



Eyebuzz Fine Art  
Matt Licari: Recent Work  
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*Interview – June/July 2007 – Tim Thayer & Matt Licari*

**Tim Thayer:** *What interests you most about your photography? (Composition, subjects, conceptual (capturing time, etc))*

**Matt Licari:** Well I've always loved to explore. I think that's been the real pull of photography for me. It gives me permission, even as an adult, to do some snooping, some climbing, for me to scour my environments and stare at something. I grew up in the Bronx, but I used to hike in Maine a lot when I was very young, and I'd always go off the trails to explore the woods. Then when I got older, my need for exploration was satisfied through my love of skateboarding and searching for places on the street to skate. And from skating all over New York City day after day for a number of years, I further fed and developed this need to discover and explore my environment. That's what I love about photography - it's not painting, it's not drawing, it's not sculpture. The process is rooted in reality - you're actually out there, getting your hands dirty, looking at something in the *physical* world - therefore you establish a relationship to the physical world that becomes very important. Photography is simply looking at the real world and examining it - saying, "hmm, look at the way the light transforms that building" or "check out how this intersects that if I stand *here*, and how that color relates to this color" and finally, "how can I organize these shapes and values into something coherent, something that is exciting to *me*?" I love to explore and learn, and my camera aids me in that. It's become as necessary as my ears and eyes and nose and mouth; it provides me with a tool to analyze subjects and to be expressive in doing so. You have the whole world, and then suddenly there's just this small rectangle. It's a way for me to edit, out of the real world, *exactly* what I want you to see. There are themes that I am attracted to within photography, there are things at which I seem to repeatedly aim my



camera, but the thing about photography *itself*, the thing about the camera *itself*, is that it enables me to have two things at once: a way to analyze the world and to simultaneously respond creatively. And

at a certain point, what you love about taking pictures is *taking pictures*. It's just that. It becomes *as* enjoyable as the products that you had set out to make at the start. It is a means to an end, but really, as with all artistic processes, the means becomes fully joyous and fulfilling.

**TT:** *How do you see your role when photographing a portrait? Are you a director of sorts, or do you try to take a more passive role? I ask because you said that with the large format camera, it is not a quick process (you can't hide behind a wall and get a quick shot). Also, how many images do you usually shoot for the portrait work?*

**ML:** It depends whether or not I know the person, how well I know them, my level of comfort with the person or situation, my physical and emotional reaction towards a person or even the space they occupy - a lot of things come into play. Yes, these images were shot with a large format camera (4x5 view camera), so there is an inherent level of confrontation that I have to address while working. It's a rather large piece of equipment, so there's a lesser element of surprise in that sense, but there is plenty of room for capturing a moment regardless of the size of the camera. I usually work pretty quickly (setting up equipment, metering, etc.),

so I can make an exposure within 2 or 3 minutes of spotting a subject if I decide it is necessary. Sometimes moving as quickly as possible and making only one or two exposures is appropriate to express what I want. Making too many exposures can (sometimes) work in an adverse way, and the subject may begin to goof off in front of the camera and pose. I am more interested in their personality than their persona, so knowing when to act quickly is key. Many times, a portrait can be made before the person really knows what's going on. Asking to make a gas station employee's portrait with a view camera is not quite a common request - I get a lot of responses like, "Really? Why me?" This level of disorientation can be advantageous if you move quickly; people often reveal themselves most when they are shocked or confused. Then there are other instances where I may try to assume a more passive role and allow the subjects to move within the frame as they please. In these situations I tend to shoot more frames, to ensure that they will not only have an expression or poise that is exciting to me, but also to guarantee that their position within the frame supports the composition in a dynamic way. Being more passive and taking my time can (again, *sometimes*) allow subjects to reveal themselves more honestly, because they often become increasingly relaxed after more and more exposures are made. I may talk with them in between or even during exposures, I may direct certain things, like a hand gesture, or even ask them to sit down or stand up. Each subject demands a different response, which is why it was exciting for me to make these pictures. If I had a recipe for a portrait, I'd become bored very quickly. I could tell you a story about each one, and other than a few standard photographic techniques, nothing would be the same.

**TI:** *Because the camera is larger, and I assume expensive, I would guess that it is not something you can carry with you at all times - do you scout out potential locations and/or people and return later, or do you set out on a day of shooting (or week or whatever the case may be)?*

**ML:** I do different things. Sometimes I may be in a place without my camera and decide to return to it. Other times I may be out all day shooting, driving around and stopping in different places and then walking around, then getting back into the car and continuing like

that. Sometimes I ask a friend to come with me, maybe for another pair of hands, or for company, or even for safety in a rough area. I will often go out to run errands or drive somewhere and instinctively take my camera and film bag along for the ride, just in case. I would leave them in my trunk year round if it weren't for the damage that temperature changes do to film, so instead I leave only my tripod, and the rest I shuttle between my apartment and my car. The film is very expensive (1 color negative costs \$4.25, including processing), so I try to be certain whenever making an exposure. I normally go out with most, if not all, of my film holders loaded, which is about the equivalent to one roll of 35mm film (19 holders, 38 sheets of film - 2 per holder). But photography is a real-time practice, and people's expressions change within fractions of a second, so I can end up shooting a lot of negatives in one day. I haven't quit my day job!

**TI:** *Originally we had seen some of your skateboard work. Were you seriously/heavily involved in skateboarding yourself?*

**ML:** Yes, I have skated for about 8 years. In middle school I went to Florida for 2 weeks to visit my grandmother, and there was a nearby skate park, so I spent most of my days there. Once I got back to New York, I kept at it, but I didn't know anyone who skated in the Bronx, so I just practiced on my own when I had time. Then in high school, I met a few kids in my area who skated, and that was the beginning of a very intense 5 years. On weekdays we'd skate this schoolyard, "81", everyday after school until it was dark. That was our home, I sort of grew up in that schoolyard. On Fridays and weekends we'd all get on the el train at 231<sup>st</sup> and Broadway and scour the city for spots. Those were amazing days, we covered so much ground, met so many people in so many different neighborhoods; we really learned about the city. And all we needed was a few subway tokens and a couple of bucks for Gray's Papaya hot dogs! I think skateboarding is an amazing activity, I think it's a good idea for any kid to pick up a skateboard, for so many reasons. It gives kids a motive to get off the streets (while actually staying *on* the streets), and to be excited about a non-linear physical sport. It's a great outlet for people who don't want a team sport but want to expend a lot of energy. It's not overly competitive - most skaters are usually

very encouraging to one another. And it builds character. You have to fend for yourself a lot – you're not on a court or a field. You're out there, getting dirty, cut up, learning how to bandage a sprain, talking with homeless people for advice on where to eat cheap, getting kicked out of places, the whole nine. I'm aware that skating has developed a reputation for breeding anarchists and rebels, and in all fairness, there is a tad bit of truth in that. But in my opinion, the kids who have those tendencies would have developed them regardless. That's a matter of parenting, not skateboarding, to set the record straight. The people you meet are from such a myriad of places, too. In my old crew, there was an Italian kid, some Irish kids, a few Albanian kids, one kid from Belarus, a Haitian kid, a bunch of Puerto Rican kids, a bunch of Black kids, a couple of Koreans, a Philippine – I mean, we had a cross section of New York City between us. And very few of us had the same economic background. There's kind of an unwritten rule that you don't mess with another skateboarder, because we've all seen each other land a trick with style, and we've all seen each other break a bone trying to land one. I still skate, not as much as I'd like, but whenever I can. You got me going there! As for skateboard photography, that's how I started. For a while, I wanted that to be my career, but I soon realized the expressive potential of photography, and moved on. It really helped my technical craft, though – all that lighting work, the wires and syncs, freezing motion – I wouldn't take any of it back. You get hit with a stray skateboard every now and then, though.

**TT:** *Part of the reason I asked about skateboarding is that skateboarding is something done outside or independent of society's structures (although you literally ride on society's "structures") – my point is that you don't take skating in school, there aren't older mentors and teams (for the vast majority of skaters anyway). Did you consider not going to school for photography also?*

**ML:** Well, I'd always wanted to go to college. I never really had doubts about that. And I had always thought I'd go for something like writing or journalism; I loved to write. But by my junior year in high school, although I still enjoyed writing, skating had really opened me up to the world in a different way. I began looking for a more exciting career path, one that was based on exploration and the real world, and I began

to realize that I was not willing to put my time into writing. When I stumbled upon photography, through drawing and painting, which I'd done for many years, it was an absolutely perfect fit. There were almost no questions. I suppose I could have studied it on my own, but I have never been a fan of mediocrity; if I decide to do something, I'm going to want to learn every little thing there is to learn about it. But there was another reason I chose to study photography in school. My uncle, John Rooney, a very fine photographer who is still making work, and hands down one of my most important influences to date, studied under Jan Groover and John Cohen at the conservatory at SUNY Purchase, and once he saw how seriously I was considering photography, he immediately suggested I look into studying there. I actually didn't have enough photographs to submit, as I had just picked up a camera a couple of months before the application deadline, so I submitted charcoals and a few acrylics. The guy who looked at my work at the portfolio review was unimpressed, so I went back to my art teacher at Fordham Prep, Marilyn Honigman (another huge influence), and discussed it with her. She knew little about photography and my uncle knew it would take some time for me to develop a body of work, so I decided to continue drawing, and I actually made it past the review on my second try. Once I was in, I declared my major as photography within the School of Art + Design, and now here I am. I think it's different than skating in some senses – it really is more complicated first of all, so you do need some help. But I think it just depends on how you learn best. Around the time that I started drawing more seriously, I began to study jazz improvisation with Larry Bluth, who I'd already been studying with for about 6 years (until then we'd worked mostly on classical approaches and the basics). When I expressed interest in jazz, his music of choice, and began to study that intensely, I realized that I wanted some form of teacher for my visual art as well. I think it's important to understand how you learn best, and embrace that.

**TT:** *Having taken a lot of pictures I know how hard it is to get good ones - through the viewfinder it always looks great but in the end it often turns out not so good. Did you always have a good eye? Did you take pictures as a kid (with the family camera)? Did it come*

*easy?*

**ML:** I don't remember taking too many pictures as a kid – my dad was usually too worried that I would drop or brake the camera, which was a valid concern, because I dropped almost everything I touched (and continue to do so, though somehow not as much with my current equipment...). The point is that I mostly stuck with drawing. I started drawing superheroes from Marvel comic books. I remember around 1990 Marvel had a series of cards with starch-white borders (don't ask how I remember these details), and for some reason my best friend Chris and I deemed it necessary to try and draw them all and make comic books (which consisted of fragmented plot lines from the scattered minds of two elementary school kids, photocopied and stapled together randomly, and sold for 10 cents a piece). I don't remember picking up a camera seriously until my junior year of high school, and I can't say that it did or did not come easily, but I was definitely excited enough by the results that I kept at it. I think through drawing (and always being a visually stimulated person) I gravitated towards things when I looked through the viewfinder/ground-glass (formally, content-wise), and the camera just seemed to be a perfect fit and the next natural step.

**TI:** *Subject matter is obviously a large element in your work and the more I look at it, also composition...what is the ratio of importance between subject matter and composition?*



**ML:** Form and content play equal roles. Sometimes the content can enhance the form, or vice versa, but that's more picture-to-picture than a general rule. The two really are inseparable (for me – there are obviously many pure formalists and concept artists out there). In terms of subject matter, I generally work a lot without thinking too much, and then lay out my negatives on the lightbox to see what I was after. I usually group a few together, and end up with a bunch of smaller themes or ideas. Then I either free-write or journal about them, or do some research about a subject, or put them away and revisit them later. I usually end up dealing with images as individual statements, concerning myself only with the one I'm making, not its prelude or its sequel. I deal with the editing and sequencing later. I know some people who work better by having a specific idea of what they want to do,

and then going out and executing it. My buddy Matt Calabrese, for example, will call me and say, "I want to do a whole series on this, and I'm going to shoot it just like that, and it's going to be printed this size, on this paper, and it'll be about that." And he's an excellent photographer, so of course the series ends up being incredible. It's like Bach to Lester Young – both results are beautiful, but one is composing and the other is improvising. I will, however, every now and then become interested in a topic and think up some ways of photographing it – but as soon as I reach the site, I branch off and end up photographing fifty different things, and maybe only end up with one or two images that relate to the original idea. Which means at any given moment I probably have fifty different projects brewing. It's a long process, but it's totally worth it when you end up with one completed! In terms of form, though (since most of that relates to subject/content), form is the stimulus that actually makes me set up the camera. Just yesterday I was driving and made one of those obnoxious New Yorker u-turns because I saw this tree that was strangled by a bright green vine, and after convincing the approaching security guard that I was not "spying on the gated community" and that I really was only interested in *that one tree*, I got ready to make an exposure. But being the cloudy, unpredictable day that it was, the sun slipped behind a veil of clouds, and having other engagements, I packed up and left. Looking back, I might have been interested in the ways in which vines and overgrowth eat up trees, or perhaps these invasive vines being neglected in an otherwise "private" community (just making things up here), but the reason I *stopped* was the *form*; the *light*. You can't have one without the other, or at least I can't.

**TI:** *What does it mean to the people you photograph - is there a common connection you share with them, or is each person/situation different?*

**ML:** Every situation really is different. It depends on so many variables, it's hard to say. As far as there being a common connection (like a specific feeling or sentiment), I can't say that there is. Some subjects are nervous, some are confused, others are excited. Many are indifferent. I try to approach each subject with my whole self,

though. I suppose that's a recurring attempt throughout all my work. I don't always succeed, which is why I continue to photograph. It keeps me connected and grounded, in touch with reality. The only goal I have that stays the same is the attempt to be fully present in each situation. The times that I succeed in doing so, I am rewarded in much more wholesome ways. I think it's a matter of respect, for your subjects, and for yourself. It's getting easier and easier to become sedated and let a filter slip over your eyes (and ears, for that matter). We move from situation to situation these days, iPod-ed and Bluetooth-ed, with Red Bull running through our system, as if we're trying to play connect the dots without actually drawing the lines that connect them. And I do it too! But you have to keep catching yourself, and reeling yourself back towards what's *actually* real. Not a movie playing on your cell phone while you walk down the street, but the people you weave through on that street, and the sounds and smells of that street. I just try to stay connected, and it's something I have to do everyday. It's not like you get it and then you have it. If you think you have it, you've probably lost it.

**TT:** *Do you like to have your own picture taken?*

**ML:** In photography school, you become a subject often. So I suppose "indifferent" would be the best word. I like having my picture taken by people I don't know, like at a party or something, so I can make an absurd face and have everyone who doesn't know me convinced I'm crazy. No, I feel like most people probably do – I'd like to look decent in a photograph, but if I don't, I couldn't care less.

**TT:** *Who are some of your photographic influences?*

**ML:** I have always been very inspired by Diane Arbus and August Sanders. I also like Robert Frank, some of Mitch Epstein (American Power, The City), David Hilliard, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Jan Groover, Paul Strand, and I have to say, I love some of Ansel Adams work. There's a book called "Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs", and it has (in my opinion) some of his better work. He's an over-published artist though, and since there are so many mediocre photographs in circulation, he is often misrepresented. But his finer work is among my favorite, hands down (Frozen Lake & Cliffs and

Silverton Colorado, for example). Aside from established photographers, I'm also very influenced and indebted to some of my own contemporaries and teachers. Daniel Salemi is making very interesting and different work, and also Kenta Mitome. In a different way, I'm influenced by some of my teachers – not necessarily by their work, but by their teaching. I've studied a lot with Sergio Fernandez, and more recently with Jed Devine and Anna Collette. Jed really opened me up to dealing with images in a totally different way – nonlinearly, and much more sentimentally and emotionally. Sergio has helped me understand my own methods and work habits, and how to utilize them effectively, which has helped me to be more direct with the intent of my images. Anna really introduced me to color, which is currently (not necessarily forever, of course) my preferred medium. And I can't omit artists like Van Gogh (especially his drawings, and the way he translates light with paint), Philip Guston, Cézanne, and Matisse.

**TT:** *What about outside of photography?*

**ML:** As I've mentioned, skating has been a huge influence, opening me up to culture and sub-culture, and to an intimacy with the streets. I've always loved the unforgiving boldness of comic books too, especially their use of color and strong lines. Along similar lines, graffiti has played a role in my development as well – artists like REVS, SERF, SPEK (RIP), REP 1, and SKUF. I used to ride the el all over town, and they gave me lessons in color and style every ride. Aside from visuals, music has been with me my entire life, much more so than photography, and I attribute most of my inspiration to it.

**TT:** *How does another medium (music) influence you in your photographs?*

**ML:** Music doesn't necessarily influence my work in a literal sense, but it energizes every bone in my body in the most fulfilling way, actually more than any visual art has ever done. I really dig Billie Holiday, Pres (Lester Young), Bud Powell, Lennie Tristano, Bird (Charlie Parker), Larry Bluth, Robert Johnson, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Television, Al Green, Motown, Reasonable Doubt (Jay-Z), specific Eric Clapton (with John Mayall, Cream, Blind Faith, Howlin' Wolf London

Sessions) to name a few. The thing with those guys is that they are *so* present in their work. I've never listened to Billie or Pres or Bud (in their good years) and thought, "something's missing." It's a complete package, they offer themselves in their entirety, and it's beautiful. This is probably the most difficult question to answer, because I could give so many answers. I mean, there are the obvious influences that music can have, like lyrical value, emotional energy, and those kinds of things. I suppose the most clear answer I could give is that music is the most direct reminder my need to stay creative, open, and sincere. I've studied piano every single week, for many years, and never in my life has one lesson been like another. As a human, I am accustomed to habits, and it's easy to let a habit or routine slip into other aspects of my life. Music (and art) is a way of keeping each moment a fresh moment – not forgetting the last, but not occupying any space but the present. My piano teacher once said something like (paraphrasing), "You don't need to be *thinking* to be *fully aware*." It isn't a forceful routine, this process of staying open; it's not a battle. I remember a line in the movie *Shine* (about the mentally challenged pianist), where he's having trouble with a difficult piece, and his teacher keeps telling him, "It's a *battle* with the keys! It's a *battle!*" When I battle, I lose. It's surrender. It's simple, really.