at ease and discover a new view of themselves, they gain more confidence and awareness. Then the magic happens, the revelation: it's often a transformative experience.

Participating in the portrait workshop with Enzo was fundamental in my journey as a portrait photographer. It was there that I understood the key to creating my portraits.

A good portrait is never something purely aesthetic, but rather a narrative, a story that describes the subject. To make it, it is not enough to know how to creatively use the camera and light; you must have the ability to connect with the people being portrayed and make them feel at ease. The most beautiful shots come from the relationship between photographer and subject. And every person I photograph has a story that teaches me something.

Mirko has participated in some of my portrait workshops and is one of the few students I have seen grow up with a very definite path in art photography.

«Photography,» he tells me, «can never tell the truth, but only certify that at the moment of the shot, the subject was in front of the camera. The rest is in the head of the photographer.»

In fact, Mirko doesn't seem to want to represent reality, but rather to express his inner world, and from portraits he then moved on to self-portraiture. He has a unique and unmistakable approach and very clear ideas about his relationship with photography.

Mirko Bonfanti

self portrait © mirko bonfanti



I consider portraiture one of the most complex genres to deal with because it requires not only technical skills, but above all, great sensitivity, empathy and a propensity to relate freely to others.

I like to go in search of details that function as a clue, so that the photograph doesn't quickly exhaust its visual charge, but forces the viewer to stop and think about it. In people, I am interested in the more intimate aspects beyond the surface, the fragility, dreams and weaknesses.

Over the years, my relationship with portraiture changed when I turned the camera toward myself and became interested in self-portraiture. From that moment on, it became a priority.

The unique short-circuit between operator, spectrum and spectator (i.e., photographer, subject and viewer of the image) has meant that this kind of practice has become increasingly present in my artistic production.

My inspirations come mainly from the history of photography. I have always been fascinated by the symbolism and introspection in the images of Francesca Woodman, the relationship between man and nature in the representations of Arno Rafael Minkinen, and the play of the body as a visual perspective by Bill Brandt.

Photography, with its two-dimensional reproduction, stops its ride on the surface, but, paradoxically, has the ability to make the (predisposed) observer continue on their personal journey within the image, to dig in, to go deep. The photographer should simply invite, without giving definitive answers.

Therefore, in my opinion, a photograph works when it also speaks about the photographer, when it reveals something unexpected, but still manages to maintain a veil of mystery for the viewer to unravel. A portrait also works when it achieves, as Nadar said, a certain 'intimate likeness' of the subject.





Justine + Marco © giulia iannace

Giulia decided to become a photographer right after one of my workshops. What a responsibility for me! And what satisfaction. Her photos have a freshness all of their own. She sees what others cannot see and frames in ways that others would not even think of. Five years ago, she moved to Sydney, where she specializes in portraying lovers. Her photos have something cinematic about them... she can turn even a doormat into a romantic and poetic love story. That's not for everyone.

I asked her what she remembers about our first workshop together: *«The things I always keep are the first things you taught us, and that is to somehow establish a connection with the subject we portray. Even if we only have two minutes to do that.»*

And then? What does Giulia photograph when she takes a portrait? *«I am drawn to the hands, the signs of time and lived experiences. The dreams I see in others and their lives.*

Giulia Iannace

When I take a portrait, it is as if I am living another life, another story. The intimacy, confidence and emotions that people share in an instant make me smile, move me or give me goosebumps at times.

I am drawn to natural expressions, gestures, a light that brings out a hidden detail of the person. I like the laughter, the breaths, the eyes. I like to see human beings become one with the earthly elements or a light or a specific background.

I have learned that when one is able to give of oneself a little bit, there is a chance that other people will do so as well, and thus connections are made. This is true in different areas of life, including when I take pictures. Feeling comfortable and making others feel comfortable has helped to create a safe environment where feeling vulnerable is not scary and brings you closer.

To those who love portrait photography, I recommend attending one of Enzo's workshops as soon as possible! And also to start investigating why they want to photograph, whether a light, an expression, a story to tell, a fabric... and to have fun letting go, without worrying too much about the trends of the moment.

For me, when I hand over the photos to the people portrayed and see them being moved or smiling, I am happy.

Justine + Marco © giulia iannace







Gian Paolo is one of the students who has been following me for several years. He is a programmer and for him photography is essentially a great passion.

He is particularly interested in ancient photographic techniques; in fact, he experiments with them like an alchemist. While others discuss the latest techniques, ever more powerful cameras and programs that automate post-production, he brings his view camera to the workshops.

He enjoys having the opportunity to share his enthusiasm and doubts with those who can understand him.

«I have learned a lot by engaging directly with other photographers. My eagerness to learn leads me to be curious and 'pester' with questions those who have already dealt with a certain topic or photographic technique.»

Gian Paolo Zoboli

«When I participate in workshops, I find fertile ground because I meet people with the same interests as me, and good friendships are also born. I photograph mostly in my spare time as a hobby, and my subjects are mainly friends and acquaintances. I like to know what makes them happy, what worries them, what their interests are, what excites them and what frightens them. All these things contribute to forming an image of them that I try to represent through some details, particulars, accessories... We decide together where to take the pictures, and I focus mainly on their eyes: when I read in them one of the feelings they have aroused in me, I shoot!

I often learn from mistakes, for example, this double exposure is accidental. I forgot that I had already taken the picture and photographed another person again. I liked the result, and from there, I started to make more double exposures.

doppia esposizione © gian paolo zoboli



Portrait photography guid - enzo dal verme

I find that any subject can be beautiful and anyone can have 'something to say' to my lens. The biggest challenge for me is getting the context right: the location, the light, the details that matter.

For those who want to delve deeper into portraiture, I recommend not being afraid to ask for advice and suggestions. It is important to experiment and seek comparison with those who share our same passions.»

After one of my workshops, Gian Paolo took a portrait of his friend Elena. It is a simple photo, well composed, with impactful light, respects the subject and everything is very natural. The whole is harmonious and we can sense a state of mind. Basically, Gian Paolo showed that he knows how to implement Ute's words: «A portrait shows you something intimate about the subject, otherwise it is just a photo of a person.»





Daniela Giannecchini

When Daniela came to her first workshop, she made it clear right away that she was used to photographing interiors and still-life, but not people because she was shy and didn't feel too confident in interactions.

After the workshop, she wrote to me: *«It was a very special and unexpected weekend. Before you experience it, you can only get a very vague idea of everything you teach and share with your students.»* Then she came back again. I had to remind her a few times that it is the photographer who must always lead the session. I saw her putting in a lot of commitment and making progress. Today she photographs weddings, maternity, dock workers and even teenagers. When I asked her what had changed, she said, *«I have learned to be comfortable with myself, so that I can put those in front of me at ease and capture an emotion of theirs.»* Simple.



Vento © daniela gianneccchini

I have been photographing out of passion for more than twenty years, for work for about ten. I became interested in portraits after the birth of my daughter as I was intrigued by her changes and expressions, but mainly to have a memory of her.

Then for work, I was required to shoot portraits, which for me meant contextualizing them in the context of the company or their specific field of work. At first, it was very difficult because I could not relate to the subjects. The portrait workshops helped me so much in this.

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David © daniela gianneccchini





Alice in un mare di lacrime © daniela giannechini

For me, portraiture is intimacy. It is intimate moments between the person who shows themselves to you with all their frailties, hostility, sweetness or anger. I consider a portrait successful when I can remove the cover setting and the selfie face.

The first thing I really pay attention to is the eyes. I decide whether to ask the subject to look toward me or off-screen, and from there, I build the image using everything else on the body.

I am always struck by the change that occurs in the person from the first test shot to the end of the photoshoot. It happens that some people do not recognize themselves and get excited when seeing the result.

Of course, depending on the situation, my way of photographing changes. If I am asked by a company to photograph employees, I have a more technical initial approach and focus on the environment and their role; only then do I think about the emotional part and how to interact with the subject. When it's a personal project, on the other hand, I do exactly the opposite: I start with my idea first and then move on to the person who lends themselves to implementing my idea. When I've figured out what I want to see, I move on to the technique, the framing, the settings.

“ I feel like a storyteller with a camera ”

At a glance, it looks just like St. Matthew and the angel: the same light, same colors, same proportions as the canvas Caravaggio painted in 1602. But then, we see the clock, a computer, the T-shirt, and realize it's not Caravaggio, but... that joker Sascha! His series of funny parodies of famous photos and works of art is called "Recreations" (somewhat in the style of Celeste Barber, as he points out). They are self-portraits that he started making after taking a workshop with me and have since become an exercise in style.

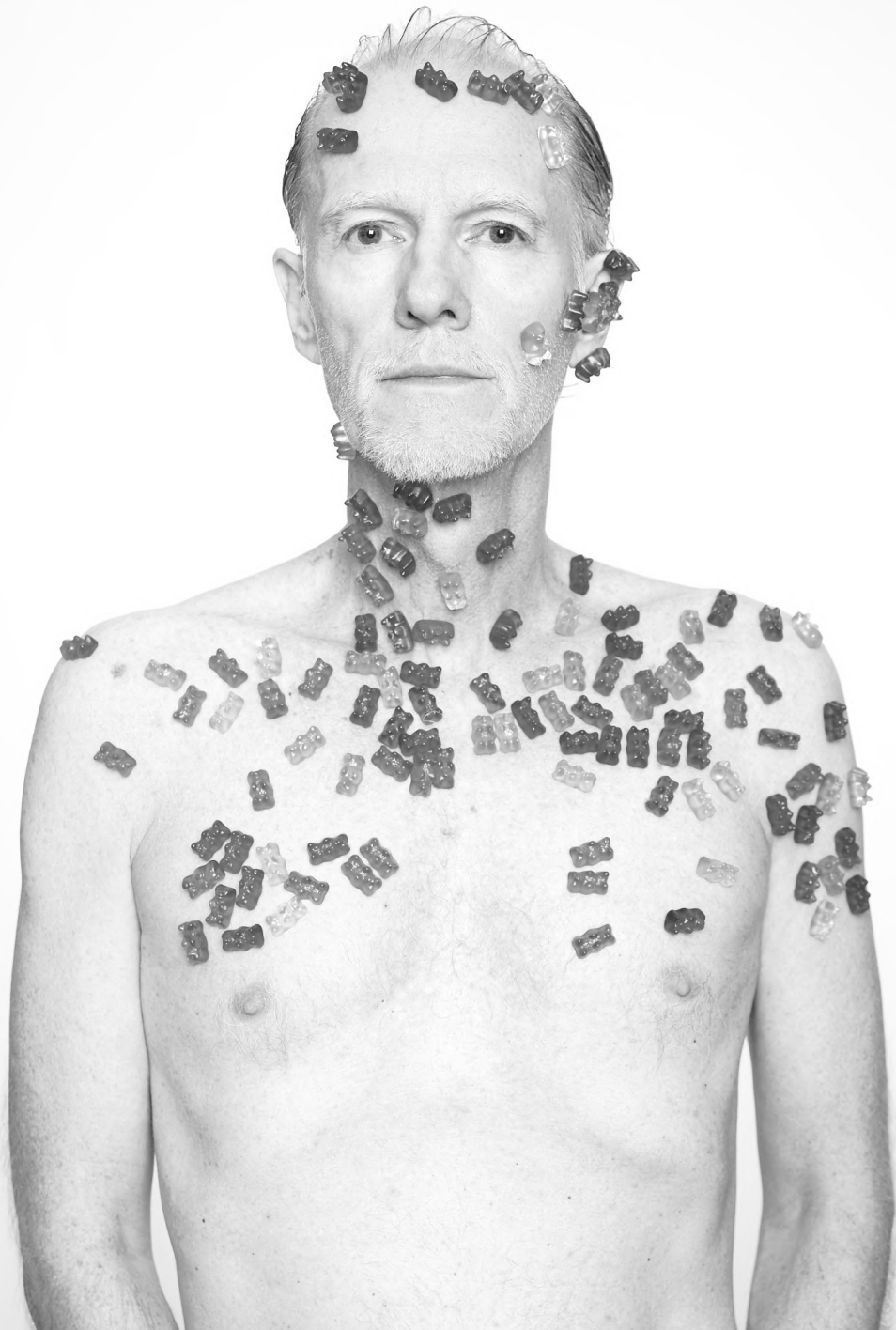
The recreation inspired by Avedon's Beekeeper was made with candy – Haribo gummy bears. And what about the snake slithering over Nastassja Kinski in another famous Avedon shot?

Sascha has participated in many workshops, and it is a pleasure for me to see him grow photographically. For him, photography is not a job, but a great passion.

Sascha Schulz

Ricreazione da San Matteo e l'angelo del Caravaggio, 1602 © sascha schulz





Taking portraits, for me, has become almost a necessity. Apart from Recreations in which I photograph myself, when I shoot, I try to connect with the subject and consider it very important to open myself up to the experience I am having.

I am not interested in stopping at the surface, focusing on technique and posing in search of an aesthetically pleasing result. I love to spend some time with the people I photograph, time in which the rest of the world ceases to be so relevant and allows us to build together and unleash our creativity. I say 'our' because I more or less gently guide the session and also like to engage the people I photograph.

Technically speaking, I then look at the whole, that everything is right in terms of lighting, clothing, posing, framing and composition.

Peter Lindbergh used to say that when he was shooting, he fell in love with the subject: I think there's a good lesson in that way of thinking.



Vania Pambianchi

Vania was not convinced about enrolling in one of my workshops; she was an inexperienced amateur photographer and was afraid that she wouldn't be able to handle the classes. She kept repeating that she wasn't capable of photography, but she amazed us with a series of beautiful images. She came back many times after that, loving the relaxed and collaborative atmosphere that is created and the approach of the classes.

«I learned that to shoot a good portrait, it is not enough to know shutter speeds, apertures and depth of field perfectly. What is essential is to enter into a relationship with the subject to be photographed, to find a channel of communication, to learn to observe, listen and understand.»

Veronica © vania pambianchi





Eleonora © vania pambianchi

«It is necessary to establish a connection because the interaction between the photographer and the subject is fundamental. There are two lives that intersect and the magic happens when a kind of attunement is created between the parties, and it is in that instant that the shot is born.»

For Vania, photography is now a second job that she tackles with great dedication. Of her latest photos, she says, *«I am mainly attracted to female faces, but I don't like stereotypical beauty. I love shy, melancholy and confused faces. I always tend to look for a bit of myself in the other side. Photography is revealing; in fact, I learn something every time and every encounter is generous and holds meaning.*

In my opinion, photographing not only teaches me how to communicate and relate and engage with the world, but above all, it means immersing myself in a creative process that takes me away from stress and worries. Thanks to photography, I am getting to know myself better, which allows me – among other things – to acquire a key to portray others and express my creativity freely. When I photograph a portrait, I prefer to be present in all my vulnerability because that way, I feel I can represent my subjects in the most sincere and authentic way possible.»





Cristiano was already a professional when he signed up for a workshop with me. He now runs a well-established advertising photo studio, and when it comes to portraits, he doesn't mess around. A few months after the workshop, he had written to me, *«Now I feel more confident on the various sets,»* without specifying too much. From then on, we always kept in touch, and after a few years, he confided to me, *«I didn't really know what I would find in those two days. I had read that photographic technique would not be the main topic of the workshop, so I didn't understand what it could give me, but I participated anyway. A world opened up to me! A way of approaching portrait photography that starts even before you have set up the camera or checked the light.»*

His portraits are essential, without too many elements to distract from the subject's expression. Images in which simplicity is a strength.

What are the challenges you face when shooting a portrait and what strikes you about the people you photograph?

Cristiano Bonassera

«Each person I photograph is a world apart and unique from all the others. The thing that always strikes me and makes me love portrait photography is that magic I feel at the precise moment when my gaze crosses, through the camera, with the subject and automatically my index finger presses the shutter... That's when a picture is born! Every time it happens for me it is special. This normally occurs when you have time on set. Unfortunately, though, everything is not always so magical!

Maddalena © cristiano bonassera



Often you have to photograph subjects who have no desire to be photographed, but because of work requirements, they have to do so. Or, the set is improvised and there is an absurd tension in the air even before you start the shots. That's when you have to look for help in technique and experience, because you have to bring home the shot at all costs; you don't have another chance. I remember in particular a shoot I did of a great Italian soccer player for a fashion line in his name

He arrived several hours late and said he had max ten minutes to shoot. He was very unwilling to be guided and very nervous for other reasons. And then I had the art director who kept calling to ask how the shoot was going... In the end, I still brought the shot home!

When it's not an advertisement, where time is often very short, I like to improvise: talking to the person being portrayed, observing their attitude, the creases in their eyes or mouth when they smile, how they gesticulate...

Only after this observation do I begin to see, in my mind, what the framing might look like, where to drop the light and what to put in shadow. Then, as I shoot, I realize if the subject needs more direction from me or if they are moving freely, and then I let it be.

“ Seeking chemistry and empathy on set also proves useful in other relationships outside of photography, in everyday life.

”





Mitsuko Uchida © justin pumfrey

Justin Pumfrey

Justin is not my student, but a friend and colleague. I want to introduce him to you because, like me, he considers meditation to be a very valuable aid in being able to manage attention and focus better even during very demanding shooting sessions. I asked him to tell us a little about his approach to portraiture.

«For me a meditation practice is a very useful tool to help you reach your best potential in the workplace. I am professional London based photographer with more than 30 years experience working in the fields of Advertising, Design and Editorial. My career has taken me all over the world and have done big campaigns for the likes of Adidas and photographed Prime Ministers.

WWW.JUSTINPUMFREY.COM



Whenever I have given advice to my assistants or others, I always start at the beginning: you must first find yourself! To do this with a camera is to be able to feel and find out what brings you to life, to excitement, to love and wonder. So, to start with, get inspiration from what others artists have achieved, know the work of your favourite portrait photographers, work out for yourself how they arrived at such powerful compositions, and learn all the techniques you can. Create a big tool box!

This process of emulation gives us the skills to produce imagery on demand which is the essential prerequisite for success in the commercial world of photography. So, once you are on this path of self-discovery, hopefully fueled by a genuine passion to produce amazing images it is very helpful to bring in awareness practices.

INSTAGRAM @justin_pumfrey_studio

The most important one, for me, is to approach any subject with an attitude of openness and with a sense of "not knowing". This way we are available to be taken by what we see. So, waiting without exactly waiting, we become open, and suddenly we see what we want to explore. Often, we may approach a subject weighed down with many ideas about what we may find, or what we may hope to achieve, these thoughts often can get in the way of our instinctive response to what is in front of us. That's why I am saying that it's important to have an attitude of openness.

With this orientation, many solutions become possible and - providing we have enough skill and technique from our journey of emulation - we will find interesting images emerging.



Portrait photography guide - enzo dal verme

Mitsuko Uchida © Justin Purnfrey

In the field of portraiture, I found that a practice of meditation has many benefits; for sure it reduced the amount of stress we may feel before we start the shoot, this has the effect of making us more available for contact and more natural. So, the calmer we are, the easier it is to connect directly with our sitter. At this point the interaction can become a bit like a dance, and as the connection deepens and the contact becomes more intimate, the presence of the camera between yourself and your subject is no longer a hinderance and we have a chance to capture the essence of our subject. When this happens, it is a very exciting and amazing experience on both sides of the camera.

These portraits are of Mitsuko Uchida, shot for BBC Music Magazine. Mitsuko Uchida, is one of the most revered artists of our time, known as a peerless interpreter of the works of Mozart, Schubert, Schumann and Beethoven. Working with her was a wonderful unfoldment in the moment.

Mitsuko Uchida © Justin Pumfrey



I hope this guide has inspired you. And now, I have a question for you:

“ How much time do you spend on your technical preparation and how much on developing your ability to interact with subjects or compose images quickly and intuitively? ”

If you are interested in learning more about the non-technical parts and want to treat yourself to five days in the heart of Tuscany, come to a Portrait Photography Retreat. [Click here](#) to find out more. I look forward to seeing you!

