



# WEBB OF COLOUR

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Magnum photographer *Alex Webb* is best known for his colourful street photography, but his influences are wider than you might imagine, as he reveals in this exclusive interview

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The grey Georgian symmetry of Somerset House in London is not the usual habitat of Magnum maestro and street photographer Alex Webb, but the surroundings are not entirely unfamiliar either. Just over three years ago, he was one of those featured in a group show here entitled 'Cartier-Bresson: A Question Of Colour', curated by William A. Ewing, formerly of New York's International Center of Photography. Recalling that exhibition, Alex says, "The thesis was that Cartier-Bresson hated colour, and yet these photographers who work in colour were clearly influenced in some way by Cartier-Bresson." He leans back in his chair to examine some of the prints that surround us: "Some of these pictures were in that exhibition," he notes. ➤➤





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Child and statue,  
Mexico, 1987  
[Left] Baseball fans,  
Cuba, 1993

IT'S THE first day of Photo London 2016 and we're sitting in the Naval Board Room, its tall white walls radiating with frames of vibrancy and energy from a dozen or so of Webb's best-known works. In the heart of Georgian London, his images offer a glimpse of Latin America's chaotic street life: Cuba, Haiti, Mexico, countries that have fascinated him for nearly 40 years.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that Alex's vivid imagery, succinctly encapsulated in the titles of some of his books (*Hot Light/Half-Made Worlds*, *Under a Grudging Sun*, *The Suffering of Light*), is the antithesis of Cartier-Bresson's gritty, monochrome-only moments. But the connection between the two is stronger than it seems. Webb cites Cartier-Bresson's *The Decisive Moment* as one of two books (the other being Robert Frank's *The Americans*) that were "key to me as a young street photographer". Indeed, he was shooting in black and white when, at only 24, he became a Magnum nominee in 1976. By the time he became a full member of the agency three years later, the transformation from black and white to colour was nearly complete. Yet he readily admits the impression left by Cartier-Bresson's 'Paris' still resonates in his images of Latin America 40 years later.

**Whenever I come back to look at one of your pictures, I see something else. There are many layers and great depth.**

"Yes, there are many layers. I'm intrigued by complexity, it's not just a photographic thing. In the general sense I'm intrigued by the complexity of the world. It's almost as if the longer I live, the less I know about it. One of the things about embarking upon the kind of travels I did in the mid-70s is that I learned a tremendous amount about cultures that were utterly different to my own."

**They were very different to suburban New England where you were raised.**

"I don't think it was suburban, but in New England there's a kind of grey-brown reticence to the society. But you go to Mexico, you go to parts of the Caribbean, Latin America, you feel this ➤➤➤"





## I'm looking for something that's more novelistic than journalistic.

sense that there's life in the street. Life is lived on the street, whereas in New England it's all behind closed doors. And I found that really exciting, to wander into a place like Haiti, or wander the US-Mexico border and see the intensity of life."

### Why did you choose these places as opposed to anywhere else?

"I'm not sure if a photographer or an artist ever really knows why they choose what they choose. In 1975, I was photographing predominantly in the US. I was working in black and white, and I was taking kind of slightly alienated pictures of the social landscape, in the spirit of people like Lee Friedlander. You know, big empty parking lots of supermarkets, little dogs, unhappy looking children. And the pictures were a little alienated, sometimes a little funny, a little ironic, but I didn't feel that they were resonant on some level. They weren't expansive, I wasn't moving forward. I felt I'd hit a dead end and I happened to read Graham Greene's *The Comedians*, which is a novel set in Haiti, and it fascinated me, it scared me. So I read a little bit about Haiti and I decided to go there."

### Was this when you were still at college?

"This was in 1975, a couple of years after college. In Haiti, I saw a world of intense vitality – as well as tragedy because Haiti has a horrific history – and I was fascinated. So I started working more outside of the confines of New England or New York. I was working in black and white, but I began to realise that something was missing. And that was the sense of colour, because you really feel in these places that colour somehow is embedded in the culture – in a way that's utterly different to New England. It's a very visceral type of colour; it seems embedded in the culture."

### So a life-changing moment, not just as a photographer but as a human being?

"Absolutely. I learned something about places that I had no idea of at all. It's ➤





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Children in courtyard,  
Mexico, 1985  
[Left] Paraguay, 1990

different being in a university and reading about The Terror during the French Revolution; it's a whole other thing to see it in Haiti during a time of election."

**You once said: "I like the notion that things that are paradoxical can coexist." Is that something you consciously look for in the locations you visit?**

"I'm not consciously looking for anything! It's about how certain things attract me. This kind of photography of wandering the street is really about working from the unconscious or the subconscious. You're responding before you can think. At times, if you know too much about a place, at least in your initial stages of being there, that can hinder your ability to perceive it. That's why I hold off reading too deeply about a place until I've at least made one trip, so that my visual knowledge of a place parallels my intellectual knowledge."

**So it's more serendipitous?**

"Serendipitous and visceral. You are photographing from the head but it's not from the rational part of one's mind, it's from some other place."

**Can you describe your approach when you go out with your camera?**

"I walk out the door and start to wander. I think it was Cartier-Bresson who once said that he smelled the possibility of a photograph. It's like you walk down the street and there's something there that intrigues you. Sometimes you're not even sure what it is, but you hang out for a little bit and things start to happen. It's a sense of sniffing the possibilities."

**Is that a sense you've developed more keenly over the years?**

"I think so. I think I've always been drawn to things that intrigue me. At certain points of my life I'm attracted to certain kinds of things, at other times I'm not. Right now I'm trying to photograph the USA, which is a whole new development."

**What's pulling you back to the States?**

"I've wandered the world for so many years, and maybe now I'm capable of





## This kind of street photography is really about working from the subconscious.

confronting my own culture! [laughs] But confronting it in a different way than I did in the mid-70s. Back then, I was always kind of ironic and extremely questioning, and felt very few positive things about the US. Now, I have to say that the country is going through a very strange political time right now, and I don't want to even begin to express the craziness of that, but in photographing the United States I want to move beyond that. I want to be able to find things that move me personally in ways that aren't just about scepticism and irony. The first significant project completed on the US was the book on Rochester, New York, *Memory City* [a collaboration with his wife Rebecca Norris Webb]. Rochester is a rust belt town. It went through a tremendous decline as Kodak declined, and I've been looking at cities in the US that are in a similar kind of state, sort of rejuvenating themselves, or changing."

### **Memory City seems like a eulogy to film and Kodak. Do you miss the colours of those emulsions from film days?**

"Look, there's no doubt about the fact that I would have been happy continuing to use Kodachrome until I died. You know, there's something that I really loved about Kodachrome. Having said that, I now work digitally. The transition has been somewhat of a struggle. I didn't want to do it initially, but Kodachrome was discontinued in 2009-2010, and now I kind of feel like I've resolved the issue. I do like what I do with the digital camera now. I miss the tangibility of film, though. That's the one thing really, almost on a philosophical level, that I miss. I like the notion that you can touch something that comes out of the camera."

### **How did the collaborations start with you and your wife Rebecca?**

"It started with our Cuba project. We had been to Cuba 10 times, probably, working separately on two separate projects.

I was photographing the streets of Cuba, ➤➤





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candy, Mexico, 1990  
[Left] Mexico, 1996

very much in the spirit of the rest of my work, and Rebecca had discovered all these collections of animals all over the island – in people’s homes, in private zoos, in public zoos – particularly birds. She was going to call her project ‘Three Rooms’, because she met someone in Havana who said, “We have three rooms in our house, two are for our birds and one is for us!”

“Just before our last trip to Cuba, we somehow hit on the notion of combining the work. As we began to play with our work, all of a sudden different kinds of meanings began to emerge. It ultimately began to create a more multi-layered portrait of the island of Cuba. So it happened extremely organically, it was a total surprise to us.

“I’ve also been photographing in Brooklyn itself. This is going to be another joint project that Rebecca and I do. I’m almost treating Brooklyn like I treated the world for 35 years, because in Brooklyn I can take the subway and I can be in one of the three Chinatowns that exist in Brooklyn in 40 minutes, or the Mexican community, or the Caribbean community, or the Russian community. So I’m trying to wander all over Brooklyn, capturing the cultural variety of it.”

**So will you return to photograph the US-Mexico border if Trump gets to build his wall there?**

“I have no idea. There’s no doubt that once one does a place, unless one has some special kind of new insight, one doesn’t return with the same passion. But it’s always possible that something intriguing will take me there. I tend to respond on more visceral and subconscious urges than specific aspects of something that’s happening more short-term politically. I’m looking for something that’s more novelistic than journalistic.” ×

**Keith Wilson**



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