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ART

Stubbornly Practicing His Principles of Photography

By RANDY KENNEDY

"LISTEN, do I have time to feed my pig?" the photographer Danny Lyon asked, picking up the telephone one morning at his home in rural New Mexico. "It will only take about 10 minutes. I'll call you back," he said, adding: "That way I can start the day with a clean conscience."

Among a group of revolutionaries whose work rose to prominence in the late 1960s and '70s and transformed the nature of documentary photography — a group that includes friends and colleagues of Mr. Lyon's like Mary Ellen Mark and Larry Clark — the idea of conscience has been imbedded more deeply in Mr. Lyon's photographs than in those of all but a few of his contemporaries.

At a time when picture magazines were still a holy grail for young photographers, Mr. Lyon, self-taught, began his career as the first staff photographer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. A week after hitchhiking south in 1962 at the age of 20 he was in jail with other protesters in Albany, Ga., next to the cell of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And Mr. Lyon's first book, the classic "Bikeriders," made after spending more than two years as a member of the Outlaws motorcycle gang, was not just a pioneering example of New Journalism but, as he later described it, an attempt "to destroy Life magazine" and what he saw as its anodyne vision of American life.

His newest book, "Memories of Myself," published this month by Phaidon Press, seems on its face to be the kind of comfortable, coffee-table retrospective that a revered 67-year-old artist receives at this point in his life. It is a selection of self-assigned — and largely unpublished — photo essays that he made while wandering from Chicago to Galveston, Tex., to Brooklyn to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, over almost four decades. But even this book is a product of political calculus, as Mr. Lyon described it. He has been traveling for many years to photograph a remote, impoverished region of China with a book in mind but with little idea of who would be interested in it.

"It's not always easy to get these things published," he said. "I'm pretty uncompromising and not very commercial." So when Phaidon approached him a few years ago with the idea of a career survey, he offered a deal. "I basically said, 'If you do the China book, you can do the retrospective.' " (Phaidon, which does not comment on its negotiations with authors, would say only that it plans to publish two books by Mr. Lyon, in addition to "Memories of Myself," calling him a "great photographer.")

It is the kind of bargain Mr. Lyon has been striking his whole life, especially during years when he was supporting a family of four while insisting on making the kind of work he wanted to make, a stubborn vision that has probably contributed to his photographs and independent films not being better known. Even now,

with his work in important museum collections around the country, a survivor's hustle remains and sometimes still comes in handy: a few weeks ago, at his dentist's office in Albuquerque, he traded a nice print for a root canal. "The market has taken a body blow, and I needed the dental work," he explained, adding, "I was so happy to do it."

Like Mr. Clark, who blurred the line between observer and participant and wanted to confront middle-class viewers with the American underclass, Mr. Lyon has made a peripatetic attempt to photograph people who are generally unseen or unwanted, even hated, and he has never been able to approach it with a journalist's distance. When he began his motorcycle work in the mid-1960s while at the University of Chicago, he writes in the new book, "I was a bike rider, a photographer and a history student, probably in that order."

When he became involved in what many critics consider his most powerful work, "Conversations With the Dead," based on more than a year photographing inside the Texas prison system in the late 1960s, he developed deep bonds with several inmates, including one who had been convicted of rape. Another, James Ray Renton, a talented escape artist who was later convicted of killing an Arkansas police officer, became an unlikely friend and devoted correspondent for more than 30 years. (In "Like a Thief's Dream," Mr. Lyon's book about their relationship, he describes testifying as a character witness for Mr. Renton at his murder trial in 1979 and, in addition to his testimony, offering Mr. Renton some marijuana during a courtroom recess. Mr. Renton declined.)

"To some, he's idealizing people who really are not good people at all — they're just criminals," said Larry McMurtry, who was teaching at Rice University in Houston in the 1960s and befriended Mr. Lyon while he was there working on the prison book. "But to Danny maybe they're good people who just never had a chance."

"He hasn't really changed his principles any at all since he was young, when I first met him," Mr. McMurtry added. "He's an idealist, to a large extent."

In a long, animated, tangent-filled telephone interview after he went to feed his pig (which turned out to be not his but a neighbor's, borrowed to entertain Mr. Lyon's visiting granddaughter), Mr. Lyon more or less agreed with Mr. McMurtry and asked: "Is there something wrong with me because of that? I don't know."

Raised in Kew Gardens, Queens, where his father, Ernst, an immigrant from Germany, was a doctor (one of his patients in New York was Alfred Stieglitz), Mr. Lyon ached to flee the conformity of an upper-middle-class life. He discovered "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" at a formative age and was fired by the intensity of James Agee's prose even more than by Walker Evans's pictures.

"Agee was a stone realist, and that had a huge impact on me," he said. One of the new book's more lyrical essays is a series of portraits Mr. Lyon took after driving to Knoxville, Tenn., in the late 1960s simply because he wanted to see Agee's birthplace.

But a more important influence on Mr. Lyon's work was Hugh Edwards, a pioneering but still underappreciated curator at the Art Institute of Chicago who gave Robert Frank — later to be a mentor and friend of Mr. Lyon's — his first solo museum show and guided the careers of many young photographers. Mr. Edwards was an intensely private man, but Mr. Lyon once managed to tape record a late-night

conversation with him. A partial transcript included in the new book, forming an intermission between photo essays, at times casts an interesting light on the tension between art and ideology in photography, a tension that exists in much of Mr. Lyon's work.

"People who purvey ideas in pictures are nothing anymore than propagandists of one kind or another," Edwards told him in the 1972 conversation. "A great picture is something that awakens a very different reaction from each person who looks at it."

Mr. Lyon, who has been awarded two Guggenheim fellowships, one for his film work, has called his work advocacy journalism and does not deny that it purveys ideas — if only the idea that everyone should be more aware of the pain and struggle around them in a consumerist, media-saturated world that tends to encourage isolation and apathy. "I think I try to hide it," he said of his worldview in his work. "But I'm a highly politicized person, and it's in my blood."

"If I work in China, it's because I want to humanize the Chinese, whom we tend to demonize," he said, adding with an emphatic laugh, "I'm trying to pump up the humanity."

But Mr. Lyon's approach has never been straightforward, and he said he felt a greater affinity with intensely personal photographers like Mr. Clark than he did with, for example, war photographers or photographers like Eugene Richards, a fellow former member of the Magnum collective whose searing work has focused on mental institutions, emergency rooms, wrenching poverty, AIDS and drug abuse.

"I wanted to change history and preserve humanity," he writes in the new book's introduction. "But in the process I changed myself and preserved my own."

The essays in Mr. Lyon's new book are often accompanied by diary entries or transcripts of taped interviews from the periods in which he was working, lending a Beat-inflected, often darkly funny sense of verité that can make the photos feel less documentary and more impressionistic.

Passages written in Galveston in 1967, where he spent time photographing transvestites, can sound like something from Denis Johnson's ragged short stories. One follows an existential discussion at a bar called the Gizmo: "Joe had been arguing with the bar's owner, Dixie, about whether or not he would ever break into the place and steal her money. It seems he did try, but was not able to get inside. Joe was extremely hurt that Dixie, an old friend, would think Joe would steal from her. Dixie was hurt that they'd ruined her door trying to break in."

Though Mr. Lyon's drive has diminished little throughout his career, he said it has finally begun to slow. He fishes quite a bit these days, in the Chama Valley in New Mexico and in Maine, where he has a cabin. He still turns down nearly every paying assignment that comes his way, though few do anymore because he makes himself hard to find. An Italian shoe company, he said, once paid someone $1,000 to track him down in New Mexico to see if he would do a fashion shoot, to which he agreed mostly because of the company's tenacity. He paces himself more between the jobs he assigns himself.

"I think it is a kind of performance on my part," he said of shooting. "It's more like athleticism or something. I wouldn't go near a war. But I function like that, and then when I do it, it's very intense for me."

He said he is quite happy with the new book, which he labored over despite its beginning as a kind of barter piece, adding, “There were a lot of sleepless nights over this.” As always, he said, he wished he could excise at least one photo the second it became too late. This particular one, taken around the demolition-derby scene in upstate New York, seems like a decent shot, a skinny, mulletted kid being hugged by a girl next to a gaping car hood, the kid seeming not to hug the girl back, maybe because his hands were greasy.

“I hated that guy,” Mr. Lyon said. “That guy was so creepy. I didn’t like him. I didn’t like his car.”

He laughed. “You put a camera in my hand, I want to get close to people,” he said. “Not just physically close, emotionally close, all of it. It’s part of the process.

“It’s a very weird thing being a photographer.”

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