

# Photographica Nervosa



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I have had the opportunity to teach at the Ringling College of Art and Design as an adjunct instructor, as well as create and implement the Bogen Café, a master workshop series presented to 20 colleges and 20 dealers across the country during the 2007–2008 school year. But what prompted me to share these images with you was a response from one of my former Ringling students during a critique, “I know I’m good, I just wish that I had a better camera.” I thought, how many times have we said, “I wish I had a better camera?” I know I am guilty of saying this recently, wanting (not lusting after) a 60-megapixel medium format camera system—but perhaps I’m getting ahead of myself.

Being from Sarasota, FL—a place with lots of sunsets, but not a lot of activity—it sounds like a variation on the critique above: “If I only had the opportunity to travel, I could get some great shots.” Sorry, that one isn’t conveniently in my camera bag, so make the most of your environment, and discover your own backyard for

the very first time. Try to put your camera where it has never been placed before. Seek out opportunities that were perhaps uncomfortable in the past. You will not only grow as a person, but these life experiences will enhance, and perpetuate your photographic skills.

After the class session ended, I told my students that I would be in New York City that weekend. I volunteered that while there I would be taking snaps with only a point-and-shoot camera and share the results with them.

I left the DSLR at home and I hit the streets armed with my wife’s point and shoot. My silver heroes are Ansel Adams, Diane Arbus, Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand. I chose the streets of New York over the mountains of the West; I was on the prowl, looking for Henri Cartier-Bresson’s decisive moment. There she was: drama unfolding in front of me, an unknown participant in life’s theater.

But wait a minute. I had a point and shoot, while the pros had the makeup art-

ist, set director, assistant and a battery of lenses and cameras. And still, they didn’t get the shot. They were too busy checking exposure; monkeying around at their digital confirmation, while life continued on in front of the viewfinder.

“I only wish...”

Walking up Madison Avenue, I saw a couple in front of a storefront under construction, lost, confused, seemingly bewildered, oblivious to the man next to them. I couldn’t get the shot. I was too far away on the opposite side of the street for my zoom lens to fill the frame.

“If I only had...”

A stranger came to my aid, providing interference in front of me so I could get the shot. “Thank You God Bless You,” said the sign the man was holding. And, of course, I crossed the street and contributed to his cup while the out-of-towners were still unaware of my presence and his.

I decided to head downtown, wanting to pass Rockefeller Center on the way back to the hotel. As I got closer to my final des-



**Top:** The bicycle messenger passes in front of the subway diva, oblivious to the fashion shoot that spills onto the streets.

**Bottom:** I'm in no man's land, off the curb, ignoring a red light, and I can't do both; I observe the scene, while trying to dodge the cabs.

tionation, I noticed a group of demonstrators denouncing the war in Iraq while the press, both video and still, documented their protest. And here I was, Mr. Point and Shoot, capturing in the center of the action: Cindy Sheehan, who lost her son in Iraq and became one of the first outspoken critics of the war. Despite my lack of professional equipment I felt on equal footing as I moved around the crowd.

Batteries finally exhausted, I called *The New York Times*.

"*New York Times*," said the operator.

"Spot news, please," I replied.

"Just one moment."

I finally got a picture editor on the phone. "Hi, my name is Steven Katzman. I'm a professor of photography at Ringling School of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida, and I just took some interesting shots of Cindy Sheehan protesting on the streets... with a point-and-shoot camera."

A brief pause and... "Can you hold on for a minute?"

"No problem." Could this really be happening, the possibility of one of my shots making *The Times*?

"You just got a shot of Cindy Sheehan?" asked the editor.

"Yeah, she's down here at Rockefeller Center with a group protesting the war, along with members of the media, and I noticed you weren't here," I replied.

"Just a moment," came the voice from the other end.

The editor finally came back on the phone, "We'd love to have you come down, but we shot her yesterday, so we can't use your images today." I wasn't disappointed when I got off the phone because for a brief moment there had been a possibility that, in spite of how many megapixels I had shot with or the name of the camera I used, *The New York Times* could have used my photograph.

Regardless of the equipment that we have in our camera bag, we have a creative voice, some louder than others. When I showed these images to the class, they all realized this was something more than Mr. Katzman's snaps. They had unknowingly given their instructor an assignment. And while I might have missed the chance to capture these images on my DSLR, or get published in *The Times* that day, I didn't lose the opportunity to witness my world, regardless of the type of hardware I raised up to my mind's eye.

Hopefully, my shared experiences will ignite a little spark within and burn away those excuses that we always find to interfere with our creative growth. I understand that personal growth is painful, but we chose photography as a vocation or avocation to give us the power of self-discovery, enabling us to be the author of our own pictorial choices. Regardless of how good or bad your images are, they are yours. And no one can take them, or the experiences you had creating them, away from you. OC

*Steven Katzman, a self-taught photographer, established Steven Katzman Photography, LLC in 1990. His recent book is The Face of Forgiveness, Salvation and Redemption. Mr. Katzman has been on the faculty at the Ringling School of Art and Design since 2003. He is a Lexar Elite Photographer, a Gretag Influencer and sponsored by Bogen Imaging. Visit his website [www.stevenkatzmanphotography.com](http://www.stevenkatzmanphotography.com).*

