

Jocelyn Benzakin died March 31



She was one of the liveliest, most honest, creative, interesting and pivotal people in the fast-moving field of photojournalism when it was at its peak. She began her career in New York in photography as a teenager, having immigrated from Morocco. She worked in several jobs, including at Time magazine, then founded and directed the New York office for Sipa Photos, one of the largest international photo agencies, and then created JB Pictures where she continued to come up with ideas for stories and nurtured some of the best talent in the business, including Peter Howe, Mark Peterson, Mark Asnin, Maggie Steber. Reacting to the New York rat race and the narrowing limits of photojournalism, she then founded the Sag Harbor Photo Gallery, where she exhibited a great deal of photography, particularly documentary photographers such as Burt Glinn and Gilles Peress, and the work of younger, unrecognized talent.

Jocelyne Benzakin (1945-2005)

Written by Robert Long

Jocelyne Benzakin

A Passion For Photography

By Robert Long - East Hampton Star

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"To me, photography is art," said Jocelyne Benzakin, who shows some of the most important photographers of the past century at the Sag Harbor Picture Gallery. "Art is anything you do with passion. It could be a chef that invents an incredible cake."

"What we have here," she said, pointing at a beautiful old wooden cabinet painted a faded rose in her Wainscott house, "is art. I can feel the spirit in it. You can feel the passion. Or Pollock - you can feel his passion, his anger; you can feel him in his work."

"Alfred Stieglitz, Minor White, Paul Strand - it's about passion." Ms. Benzakin has shown all of those photographers, plus Gilles Peress, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and dozens more who made fine art photography what we know it to be today.

Crossing Boundaries

She's also on the lookout for younger photographers, and shows their work as well. Some visit her gallery with their portfolios; others come by word of mouth or when she visits Web sites and photo expositions.

Of the difference between photographs that resonate with the viewer and those that don't, Ms. Benzakin said that fine art photography "comes from a different part than someone buying an Instamatic and pushing the button. It can motivate you. Some people use photography as a simple tool to make a salary and have less passion because they do the same thing every day. And you can see that. The photos reflect it."

Some photojournalists are able to cross that boundary. W. Eugene Smith, whose photo essays for Life magazine on everything from war to a day in the life of a country doctor, "had a foot in both worlds," Ms. Benzakin said.

"More Than Just Pictures"

"And someone like Gilles Peress - his work is journalism but it's also art.

He's a classic, and just gets better and better. They are much more than just pictures." "When you pick up Peress's book on Bosnia you become a victim of the book. It's that strong. You forget who you are and feel the pain of Bosnia. You simply can't put it down." Ms. Benzakin believes that great photographs have an impact unlike that of any other record or recreation of important events.

"When you think of World War II or Vietnam, well, we've all seen so many movies about all that, but I think of the pictures. They are what come to mind. You remember the naked girl running down the street after a napalm attack, the man being shot in the head on the street. Photography registers on a different level, it goes to a different part of your brain than movies."

Grew Up In Morocco

"Photography is much more important than we think. When I think of John Kennedy or Bobby Kennedy, it's pictures I remember."

Ms. Benzakin, who is in her 50s, started the gallery in 1995, but she's been involved with the medium as a photographer, an agent, and a dealer since she was a teenager. She grew up in Morocco, where her parents had moved from their native Algeria "because they were killing Jews there." Her father worked as a photographer. "He did the tourist agency photos, he photographed the King. He was quite a name. But this was Morocco; there were not too many photographers there."

Childhood Fascination

"Probably unconsciously I became interested in photography as a kid; I used to hang around my father's lab. I spent a lot of time in the darkroom, fascinated by the process." In Morocco, she said, "there was a lot of anti-Semitism. I was the only Jew in my class at school. 'Benzakin' in Hebrew means son of a sage, or wise man. It's common - sort of like Schwartz in America."

In 1959, there was a revolution in Morocco and "the French had to leave. My parents had divorced. My father went to France and I came here, to Forest Hills, with my mother."

A Career At 16

Growing up in Morocco, despite anti-Semitism, "was wonderful. But coming to Queens from Morocco was like coming from the 16th century. I mean, I had never been on a bus, I'd never seen television. We didn't have a phone. I'd never been to a restaurant."

"There, we had family meals with cousins and aunts, my grandmother, neighbors, that lasted forever. The contrast coming here was amazing, especially when you're a teenager and are interested in everything modern." Ms. Benzakin's career began when she was 16. "My mother needed help, so I had to go to work. I went to an employment agency, knowing nothing. I was a bit early, and had brought a doughnut and coffee with me. Well, I dropped the doughnut on the floor, brushed it off a bit, and ate it. Remember, I came from North Africa and was raised in a culture where if you throw out food you kiss it first, or you give it to the poor."

Learning By Doing

A man who happened to be passing by stopped to help her, and said, "I can't believe you're eating that." Ms. Benzakin said he "was moved by that. He had been in a concentration camp. He said, 'Not too many people would do that.'"

"Coincidentally, the man was looking for someone to work in his photo agency. "There were about 10 people looking for that job, all college graduates. But he called me the next day and offered me the job."

Ms. Benzakin began working at the agency, and did her homework.

"After about two years, a woman who handled the foreign department got sick, so I took over. I didn't know what I was doing. And I had no sense of money. In Morocco, I wasn't raised with money. We didn't have allowances or anything; there's nothing to buy after school, maybe a few pieces of candy. I didn't have the money consciousness we have here or in Europe."

Two Photo Agencies

People would call her to ask for photos "from, say, France. 'I have a 5:30 deadline,' they'd say. So I'd say, 'If you want it, it's \$5,000.' I just picked that number so they wouldn't buy it. But they would! So the agency promoted me and sent me to Paris."

Ms. Benzakin had become increasingly interested in taking photographs herself, and eventually became a correspondent in England for a French magazine, sold photos, and, when she was about 30, worked as a photographer and a picture editor at Time magazine. "There were very few women in photography then," she said. She was not a competitive photojournalist, though.

"I'd go to parties and wouldn't photograph people who didn't want to be photographed, like Woody Allen. Everybody else would be all over them." She also started two photo agencies in France. Her accumulation of connections with "hundreds of photographers and dealers" in the

photo world, here and abroad, has served her well in her career as a dealer.

Respected Again

"There's no one formula" to being a photo dealer, she said. "I deal directly with contemporary photographers, and also with estates and collectors."

When Ms. Benzakin was starting out, "there weren't many collectors or many photo galleries. Once in a while there would be a big show, say at the Museum of Modern Art. Avedon or something. Even in Paris there were very few shows." There was a lot of action "during the time of Stieglitz and Steichen, and the Photo League," she said, "but then it died down. And now it's re-emerging, and has become really respected again, especially in the last 10 or 15 years."

"A Different Level"

"When I go to photo shows in New York there are people from small towns in the Midwest showing their work. All of these little places in America I've never heard of now have photo galleries. And look at all the museums that are showing photos now."

Ms. Benzakin is a bit dubious about some uses of technology - altering photographs on the computer, for instance, as is sometimes done with newsmagazine covers. "It's something of a problem for me, perhaps because of my age. I realize the power of a computer program like Photoshop," which can be used to alter images, "but I haven't seen anybody who has taken photography to a different level with it, a different place, the way, say, Jimi Hendrix completely changed the guitar." "I haven't seen such a portfolio yet. But that doesn't mean I won't."

Admires Mapplethorpe

Ms. Benzakin was fortunate, she said, to have been able to rent the space for her gallery. Her landlord, Marty Trunzo, the barber who owns the building and whose shop is next door, picked her although there were "a lot of people on the list ahead of me. I think I was 15th, there were antiques dealers and so on ahead of me, so I didn't think I'd get it." "But he said, 'You'll bring culture to Sag Harbor. We have enough antiques shops already.' And he liked me because he'd been in World War II, and had been in Algeria then."

Among the many photographers Ms. Benzakin admires are Robert Mapplethorpe, who "was important because of the way he opened up things both in photography and in society," although she finds his later work "too intellectual," and Minor White, whom she is particularly enthusiastic about these days.

"So Much Gratitude"

"It's the details. Minor White is on a different level. He never had the reputation other photographers had in those days, probably because he was gay. But I look at photographs in the gallery for weeks on a day-to-day basis, and he holds up. To me he's on the level of Ansel Adams and Edward Weston." "I was very fortunate in my life," Ms. Benzakin said. "I worked with people who had a passion for photography. They all had so much to offer me, and I have so much gratitude for that."

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<http://zonezero.com/magazine/obituaries/benzakin/benzakin.html>