Surrounded by meaning

Environmental portraits tell a deeper story by integrating a person with a place.

Environmental portraits can go well beyond just describing the appearance of the subject. They can define character and personality, and even tell a story by integrating a person with a place. When making environmental portraits, photographers should look for meaning in the subject’s body language and expression, and should suggest the nature of the work the subject may be doing through the surrounding environment.

In my first example (right), a portrait of an elevator operator at her post in Shanghai’s famous Peace Hotel, my goal was to say something about the woman, her job and the historic art deco hotel in which she works. I took 20 to 30 pictures and never said a word. I just kept smiling and working from a vantage point on a balcony just above the elevator door. Eventually she grew disinterested in what I was doing, stood as far back as she could within the small niche in front of the elevator door, put her hands behind her back, and gazed up and away from me. She seems discreet, polite, yet also shy, boxed-in and far, far away. Surrounded by symbols of a colorful past, she must stand and wait until her elevator can carry someone else into the future.

I made my second example (opposite, bottom) while traveling upriver between Long Xuyen and Chau Doc in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta. We spent an hour or so visiting with people in a small village devoted to the manufacture of joss sticks used to create incense for Buddhist rituals. Almost everyone who lives here seems to be in the incense business. I made this environmental portrait of an incense worker who turned from her task to stare at me over her shoulder. The businesses are family enterprises, and I have a hunch that the woman at the top of this image is further up in the hierarchy than the woman at the bottom. She adds a bit of context to the worker who assembles thousands of crimson joss sticks. It is not an easy job, and this photo tells us why.

Although most of my subjects look directly at the camera, I never direct their responses. I prefer natural expressions to the standard posed smile we see in so many.
portraits. The man in my third example (upper right), sitting in front of his house in the ancient walled city of Pingyao, China, has probably seen the World War II Japanese occupation of his country, the coming of the Communist regime, the upheaval of China’s Cultural Revolution and the opening of China to the West, which launched an era of great change. Here in Pingyao, deep in rural Shanxi Province, things move more slowly than elsewhere. This man rarely leaves this spot before his front door. The world must come to him. And in the form of tourists, it does. I saw a life’s story in his gaze, his patient posture and the well-used façade behind him. He shows no emotion whatsoever, yet he seems to look life squarely in the eye as it passes by.

The environmental portrait above conveys the tediousness of this woman’s job of making the joss sticks used to create incense for Buddhist rituals. At top, we see a life’s story in this Chinese man’s gaze and patient posture, as he waits for the world to come to him in the form of tourists.