

Conversation with Michael Barry on in Cape Town in November 1985

I was born in Port Elizabeth in 1954. I grew up in Port Elizabeth until I was twenty one when I came to Cape Town. I came to work on a boat, Merchant Navy. I worked there for two years. I bought the camera when I was on the boat, and that'd the first time I started taking pictures. But I didn't take it seriously until I went to Varsity. I actually bought a camera for someone else as a present and this guy gave it back to me, because he couldn't use it. It was a Pentax K1000, a nice camera. So when I was in Varsity (University) they offered a course in photography and I took it. I was doing a fine arts course at the University, but I knew you can't do much with a fine arts degree. But if you take photography, you can work commercially. I thought like that. Then I got into Michaelis after they saw my portfolio which wasn't photography but painting. So I studied there. Now I am a painter and a photographer. I will be going to Port Elizabeth to teach art in high school there, a colored high school, a state school, this is the first time they have give art as a subject for school kids in that area. So it's exciting because you can teach a lot of your own ideas to those kids.

If you look at someone like Cartier-Bresson, to me he's got a combination of aesthetic and content. And as a painter you think more about aesthetic more than content. So you can combine that with photograph and it's perfect. I took a lot of ideas from Cartier-Bresson, because of that combination. But sometimes, if the content is very strong, it doesn't matter, and likewise the other way around.

When I was working at the night shelter I was doing a lot of social documentary work. That is actually where my photography grew into a real interest. Because, I was working, and I thought this situation, is perfect for photography, to take pictures of the people that I know as well as taking photos for myself, and doing a course at Michaelis. The night shelter was for vagrants, people on the edge of society, street people. I was the supervisor of the Night Shelter. It's not state money, it's charity, people donated money. When we opened up the new night shelter, I printed up a lot of pictures and we had an exhibition of the night shelter how it used to be for five years. The pictures have been used to fund raise for the shelter, and in exhibitions. A group of guys here also put out a calendar of night shelter photos. Also my photos were in the National Gallery in 1983.

I decided to not use a flash inside at the night shelter. I had to overcome that problem. Of course the people new me as supervisor and I would just go in there and people would accept me. I've seen guys come and take photos in the night shelter, from the outside. I saw this photographer come in one night, and he had a big flash, bam, bam, bam, and it really seemed wrong. He was just using the situation to get a good picture for himself. You can't use photography like that. You must actually live in a situation so you are part of it. Most times you can't do that, say in a war situation, you have to go in as an outsider. But if you can help it, then go in and live in that situation, then obviously you are going to get better photos, because after a while people are going to forget about you. For me that would

Michael Barry  
Be PART  
OF community  
you photograph

be ideal, to take photos like that, to be part of a community.

I didn't think about how the pictures would be used when I actually took the picture. It was something to show the people and for me personally. But I also so this as social documentary. At Michaelis, we were taught to see photography as a fine art. So you couldn't just come in and do social documentary work. You had to have some aesthetic idea. But I think if a picture works, it works, social documentary or not.

*Removals*  
*Barry*  
*Politicization*

You notice things are wrong in this country from a very early age. Because obviously it affects your life. We were living in one area of Port Elizabeth, and we were forced to move. And my old man was very upset obviously because we had to move out of there. So in that we became aware. It affects your life. And obviously there are thousands of incidents, you become aware of it. No one in my family was politically active. A lot of people accept the situation. People in this country, the more you suffer, the more politicized you become. The situation I grew up in wasn't that extreme. So in some ways, I was shielded from the harsh reality. In P.E. at that time, we used to speak about Apartheid in school, but people weren't that radical. Now they are conscientized. A friend of mine is living in London now, he had to leave the country. And he used to talk to us about, when you are young and you are in that situation, basically a middle class situation, you're not radical. It is good to grow more aware of the situation as you grow older. And you feel you want to do something, taking photos for instance.

The last painting I did was exhibited at the ECC, end conscription campaign, and that was very political painting. And the group I belong to, when we have exhibitions, BaKalisa, it means "awake." We work in communities and make people aware that there are cultural activities going on, in the townships themselves, to help educate people through these cultural activities.

Obviously we don't hope for confrontation. Things change overnight. You can't predice what is going to happen in this country. I don't think anybody hopes for a bloody confrontation. But I think people are prepared for that kind of thing.

(talking about his photograph of the man with the bloody head in the night shelter) You see this is a semi-industrial area, but at night, it is completely different. There are prostitutes, it is like a dock front area, with gangsters. So there is always something violent happening, not necessarily in the shelter. but this guy was hurt outside in the street. Would take in anybody that was hurt. It looks bad, but it wasn't a deep gash. Somebody hit him from behind. That was a very common thing. To get money, or just argument.

We had worse things there, we had a guy who took a bottle and broke it on a guys head, and as he came down, he came up like this and with the jagged glass cut him.

But another important point about photography, in situations like that, say I see that and I have my camera in my hand, do I help the

Special  
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BARRY

guy first or do you take the photograph? And I think a lot of photographers are confronted with that problem in the country today. I think I would help the person first. It is a difficult question. The photography in the end is made to show a situation, but you don't want photography to become more important than human qualities, especially in South African situations.

I have a friend who was taking photos in a funeral and there were a lot of other photographers there from out of the country, international guys. So he felt afterwards that he should actually participate in the march as well and those photographers said to him, "no you mustn't do that, you will compromise their situation with the police" The police might see them as being non-objective. So he said, no he had to follow his conscience. He felt part of this activity and he wanted to take part. What I would do is put the camera aside and take part.

Omar: No, I don't agree, it is not a rule that one...

Barry: no it is not a fixed rule, obviously not.

Omar: Most cases, in our situation, the actual taking pictures itself is the most important act, because nobody else outside that little township or that little street knows the situation, it is so restricted so that documenting that becomes important.

Barry: What I meant was that .....

Omar: I've taken part in processions when the guys are marching and said, "that's enough, let's break up the march" I am photographing and what you to move that way now. You know where it happened, at the launch, the UDF launch. You remember when the guys were in the quadrangle and they started singing. And then they started to March out of that quadrangle. So I was photographing and I realized, if they were going to march out of that quadrangle into the streets, the Boers was going to get them, find an excuse to stick it to people. So I picked out the guy who was leading it, and I said to him, "get back into that area." Now there obviously you can't, you know that there are things happening, and you can't afford police to start breaking up this huge meeting, it would have been chaos, because some guys get into a situation because they want to march. And you are always concerned that there are agent provocateurs to lead people. Now when the march songs start, people march. They get carried away. So I told those guys, move. I pushed a guy. So sometimes it is good to keep a distance as a photographer because the guys taking part get carried away.

June 16th this year there was a big meeting. It was packed. The side door was open and I went to that door and I was photographing, and the chaps opened the door and they saw an MP sitting in a car in the church yard. And they went WAAAAA. They all started coming out and they started to attack the MP and I said to those guys, "get back into the hall!" Now there I had to because you know those kids want to take on the police and they aren't concerned about the meeting which is a peaceful demonstration. You have to commemorate it. After the

OMAR -

meeting you can decide what you want to do. And they waited until the meeting just ended and the national anthem ended and a whole stream of them went out, and I've never seen anybody move that fast. That car took off.

So now as a photographer, you are not just a photographer, you are also a participant in those meetings. You are concerned that you don't want anything to happen to disrupt anything. And you are also concerned that there are elements there who will do anything to create chaos. It is a difficult thing, actually, very difficult, to keep that balance between photographer and protester.

Barry: At a school demonstration recently, I didn't photograph because I had a big camera and didn't want to cause trouble. I made a mistake of running into a room with three other guys and we locked a door, and all the cops came across and they were looking into a window. But lucky the windows were high. We layed flat against the wall. They obviously didn't see us. It felt like those old Nazi movies, Anne Frank and all of that. I am sure other people have been in worse situations, where they have actually been shot.

And people in townships now, kids hang onto the armored trucks whenm they come in, and you know they hang onto it and like Jimmy was telling me, when he shoots for television, the kids in the townships, when the police shoot the tear gas canisters, they catch them and throw it back, like it is part of their life.

Omar: I've seen kids throw that back into a caspir, and the O's come out of there crying, some of them had masks, others didn't. But it is too hard to wear that mask all the time.

Barry: I am sure it must be a nerve gas they use as well. Some people it knocks unconscious.

Omar: I think they are just using very high concentrated tear gas, which for some people overwhelms them. It is very dangerous for children or old people. And if that thing is fired right on to you.....

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