

## A Tribute to Eve Arnold

*No photographs of me please.*

*Eve Arnold*

Eve Arnold's photographs of the twentieth century have so seared themselves into our collective unconscious that they have become the lens through which we understand much of that recent past. To be a documentary photographer is to record the world. An event that has been photographed instantly becomes more real than it would have been without being caught on camera. When her shutter clicked down on Marilyn Monroe, Malcolm X, Jackie O, Joan Crawford or Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor sitting in a pub during the filming of *Becket* nursing a couple of pints and a packet of pork sausages they were about to cook for dinner, Eve Arnold sealed them forever within those transient moments like flies encased in amber. Photography, as Susan Sontag writes, is 'an elegiac art, a twilight art'.<sup>1</sup> The subject in front of the camera is touched with pathos because we know when we look at the resulting print that that particular instance has already passed and can never be regained. Like Marcel Proust dipping his madeleine into a spoonful of lime-blossom tea, the photograph acts as a catalyst that returns us to a lost past which, in retrospect, so often seems gilded. All photographs are, therefore, a kind of *memento mori*. The images that remain linger like ghosts, giving their subjects a kind of immortality. By freezing a particular event, the photographer lays down evidence through which we try, like an archaeologist brushing the dust off a bowl, to make sense of history.

This is a nostalgic age and photographs are elegies to nostalgia. They act as still points in the flux, making seeming sense of the chaos of wars, of social upheavals, of the highs and lows of lives and fractured careers. They imply that we can get close to a celebrity or a politician so that we feel personally acquainted with them, that we can know what is true about this shifting world because the camera has recorded it. Even though the image we encounter is often second or third hand we believe that the photographer has acted as a witness to some event to which we may not have been privy. Thus the photograph takes on an iconic, magical reality.

Eve Arnold came late to the profession, when she was nearing 40. Born in Philadelphia on 21 April 1912 (her age was never mentioned until she reached 90, when she stopped concealing it), she had wanted to be a writer or a dancer. Her Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, Velvel Sklarski and Bosya Laschiner, had changed their names to the more American-sounding William and Bessie Cohen. Working as a bookkeeper for an estate agent during the Second World War, she answered an advertisement in the *New York*

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Penguin Books, 1979).

*Times* for an amateur photographer which led to a job in a printing and photo-finishing plant in New Jersey. Her only formal training was a short but tough six-week course at the New School for Social Research under the auspices of Alexey Brodovitch. The rest of her art was acquired, as she says, from a lifetime of 'learning by doing'.

Her first photo-story covered fashion shows in Harlem. Her 1950 portrait of Charlotte Stribling, a young black model known as 'Fabulous' – her blonde hair twisted into braids on either side of her head, her eyes wide open and lips parted in anxious anticipation as she gathers up her skirts to go on stage – is classic Arnold. Full of empathy, she has simply allowed the subject to be herself. Looking back from these early decades of the twenty-first century it is, perhaps, difficult to appreciate just how different those times were. Not only was America still racially segregated, with the Civil Rights Movement yet to gather pace, but this was a pre-feminist world where a young middle-class woman (Arnold was a Long Island housewife with a small son) was generally expected to do no more than a little light stenography or stay at home and bake cookies. To launch herself as an independent documentary photographer was far more exceptional than it might appear today. It took stamina, steel and determination. 'It was', she says, 'daunting to bring my pale face into that all-black audience.... My hands were shaking, from fear not of the people but of my ability to bring forth pictures.'

Without any consultation her story was syndicated by *Picture Post* in London and, as a result, was taken up in Europe. In 1951, with this and another piece on an opening night at the Metropolitan Opera in New York under her belt, Arnold decided to approach Magnum Photos, then the foremost photographic agency in the world. For a rank beginner this was a daring move. Magnum had been founded as a co-operative in 1947 by Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger and David 'Chim' Seymour, all of whom had been affected by what they had seen during the war. Now that there was peace they were keen to set about exploring a changed world. Magnum was unique in that it was to be an agency run by and for photographers. Although Arnold was one of the earliest women members ever to be admitted, her natural modesty meant that she never claimed to have been the first. For at the same time as she joined the New York office, Inge Morath (who would later marry Arthur Miller) joined the Paris office. For its members Magnum became a family. Arnold not only made important friends but also gained a great deal of technical and artistic know-how from fellow photographers such as Erich Hartmann and Ernst Haas, who were themselves to acquire significant reputations. At the time she was working with a larger format than normal: 2¼-inch square, taken with a \$40 Rolleicord. Having no money she had to make these images, shot on an inferior camera, express what she wanted them to express. Over the years this led her to

conclude that it wasn't so much the instrument used but the eye and the mind behind it that counted. Through her involvement with Magnum she began to meet movie stars and it was at a party given by John Huston at the '21' club that she met her most famous subject, Marilyn Monroe.

In 1944 Norma (after the silent-screen actress Norma Talmadge) Jean (after Jean Harlow) Morteson (later to be christened Baker) took a job on the assembly line at the Radio Plane Munitions factory in Burbank, California. Norma Jean had never known her father and had had a disruptive and painful childhood. A fabulist and storyteller, she found an emotional escape route in the movies and film magazines. It was whilst working on the assembly line that she was discovered by the photographer David Conover, who was taking pictures of women contributing to the war effort for *Yank* magazine. Using her for the shoot he then began to send modelling jobs her way. On her first magazine cover (*Family Circle*, spring 1946), she poses as a homely brunette in a pinafore, cuddling a lamb. But Norma Jean dreamed of Hollywood and enrolled in drama classes. She dyed her hair blonde, changed her first name, took her grandmother's surname and posed for a number of pin-up shots for girlie magazines. Then on 26 August 1946 she signed her first studio contract with 20th Century Fox and Marilyn Monroe was born. She was paid \$125 a week. Her first movie role was a bit part in *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim* (1947), followed by a series of equally inconsequential films.

When Eve Arnold met Monroe at John Huston's party she was still an unknown starlet and Arnold a relatively inexperienced photographer. Neither of them knew much about their respective crafts and this became a bond between them, so that later Arnold would say, 'I don't know where she ended and I began or I ended and she began. We fed each other for ten years.' Having seen Arnold's images of Marlene Dietrich in *Esquire*, in which Dietrich was unposed, singing the song that made her famous, 'Lili Marlene', Marilyn was canny enough to realise that here was a photographer who was attempting something new: natural, informal shots that were a departure from the stylised and retouched studio portraits used to promote stars at the time. She approached Arnold, suggesting that 'If you could do that well with Marlene, can you imagine what you can do with me?' Thus began a unique professional friendship. Was she manipulating Arnold? No, she insisted, they were manipulating each other: 'She couldn't have done it without me and I couldn't have done it without her'.

Eve Arnold's gift was to recognise Marilyn's raw talent. Monroe had a sensual, luminous presence in front of the lens and a genius for self-promotion. This was a pre-television age and she was hungry for more exposure and aware that the still photographs

reproduced in the magazines of the day were her route to fame. According to Arnold, the image she projected was what she wanted the world to see. She was the one in control. The walk, the wiggle, the pout – they could all be switched on for the camera. Eve Arnold photographed her six times during the decade that they knew each other. The shortest session took two hours and the longest lasted for two months on the film set of *The Misfits*, Marilyn's final film, when they met daily. At various times Arnold caught her poised beneath an umbrella on the steps of an aeroplane, her white broderie anglaise shift cinched in tightly at the waist and, elsewhere, in the same white dress in front of a washroom mirror doing her hair, her skirt, knowingly, hitched up around her thighs. Such frank, intimate shots were then highly unusual, humanising the subject and giving a glimpse behind the spangled mask. Marilyn trusted Arnold and allowed her free rein, in contrast to most of the other photographers who shot her – the very word conjures images of hunting and male violence – who were men. In many ways Marilyn wanted Eve Arnold to be the mother she never had, a role Arnold refused. Nonetheless, her calm, unassuming presence gained Marilyn's confidence, resulting in some of the most intimate images of her on record. Arnold caught her in quiet moments engrossed in James Joyce's *Ulysses* in a bid for self-improvement and struggling to learn her lines on the set of *The Misfits*, where Monroe always felt her acting skills to be inferior to those of the more seasoned actors. She photographed her with Laurence Olivier promoting *The Prince and the Showgirl*, leaning coquettishly over a balcony to expose her cleavage, wearing a radiant smile, while elsewhere she captured her off guard, seated on a bench beside her playwright husband, Arthur Miller, in a wonderfully domestic moment eating a picnic lunch off a tray.

Interest in *The Misfits* was, at the time, voracious. *Look* and *Life* magazines expressed an interest even before shooting began. Magnum negotiated an exclusive deal whereby a roster of their members would visit the set. Eve Arnold was required to keep a record of the day-to-day filming. At the time Marilyn was already well advanced in her addiction to drugs and alcohol. Devastated by the break-up of her marriage to Miller, she claimed to be hearing voices and suffering from constant exhaustion. Yet despite her subject's instability, Eve Arnold's discretion and gentle presence produced some of the most memorable images in Magnum's archive. Being essentially a documentary photographer allowed her to reveal something of the person beyond the icon and sex-bomb, to portray Marilyn in all her complex vulnerability. Even so, Arnold counsels against believing that she caught the 'real' Marilyn; a sixth sense always told her there was a camera about. 'The idea', Arnold says, 'of the candid shot, the actress unaware, was impossible with her'. Eve Arnold's Marilyn is a woman of many moods: seductive, playful, winsome with pigtailed on the set of *The Misfits* and a 1950s vamp lying in long grass on Mount Sinai, Long

Island, in 1955, dressed in a leopard-skin bathing costume like some lithe wild animal. To be photographed was, for Marilyn, the evidence she craved that she existed, that she was somebody. 'I wanna be loved by you', she sang in *Some Like It Hot*: Sweet, funny, sexy and innocent, she needed approval and acceptance. The actor Dean Martin once said of Monroe, 'She was a good kid. But when you looked into her eyes, there was nothing there ... it was all illusion. She looked great on film, yeah. But in person ... she was a ghost.' Eve Arnold was able to see beyond the void and capture the complex essence of this wounded child-woman.

In 2005 Halcyon Gallery worked with Eve Arnold to produce an exhibition and book featuring almost 100 photographs, including 28 previously unseen images of the star, revealing sides to her personality rarely portrayed through the lens or witnessed by the public, which established an enduring relationship between the photographer, Magnum and the gallery. Due to the overwhelming success of these images Arnold's career has been in danger of being overshadowed by the Marilyn phenomenon. But she has been very much more than simply a celebratory photographer. It was Arnold's husband who pointed out, in the early 1950s, the plight of the migrant workers toiling in the fields near their home on Long Island. Making their way up through the farming strip known as 'Migrant Alley', starting in Florida and working north picking strawberries and sorting potatoes, they spent their nights in overcrowded, insanitary, ramshackle camps. Picking up her Rolleiflex Arnold went out into the fields and into the homes of these workers, revealing not only the shocking conditions they had to endure but recording, with empathy and humanity, their tough daily lives.

But it was in 1961 that she faced one of her biggest challenges, when photographing the leader of the Black Muslims in the United States, Malcolm X. The so-called Nation of Islam was closed and suspicious, especially towards white people. Despite the air of menace at many of the meetings, Arnold managed to build a rapport with Malcolm X who was, she said, quite ready to manipulate the situation to his advantage. At the time he was under threat from Elijah Muhammad, the head of the Black Muslims, and wanted to be seen by the wider press – particularly *Life* magazine – so he wouldn't be murdered, which, in the end, he was. One of the most disquieting images from this period is of George Lincoln Rockwell in 1961, flanked by members of the American Nazi Party in full regalia, at a Black Muslim meeting in Washington DC.

In 1969 Eve Arnold produced her series 'Veiled Women'. These pictures taken in Oman, Dubai and Afghanistan revealed a hitherto largely secret world where veils and burkhas then had a more exotic resonance, for Islamic fundamentalism was still several decades

away. What Arnold's keen eye caught was a tantalising glimpse of these women's individuality, as in the wonderfully insouciant image of a veiled woman puffing away on a cigarette, a tail of ash trailing from the stub between her stained fingers decorated with silver rings.

Arnold came to live in London with her son in 1962 and remained here permanently. She seems to have had a keen eye for a certain kind of Englishness, as is evident in her 1978 image of an elderly working couple in Cumbria where the woman, wearing a flowered dress, sits on a print sofa in their highly patterned living room, or in a photograph of the celebration for the Queen's Jubilee in 1977 with a crowd gathered around a piano at a street party. In the early 1970s she created hard-hitting images of South Africa under apartheid and translated the 'kind of bleakness' she encountered in the Soviet Union into equally stark images. Yet it was not until the age of 67 that she took on the exhausting schedule of a long-awaited assignment to visit China. Since the early 1960s the *Sunday Times*, for whom she worked, had applied yearly for a visa for her to visit but had been routinely turned down. Then in the late 1970s Arnold befriended Sirin, a Thai girl who had been brought up by the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai, and a visa for three months was forthcoming. Arnold travelled extensively in that vast country at the dawn of rapid change. After an era of secrecy the Chinese government was opening up to the outside world and promising its people a period of rapid industrial growth. Her photographs of the inhabitants of Inner Mongolia, especially of a young girl lying in the grass with a white horse that she is training for the militia, catch, with their harmonies of red, green and white, a world little known to the West. The images are so memorable because what she shows us are real people. For a previously black-and-white photographer her sense of colour is almost painterly. This is manifest in her 1979 photograph where the turquoise tunic of the Mongolian musician is vividly set off against the reds and greens of the Golden River White Horse Company Militia as he accompanies them singing a folk song.

Three years after her seminal book *In China*, Eve Arnold returned to her home country to look at the land of her birth with the eye of a visitor yet with a sense of familiarity. The result was *In America*, a rare collection of photographs that illustrates the diversity of American life and culture. Arnold shows us the industrial landscape of Milwaukee and a flea market in Illinois, Chicago; she photographs a prison chain gang in Texas guarded by a pair of mounted police in Stetsons and takes a portrait of the Imperial Wizard of the Klu Klux Klan in his witchy red robes. She is particularly sympathetic to the old: the ageless Navajo matriarch from Window Rock, Arizona, in her fine turquoise and silver jewellery and the old lady asleep in a wheelchair at the Motion Picture and Television Home and Hospital, Los Angeles, her sparse grey hair tightly curled in pink rollers.

Arnold's America is a rainbow nation, a land of extremes, at once beautiful and strange, familiar and curious.

In a long life she photographed world leaders and movie stars, artists and dowagers, political militants and the dispossessed. Common to all Arnold's photographs is an unsentimental curiosity tempered with compassion. Her subjects, whether the translucent young Isabella Rossellini or a Latino bar girl in a brothel in the red-light district of Havana in 1954, are simply allowed to be themselves. She never imposed her own agenda. When early in her career she photographed Hopi Indians dancing, she related that they grabbed her camera and wrecked it, believing that the taking of a photograph plundered their souls. Photography, she admitted, is essentially an aggressive act, but 'if you're careful with people and if you respect their privacy, they will offer you part of themselves that you can use, and that is the big secret'.

Arnold published numerous books, often accompanied by her own texts, and had worldwide exhibitions, while her work appeared in magazines and newspapers across the globe. Her time in China led to her first major solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1980 and, in same year, she received the National Book Award for *In China* and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Magazine Photographers. In 1995 she was made a fellow of the Royal Photographic Society in Britain and in 1996 she received the Kraszna-Krausz Book Award for *In Retrospect*. 1997 saw her granted honorary degrees from the University of St Andrews, Staffordshire University and the American International University in London. She was also appointed to the advisory committee of the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television (now the National Media Museum) in Bradford, receiving an honorary OBE from her adopted country in 2003. That year she was also elected Master Photographer – the world's most prestigious photographic honour – by New York's International Center of Photography. Then in 2010, just one day after her ninety-eighth birthday, she was honoured with the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Sony World Photography Awards. Her extraordinary career has spanned most of the twentieth century, sealing that turbulent, troubling, progressive era in our consciousness to create an unmatched legacy of compassionate, honest and poignant photographs that render the transient iconic.

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