



Photographer George S. Zimbel still sees the light in the darkroom

Bill Brownstein, Montreal Gazette
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The world of digital photography has largely passed George S. Zimbel by, and Zimbel has largely passed the world of digital photography by. But as standoffs go, this one is splendid.

Zimbel, a Montrealer for more than three decades, is a maverick in this digital day and age. He is an old-school photographer: he favours shooting black-and-white images on his Leicas, then developing them in his Plateau darkroom.

He eschews the new “digital diarrhea,” wherein photographers shoot thousands of images without really focusing on what it is that captures their imaginations.

“It’s too easy now,” says the soft-spoken Zimbel. “That’s the problem. All you have to do is press the button, and you don’t have to worry about buying film anymore. That was a concern in my day, but no longer.

“Although I have to admit I have a little digi-camera that I use for fun, I follow a more primitive approach for my photo projects and it seems to work for me.”

That it does. And for many others.

This is a big year for Zimbel. His latest book of photos, *Momento*, was just released. He is the subject of two documentaries, *Zimbelism* and *The Night I Shot Marilyn*, both co-directed by his son Matt Zimbel and Jean-François Gratton.

And the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts is presenting an exhibition of the 86-year-old lensman’s work from six decades back. *George S. Zimbel: A Humanist Photographer*, running until Jan. 3, features 70 stunning portraits, from innocent images of a baseball-tossing kid with an oversized glove to those iconic shots of Marilyn Monroe over a subway grate with her skirt billowing alluringly in the breeze while on the set of *The Seven Year Itch*.

These photos cover but three years in a 70-year career. Zimbel’s work has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Look* and *Life* magazines, and has been hung in New York’s Museum of Modern Art and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, among other museums.

Zimbel appears amused, standing in the midst of his MMFA retrospective. The 18-minute *The Night I Shot Marilyn* is playing on a TV screen in one corner. Visitors scurry about the exhibition, marvelling at both the detail and the simplicity of the works.

“To be perfectly honest, I didn’t know I was a ‘humanist’ photographer before this exhibit,” he says, flashing a mischievous grin. “It was only recently that I found out this was a genre. But while I’m proud to be part of it, I still think of myself mainly as a documentary photographer — a streeter.”

If one were to thread all of Zimbel’s photos together — focusing on both regular and famous folk such as presidents and movie stars, and on both spartan and historical settings — what a tale it would tell about America. The photos evoke humour and poignancy, social and political change.

Zimbel was born outside Boston and later lived and worked in New York. But disenchantment with the American political scene led him and his family to move to Canada in 1971.

“It was my form of protest against the Vietnam War. Even though I had served during the Korean War, I was totally opposed to this one. I decided the family needed a lifestyle change.”

The family settled in P.E.I., where Zimbel tried his hand at farming. But 10 years later, he gave up the plow and they settled in Montreal — to the delight of his wife, Elaine (with whom he just celebrated their 60th anniversary), and four kids.

Zimbel claims he’s an “upbeat photographer” but that he’s not an “upbeat person,” that he remains disappointed with mankind, particularly politicians.

“But as long as I have my music and my darkroom, I’m happy enough,” he says. “I would rather stay in the dark.”

Zimbel is nothing if not patient. He took those photos of Monroe in 1954, but didn’t develop them until 1976. The negatives, along with a series on U.S. President Harry Truman, even survived a fire at his studio in 1966.

The new breed of photographer would have waited about 20 seconds before bringing pics of Monroe out to the public. Zimbel had no doubt about the quality of his shots, but he just doesn’t like to be rushed.

Yet Zimbel would be the first to acknowledge that Marilyn has been very good to him, allowing him to pay the bills and bringing him a modicum of fame. His Monroe photos can be found in nine museums and dozens of private collections around the world, and galleries have fetched up to \$5,000 for individual prints.

“The funny thing is that I never spoke to Monroe that night. I’ve always felt that the less visible you are as a photographer, the better you are,” he says.

“Still, I’ve never considered myself a celebrity photographer, despite the fact we live in such a celebrity-obsessed world.”

He says his favourite pictures in the MMFA exhibition are of the young baseball pitcher, taken in Zimbel's hometown of Woburn, Mass.

"What made that more significant for me was that the older kids in town built that ball field, including the dugout, for the younger kids. That's unheard of today."

Zimbel was 14 when he got his first camera. His first assignment was taking pictures of his high-school football team. "I didn't know what the hell I was doing, but I did it anyway.

"What I eventually learned was that it didn't matter what kind of camera you had, but that the key was having a great eye."

Zimbel would later attend New York's Columbia University and then pursue his interest in photography, both in the U.S. and while serving in the military.

"I'm not taking pictures like I used to, but I'm still at it and I'm still loving it," he says.

"The real beauty of these old-school photos I take is that they'll still be in good shape 200 years from now." Pause. "Which is more than I can say for myself."

AT A GLANCE

*The exhibition **George S. Zimbel: A Humanist Photographer** runs until Jan. 3 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1380 Sherbrooke St. W. For more information, call 514-285-2000 or visit mbam.qc.ca.*

***Momento**, a book of 118 photographs by George S. Zimbel published by Black Dog, is on sale at the museum's boutique and bookstore. Cost: \$34.95.*

*The feature documentary **Zimbelism**, co-directed by Matt Zimbel and Jean-François Gratton, is set for release next year.*

***The Night I Shot Marilyn**, co-directed by Matt Zimbel and Jean-François Gratton, is playing in the MMFA exhibition and will be shown on Bravo soon.*