

An Important Photograph from 1972

A photograph I took in 1972 feels like the seed of my interest in walking around with a camera to discover what I wanted to photograph.

Its history can be said to begin with the first Vietnam Era Selective Service Lottery (held in December 1969), in which my birthday was selected early enough that I was drafted in 1970. When I arrived in Vietnam I was lucky to be assigned to work in an office on a large base in a relatively secure area. Vendors in Japan inundated us with catalogs offering low-cost, serious camera equipment. Having always thought cameras were fun, I eventually ordered and had delivered to me two SLR bodies, four lenses, a tripod, and a book explaining the camera system as well as the principles of photography. I took hundreds of photographs. In a recreational facility on my base I learned the rudiments of developing and printing.

After my discharge in early 1972, I lived with my parents in Far Rockaway, New York, for a few months and used the bathroom as an overnight darkroom (I still fondly recall paying less than \$100 at the old Willoughby's for all the equipment I needed and taking it home from Manhattan on the subway).

One day, I took a picture of a boy and a girl standing in the sand near the boardwalk. The boy holds a dead pigeon (see next page).



Children with Dead Pigeon, 1972

I see in the boy's face pride and delight of discovery, expressed with respect; in his hands I see generosity and tenderness. The boy's pigeon is a small, ordinary thing, like the hat George

draws while singing *Finishing the Hat* (in Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*). But the song's last line ("Look, I made a hat, where there never was hat.") and the way it is sung in performances I've heard communicate to me that whether it's a hat or a pigeon or, by extension, a photograph we've taken and printed, it is natural to feel unselfconscious delight and pride in discoveries and accomplishments that might at first glance by others seem simple and small.

In the girl's face, though, I see a questioning suspicion or skepticism challenging me, the boy, and George to consider whether the photograph, the finding of a dead pigeon, or the drawing of a hat is really such a big deal after all.

Regardless of the emotional strength one sees or doesn't in this photograph, and aside from the pictures I took in Vietnam, it is the first one I took that was not a predictable image of family or friends or a touristy snapshot of nature or architecture. This photograph, now archivally framed and on a wall only feet from my pigment inkjet printer and laptop as I write this, represents the day I learned there can be unexpected, stunning moments of discovery when you're out in the street with a camera just blocks from where you live.