

RITA LEISTNER: EVERYBODY CRIES IN THE CUT BLOCK

Interview *for drool.* by Kerry Manders . . .

I met with acclaimed Canadian documentary photographer Rita Leistner twice in the lead-up to her most recent exhibition, “The Tree Planters,” which opened October 21st in Toronto at the [Stephen Bulger Gallery](#). Leistner spent the 2016 and 2017 planting seasons embedded with Coast Range Contracting, a tree planting operation in British Columbia. She is in the midst of this body of work, which will take her back to the bush for the 2018 and 2019 seasons. The work is a sort of homecoming for Leistner, who spent 10 years (1982–93) as a tree planter, sometimes as the lone woman on a team. Leistner has spent her lifetime defying gender stereotypes and proving herself in male-dominated industries.



Rita Leistner (in red) when she was a tree planter, 1989

We talked about the logic of return, the choreography of technology and bodies that it takes to get a shot, missing shots, crashing well, wrong turns, and crying in the cut block. Talking with Leistner is intense: *she's* intense. It's tempting to describe her as larger than life, as epic as the portraits she makes. She's a no-bullshit, tell-it-like-it-is interview subject who looks you in the eye when she speaks. This is my conversation with the passionate, animated, deeply committed documentarian who—like me—loves a good chin wag.



Rita Leistner, more recently

I was surprised when I opened the document of images you sent me in preparation for our talk. I wasn't expecting these arresting portraits. Why focus on the tree planters in this way, and not tree planting per se?

The tree planters are the heroes of the project. For me, the focus is their work. There are many other bodies of work that show the cultural life of tree planting—the camaraderie at camp, the dirty gloves on the ground. It's much easier to shoot a pair of gloves lying on the ground than to run around the bush chasing someone. But I love those other kinds of shots, too, and I take those kinds of pictures. I'm shooting everything. That's the way I work: I'm going to amass a gigantic amount of stuff and this project will take many forms. There's going to be a film. There's going to be a book. I'm shooting stills, shooting video, flying drones, out there on my own, mostly, because I can't afford to pay someone to do a three month assignment...



Meaghan Bissett

But you had assistants, yes?

I did: Marsha MacLeod the first season and Jade Brown the second season. These portraits can't be done without an assistant, because my assistant is carrying the strobe light and we're both running around simultaneously. To have the quality of light that you see in these portraits, I need that strobe.

How does the strobe light affect the subject? Doesn't it make you too present, as it were, for the shots to be candid?

Oh they don't even notice the strobe light—it's too fast. And "candid" is the wrong word, suggesting that I'm shooting without the subject's knowledge. I would call this "action photography." It's like sports photography, really—like shooting an obstacle course race. Subjects aren't stopping or posing for me, but they know I'm there. It's not staged, but it's not candid. As a documentarian, I don't want to get in the way. I don't want to interfere with what my subjects are doing. And Garth Hadley, the owner of the tree planting company, has done me this generosity of welcoming me. I don't want to interrupt his business; it's all about production in tree planting. The last thing I want to do is slow down production. And that goes for the tree planters. They're trying to work and I couldn't be with them for months if I interfered. I work around them. And because I know tree planting, I can anticipate where they're going to go next. I need to be ready *before* they plant their tree. I'm anticipating and dancing around the planter and my assistant is anticipating and dancing around me. I elbow her and point to where I need her to go and tell her to get on my right side, like, *now*. The planters are not stopping or changing anything they're doing because I'm there. But of course they see me. I might be with the same planter for two or three hours. I'm

anticipating where the planters are going to go and I'm running in front of them—*backwards*—to get the shot. My assistant is basically a human light stand that's never still. We can't stop to set up a light. That light has to be as dynamic as I am. It's *crazily* physical.



Andrew Dallas



Cynthia Vietch



Cleo Carpenter



Franco Benti

Is your work as strenuous, as physical, as tree planting? It looks grueling.

Um, no. It's highly physical but *nothing* is as physical as tree planting—at least, nothing that I've ever done in my life. And that's precisely what I want to show, because there's this idea of tree planting as fun—as a campy, communal party. I'm hoping that people who have tree planted will look at these pictures and feel it actually represents what tree planting looks like, what it feels like. I'm 53. I couldn't plant trees anymore. It's too hard—it's too hard to plant 2000 trees in a day. I can barely do what I'm doing. At the end of the day, I'm just completely

physically shattered. And yet I have to go home—to camp—and back up stuff and look at all my footage and make sure everything is working and get everything ready for the next day. Maybe I'm asleep by 11pm and then up again around 5am.



Maria Agueci

Did you—do you—keep the same schedule as the planters when you're shooting? Did your days begin and end with them? Do you camp with them?

Oh yeah. It's very remote so I have to be in the same place. I'd say I kept a similar schedule, roughly. I get up at 5:15am. The vehicles pull out at 7am. I lived in a tent for my first year of shooting—and for all my years of tree planting. When I went last year, I had a big tent for my gear, a tent for me, and a tent for my assistant. I had a generator because I have to charge all my gear. I have a 4-wheel drive Jeep because I need to be independent; I have my own satellite and aerial maps on my iPhone. And it was very challenging, working out of a tent with all the electronics. And it's *cold*. It drops below zero almost every night. It's *really* cold.

Remind me: where exactly are you?

Central and Northern B.C.—often at high altitudes. And so the cold is brutal. I had been thinking about getting a trailer after that first, incredibly grueling season of shooting, living out of a tent. But I didn't want to be the asshole photographer with a trailer. I wanted to live like the planters as much as possible. But then I realized that some of them had trailers and the foremen had trailers . . . so this year I bought a camper trailer and it has helped a lot, largely because it has a propane heater in it. In the morning I can wake up and turn on my propane heater and get ready: I make instant hot chocolate and instant coffee with Coffee-mate: that's my thing; it's what I get up for! And then I get all my gear sorted and

prepared. I have to be ready to go by 7am. And my assistant makes the lunches. That doesn't seem like a big deal, but it takes at least 10 minutes and every 10 minutes counts.

I'm always curious about the question of access. For this series, how does it work?

Access is a huge issue in a project like this, of course. I have a really big “in” because this tree planting company that I'm shooting is owned by one of my old tree planting buddies. I also have a reputation as a tree planter and a photographer. Both of those things help. And as I would with any subjects, I treat the planters with enormous respect. They're the most important people in the room. That respect and that trust is *everything* to access. I'm good at getting access, at gaining trust, because I'm very honest, upfront, and approachable. And I'm genuinely interested in the subjects, or I wouldn't be doing this. People respond to that. They know I'm interested in what they're doing and that I'm passionate about it and that I'm working as hard at my job as they are at theirs. I introduce myself to each person; I tell them about my project, about what I'm trying to do with it. I ask them to come and talk to me—let them know that they can ask me *anything*. And that's true—they *can* ask me anything. Same goes for you, by the way.



Laurence Morin



Matthew Muzzatti



Sandy Miller

Okay: Let's talk cameras. How many cameras do you use?

I have my medium format for the stills. It's a Phase One camera, so it shoots super high res for these gigantic prints. I want to make prints that are suitable for a major gallery. The work is so hard to get, so expensive to make. It's not a dress rehearsal. There is no point in doing anything but the highest level possible. I knew it would be a number of years in the making, and I thought: *I'm going all in.* I'm making the best possible pictures I can because I'm not going to go back and do it better, later, say when I'm in my sixties. I can barely keep up with it now. *No dress rehearsal: I've got to get it now.* For video, I'm shooting on a Sony A7SII, which is beautiful, does 4K, and is easy to use. I've had a couple of DP buddies for a couple of days here and there to do some work on the ground with me—Scotty Wilson and John Price. And I have a DJI drone—I'm on my second now, slightly upgraded. I crashed the first one. They crash remarkably well. I've managed to fix that one so now I have a spare. I've learned that drones are meant to crash. That's been really fun, learning to fly a drone: nothing makes me happier than learning something new. It's the nature of being a documentary photographer who works in long-form tradition: you have to learn to do it all yourself. So those are my main cameras, along with a smart phone that I use for my Instagram. I got an Instagram account two years ago, partly because I had a 22-year-old assistant and she set it up for me. It's really easy to use now that I know how!

Easier than a drone!

Oh my god, exactly. A lot easier than a drone! And a lot easier than a Phase One camera, which took me a long time to figure out how to use properly—to get

everything to the sweet spot—to get my flash and my camera working together in such a way that I’m getting exactly the picture I want. Because I’m shooting fast-moving subjects, with sync strobe, there are a lot of technical limitations. It’s super high key. So, technically, things have to be working perfectly. I would say that until this particular Phase One was invented (and Hasselblad now makes a similar one), I couldn’t have made these pictures, this way, because I need to be at f22— I need really large depth of field. I also have to use a fast shutter speed: 1/500th of a second. I need a leaf-shutter camera to use at that kind of sync speed because your average Canon DSLR syncs at 1/250th of second. That would blur—it wouldn’t work for what I’m doing. I need a super expensive leaf shutter lens that I can only get with medium format. I wanted medium format anyway to go big. And of course sometimes it’s not bright out, so in order to still shoot with such a small aperture, I need to be able to up the ISO. On this camera, I can shoot at ISO 800— super high for a medium format digital camera. And it looks stunning. With my old Hasselblad, I couldn’t shoot over 100 ISO or it would look like crap. And I use a portable 500 watt Profoto strobe—it’s like the Cadillac of lighting.



Maeve O'Neill



Gilbert Gosselin



Tavana MacLeod



José Kaze

You speak very passionately about light...

I am very passionate about light, about lighting. A lot of photographers hate it. You know, Cartier-Bresson, in *The Decisive Moment*, said something to the effect of using artificial lighting is a crime against the nature of a photograph, the nature of reality. I studied with photographer Arlene Collins at ICP because of her reputation as a master of lighting—she had been a student of Lisette Model. Ruth Kaplan,

whose incredible “Bathers” photographs are currently in the front room of the Stephen Bulger Gallery, was also a student of Lisette Model. Model trained, among other people, Diane Arbus. And of course Model is not as well-known as Henri Cartier-Bresson but I would say she’s *at least* as influential. Larry Fink, Kaplan, Arbus, and *everyone* who followed them—documentary photography with a focus on, say, more composed portraiture—is all Lisette Model. She trained so many photographers. The fact that everyone’s heard of Cartier-Bresson and no one has heard of Lisette Model is the rampant sexism in our industry—in our whole culture—at work. She was easily as important as Cartier-Bresson, if you ask me. Wait: not even if you ask me. She just *was*. So, Model taught Collins and Collins taught me about lighting. She also taught Naomi Harris. You can see some of the things Harris and I share, stylistically. You’ll hear many people who don’t use lighting say that its use means that the work isn’t “real” or “true” documentary; usually, those people simply don’t know how it works, how to use it. With lighting, I’m trying to create a specific aesthetic, and it’s not going to be everyone’s thing. I’ve been doing it my whole career, and was often dismissed as someone who wasn’t “journalistic.” What does that even mean? I’m not staging anything. It’s completely reportage, in that sense.

I think you just raised my next question. I mean, I’m looking at these portraits of other people and I can’t help but read them as also, and necessarily, autobiographical. The story you are telling is also autobiographical—in a way that runs deeper than the fact that you used to plant trees, too.

Absolutely. And this has been the struggle with making the film, too. How do I tell a story about others *and* attend to the autobiographical without losing the nuance and the subtlety of how that identification works? I’ve taken a couple of wrongs turns, for sure. I’m hugely invested in the stories that I tell—I’m not a detached journalist. At the same time, I don’t want this work to be all about me and my journey. Tree planting is widely considered a coming-of-age narrative. And people like me who were part of the first generation of tree planters are now in mid-life, or older. And mid-life is *another* new beginning. I feel like I’m coming-of-age into the next phase of my life. So visiting these young people, I see the parallels, the connections; it’s part of the appeal of this story. Talking to them is so inspiring. The lessons that they’re learning in the field, I’m re-learning, re-living.

Such as?

Literally, you have to plant one tree at a time—there’s no other way to do it. But that’s also a great metaphor, isn’t it? “One tree at a time” applies to photography, to the difficulty of the kind of photography that me and many of my colleagues choose to do. To show this work is also to show the *work* of photography. One day at a time. One picture at a time.



Russell Robertson



Matt Holbrook



Mouhamadou Sady



Oceanne Bourque

It's amazing how we need to learn the same lessons repeatedly, isn't it? Often the simplest things prove the most complex.

Simple things you can grab. I like going back to the simple, because it's about process. About moving. And that's part of what this project has been—going back to the physical, going back to the forest. I find I miss being in the cut block (that's the term for the area authorized for re-forestation). Everyone cries in the cut block. This is incredibly difficult work: it's long and it's hard and it's buggy and it's muddy. It can be miserable, lonely work. But it's also incredibly beautiful, and

can feel completely freeing, full of joy. The cut block is extreme—it intensifies the emotions, whether happy or sad or disappointed or proud. The cut block offers you the time and space to embody these emotions. And, really, to cry. Sometimes, out there, I feel like the luckiest person on earth.

Is there a specific image in this series that exemplifies this mantra, “everybody cries in the cut block”? That illustrates the simultaneity of the difficult and the liberating?

For sure. One day I took a photo of this tree planter, a woman named Jennifer Veitch. She’s an awesome tree planter. And she was leaping over top of a mountain and you can see mountains in the background. *It’s the shot of a lifetime.* And when I looked at it on my computer, it made me cry. It makes me cry just thinking about it—I’m crying now.

This image makes me think about my sister tree planting and me tree planting and my whole life of fucking sexism. I’m 53 years old, and I’ve done all of this fucking work, and I’ve just spent an entire three months in the bush working so hard with all this gear and all these logistics. And with 25 year olds next to me acknowledging how hard all of this is. Then I go on the internet and there’s a post about Nikon and how they got 32 guys to test their cameras? How great an opportunity is that for those photographers? It gives them *such* a leg up. And, really, they couldn’t find any female photographers to test their equipment?

Really? It’s not about “Oh I feel hurt because Nikon’s sexist.” It’s more like “What the fuck: I’m trying to survive in my career. Could I be working harder? And then I have to look at *this*?” And inevitably I read the comments about how women simply turned down the chance. Yeah, right. Nikon offered you a free camera and money to go test their equipment and you said “oh no thanks” probably because you were menstruating or you had to take care of your kids or you were shopping or for sure you had something more interesting to do than advance your career? What a *lie*, first of all. And it’s like, “Oh fuck off.” We *still* have to listen to this?

I’m going to show you this picture of Jennifer. Look at this picture of a phenomenally strong, beautiful woman just fucking killing it. *And I got it. I was fucking killing it, too.* This, right here, is what drives me.



Jennifer Veitch

[Rita Leistner](#)'s website

[Kerry Manders](#) is a Toronto-based writer, curator and photographer.

Author: Tony Fohse

Tony is an Ottawa-based photographer. [View all posts by Tony Fohse](#)

Tony Fohse / October 22, 2017

drool. TONY FOUHSE / Proudly powered by WordPress