

Interview with Ed Panar (2012)

by Benjamin Thomas

Contact Editions

About Ed Panar

Placing equal weight on editing as well as shooting, allows Ed Panar to fully explore the potential that his images have when contextualised. Individual images work together to produce everything from humour to reflection within the viewer. The idea here is not that the images compliment one another to clarify the subject matter at hand, but rather that they work together to resist one simplistic reading. To look at Ed Panar's pictures over and over again, is to learn something new each time, both about the photographer and also the places he photographs.

BT: How important is the act of walking to the work itself? Is it a part of your practice, or is it just a means to an ends?

EP: Walking is a very important part of my practice. I grew up walking a lot, so it's just normal for me to experience the world in this way. I like to think of walking as a form of meditation. All of my work begins from the simple act of walking through space and looking around, so I feel that this process is at the foundation of my work. It is also a practical thing, since I have never owned a car and I don't even have a driver's license!

BT: I've always loved other "walking artists". People like Richard Long (*A line made by walking*) or even Robert Adams (*Summer Nights, Walking*). Do you resonate with either of these artists? Who do you resonate with when you set out to work?

EP: Robert Adams is absolutely a huge inspiration to me. I always feel humbled and inspired by his work. I feel like it resonates with me more and more as time moves on and I've been able to spend more time with his books and writings. But lately what has been resonating with me the most has been coming from outside the realms of art and photography. I've been



immersing myself into the work of some writers and thinkers from the emerging Speculative Realism philosophy 'movement', especially the subgroup associated with what they call Object Oriented Ontology. From what I am beginning to understand – and much of my current understanding is on a purely intuitive level – there is a lot of fascinating overlap with the way they are describing the world and the way I feel photography relates to the world. Hopefully I'll be able to speak more clearly about this down the road, but for now I'll all I can say is that it has been deeply inspiring.

BT: What are you looking for when you wander out to photograph? Do you have to have some clear ideas in your mind or are you capable of just simply "looking" without being overclouded by other distractions?

EP: This all depends on where I'm shooting and the status of my projects at that moment. I often do have mental lists of things I would like to shoot, but many of those things are more abstract feelings or vague ideas rather than specific scenes or subjects. But I'm mostly interested in simply being wherever I am and being open to the particular configuration of reality in that particular space and moment. It's not quite as easy as it sounds, and I find this experience to be quite humbling at times. It is very easy to find yourself projecting ideas onto the world and reacting in that way instead of being open to just what is, and that is the zone where I try to operate and explore. It reminds me of how some writers describe the process of writing when the act itself becomes transformative as your thoughts, ideas and expectations bump up against each utterly unique situation that you encounter openly. When it works out right you always end up making things that you couldn't have imagined beforehand.

BT: How do you find working in the same place that you live (*Golden Palms, Walking Home*)? How does this differ from working in a completely separate environment?



EP: I always work where I live, often for a bunch of boring practical reasons. I do get to travel a bit and I always enjoy the opportunity to photograph different places, but most of the time I simply am where I live. I have been able to live in a few different cities over the past decade and learning how to make new pictures in new places has been an important part of my development. I think it is easy to take for granted how well we think we know a place, even the places we call home. I'm always humbled by the experience of being in a place that feels known and discovering something new and strange about it. This experience can come from something as simple as turning left on the road you always turn right on. I find

that the way I approach shooting a place changes over time in unexpected ways so I really enjoy the process of spending time walking around and getting to 'know' a place. I'm fascinated by the places we live and how complex and strange our relationship to our everyday environment actually is. And of course trying to figure out how to get at some of these things through photographs.

BT: How did your feelings towards L.A. as a place change during the making of *Golden Palms*, or how does photography often change the way you understand a space?

EP: My idea and feelings about LA as a place radically changed during the course of living there and shooting there. Photographing something like a city is a deeply interesting challenge to me because you quickly start to feel the difficulty of trying to articulate something so elusive and abstract. You start to realize maybe the way we thought to photograph a place isn't actually getting at it, so you try another way. Although I didn't see many of my pictures in the moment, through the process of shooting I was always reminded of the ever changing surface of things. Eventually this became my subject matter in a way. The places I shoot might just give me different ways to approach these issues. All the things I couldn't see and what I didn't expect to find in the photograph is what helps me reconsider and rethink my idea of place. Luckily these things are in never ending supply, and so it's just a matter of getting out of our own way half the time.

BT: Photography can be a very lonely pursuit, yet many people find humor in your work. Do you see things and instantly find them funny, or do you look for something else and then create humor through editing and juxtaposition?

EP: I like to have fun with my work and try not to take things too seriously. I am interested in lightness in general and how humor can open pictures up to new readings and experiences. Some of my favorite artists are comedians. But while there certainly are times when I'm laughing out loud when shooting, finding something humorous in the world and making a funny picture are two very different things. Sometimes the funniest pictures aren't the ones we saw as or found humorous in the moment. For humor to be effective, especially in photographs, it requires a certain amount of genuine surprise. For me this can happen in the moment of shooting or be brought out in the pictures or presentation later on through the editing and grouping of pictures together. There's no formula for it, it's a very intuitive thing that you simply need to allow space for and hope for the best. But I also have to mention that I don't necessarily think humor alone has the ability to sustain a great project, since it is so subjective. So although it's an important layer to the work that I try to have present in the mix, there always have to be other things going on and it has to be ok if the pictures aren't seen as funny.

BT: You talk about how the editing process is incredibly important to your work. Please could you talk us through a little bit about what this practically means?

EP: Editing is an ongoing part of my practice and is at least as important as shooting, if not more. Most of my projects are long term and ongoing, so the editing process is very slow. At this point I have so many pictures to consider, it can be a bit overwhelming. Part of the way I deal with this is making sure I spend as much time as possible looking at pictures. I see this as the first step in editing since I feel like it can be very difficult to work with images that I don't know very well. Part of this review process is looking at the pictures in different forms, as the context and presentation of an image affects how they look, feel, and function. So I scan negatives, sort and group on the computer, put them into book layouts, make print on demand books, started a few tumblr blogs, print thumbnails to flip through and sort by hand, edit and present on my website, and so on. I'm usually working on several of these things simultaneously and find that by going back and forth between different viewing modes and projects things eventually start to make slightly more sense. Patterns and ideas that I haven't noticed before may start to surface. And by making sense I mean their unique logic or potential becomes more apparent. The



single most important part of the editing process might be simply time, as it is often only over time that the strange pictures (which for me usually means the ones with the most potential) really stand out.

Editing is also important in that it raises a lot of questions. You start to question all these different aspects of the pictures that may not come up when you're just scanning through work that you just shot. Ultimately it's one big game, one that I find endlessly fascinating and thoroughly enjoy playing. After you do all these things of course the next time you go out shooting something has shifted. The angle of thought is slightly skewed or expanded since last time. Things look different. Then when you start going through the next batch of pictures the process starts all over again.

BT: Photography feels like it is going through a change where the structure required to create a body of images is being questioned or consciously disregarded. Imagery can feel disparate, non-linear or unconnected, but still be gathered together to form one piece of work, even if a lot of the links are at first unclear. This has always been present, but seems to be more prevalent now. I understand how you do this when you're making projects that are clearly about one place, but how do you go about constructing narrative or cohesion in projects such as *Same Difference* or *Relics*? The possibilities of what you can photograph for these projects seem endless. Is this not overwhelming?

EP: I have to agree, it certainly does feel overwhelming and endless at times! But I generally regard that as a good feeling. I'm not really interested in 'themes', at least not in the normal sense of the word. With a project like *Same Difference*, I'm interested in the theme of no-theme, to put it another way. This way of working influences my other projects as well and I try to have fun with the idea of 'theme' in a lot of my projects. When it comes to structuring a project in this way, it's quite an intuitive act. Much of the editing process involves simply looking, being open, and asking questions. Sometimes you are directing yourself not towards something specific or known, but instead you try to move away from the qualities you find less interesting. A lot of the time you are simply guiding it along and hoping to notice when the right ratio of vague cohesion emerges. And when I do find myself overwhelmed, I try to remember that there are patterns to how I'm photographing, but I just haven't cracked the code yet. Since I am usually working from my archive, these projects do tend to have a somewhat finite range of material.



I have to admit I have a tough time explaining this process. It's the type of thing that appears to make even less sense the more closely I look at it. And every time I go out shooting again, the whole process begins anew. There's something about the way that shooting and editing becomes a type of endless feedback loop that appeals to me.

BT: Your work has a sincerity to it. It feels closer to being in the first person than much work. It is not sarcastic. That might sound obvious but at first glance I almost expected a level of sarcasm, as it is so commonplace in the photography of what we deem 'ordinary'. Do you share this view of your work?

EP: That is very nice to hear. I generally don't like things that have a judgmental or authoritative tone, so it's not something I hope to see in my work either. One of the qualities I have always loved about photography is its consistent ability to show us things we might not have noticed at first. So for me it's always more interesting to leave things as open as possible to accentuate this quality. This goes back to my interest in trying to show a sort of 'nonhuman' world on equal footing without diminishing it or over dramatizing it. This also reminds me of the Gerry Badger essay on what he calls 'Quiet Photography', which is an idea I've felt a kinship towards ever since I read an early version of this essay in 2001.

BT: Finally, what are you working on now? Is there anything you have coming up that you'd like to share with us?

EP: Most recently, my newest book *Animals That Saw Me* has just been released. I'm also currently working on a small book series with Gottlund Verlag for my project *Salad Days*. The next installment due early next year. Last but not least, I'm finally having some film from the past year processed for the first time in months, which is very exciting. I'm looking forward to see what happened!