

Contemporary Dialogues: Brian Finke

Shane Lavalette: I've spoken with many photographers about how they first came to photography and what inspired them early on and it seems that just about everyone has a book that they came across and thought, "Alright, this is it." Is this the case for you? If so, what book?

Brian Finke: When I was a freshman in high school, I started taking pictures for my yearbook and newspaper. My photography teacher in high school recommended a book to me called *Let Truth Be The Prejudice: W. Eugene Smith, His Life and Photographs*. What was so moving about the book were the personal letters written by Eugene Smith and being introduced to such powerful images for the very first time. The social awareness aspects of his documentary photography were also early motivations for me to start making pictures. I had photographed many traditional documentary subjects throughout art school and shortly after, from heroin use in the South Bronx to child labor in India. I came to want to make images that spoke more about my own society and background and I began to make the photographs that would become my first book, *2-4-6-8: American Cheerleaders and Football Players* (Umbrage Editions, 2003).

SL: Your new book, *Flight Attendants* (powerHouse Books, 2008) – much like *2-4-6-8* and your other projects, *Most Muscular*, *Frat Boys*, *Samurai Bears*, *Tennis Camp* and *Paintball* – takes us into the peculiar world of a particular group of people. What exactly draws you to these subcultures?

BF: In a broader sense, I like photographing unique cultural obsessions. Growing up in Houston, Texas, both of my younger sisters were cheerleaders. They had gone to these big cheerleading competitions in Florida. So that was how I originally came upon doing the cheerleading work. While photographing cheerleaders, I became interested in the costuming and pageantry involved around the sport. During this time, I also began traveling a lot to photograph on assignment for publications. And while traveling I became interested in photographing flight attendants.

Other subjects, such as the frat boys and Samurai Bears, were magazine assignments but they are things that I would have loved to photograph personally. This is also how the *Most Muscular* story began; it was an assignment for Men's Journal Magazine. I am very fortunate to be at a point where I am being assigned stories that are so close to what I photograph on my own.

SL: On the spectrum of “documentary” and “fine art” where do you place your work?

BF: I consider myself a documentary photographer. In my pictures, there is a combination of capturing moments and setting up and controlling situations, but I like the storytelling aspect of it. Also, my original interest in photography was very documentary-driven, from the photographers that I first started to hear about and the photographs that I was drawn to.

SL: I imagine that flying around making photographs for Flight Attendants was a lot of fun but quite exhausting. How long were you working on this project? How many places did you travel to and from while photographing?

BF: I began photographing flight attendants on domestic airlines such as Delta, JetBlue, Hawaiian, Hooters Air, Southwest and Song airlines. I quickly realized that, along with the reality of air travel today, I also wanted to create much more “classical” images. So I began going abroad and traveling on airlines such as Air France, Qantas, and British Airways. In London, I visited a flight attendant school, complete with emergency rafts and billowing smoke. Then continued east, traveling on Air Asia, Thai, Tiger, ANA, Japan, and Cathay Pacific. And finally, went to Reykjavik on Icelandair.

SL: For a project like this, having proper access is essential. How were you allowed to photograph on the airlines and in the flight attendant school?

BF: It pretty much boiled down to lots of persistence. Working through photo editors, I also pitched stories to help get access to photograph. Some were fashion portfolios dealing with how high end designers have been hired by airlines to design their uniforms and other stories were travel related. Either an airline was interested or wanted nothing to do with it. Domestic airlines were a little more restrictive but going overseas, I was able to go to the flight attendant schools and was allowed to photograph in situations that just weren’t possible here.

SL: In Alix Brown’s introduction to *Flight Attendants*, she draws a parallel between the cheerleaders you’ve photographed and the stewardesses in these pictures, noting their similar “efforts to maintain the front of camaraderie, in their performance of choreographed activities, in their elaborate codes of appearing.” Is this the central focus of the work?

BF: Both of these groups are performing, they have their set rolls and activities and their uniforms. I was originally drawn to the costuming involved. As I said, after photographing cheerleaders for a while I started doing fashion stories for magazines. The fashion aspect was my initial interest in the flight attendants, which was right in front of me when I started traveling and flying weekly on assignment for magazines.

SL: How much are the photographs only about the surface elements of your subjects and what does that leave us in the way of their actual lives outside of being flight attendants?

BF: When I photograph, I definitely look at it as a collaboration between the subject and myself. For some of the pictures – the ironing, putting on the make up (the cover picture on the book) – I actually went to the woman’s house before she went to work and just asked her to go about the normal activities that she does before heading off and flying for the day. A lot of my images are made this way. I observe things happening and then get ideas from natural activities to recreate situations based on what I have observed.

SL: In the ‘70s, being a flight attendant had a certain allure, attracting female models and movie stars – a glamorous profession that brought to mind words like “freedom” and “independence.” Do you think the women and occasional men in your photographs are still drawn to this promise of glamour?

BF: Glamour, the allure of travel and the mystique around the lifestyle in general... I do think it still exists. When I was in Hong Kong, I was speaking with some flight attendants and they were telling me about that allure and how flight attendants are kind of seen as “adventurous” or “exotic,” that a mystique still exists around the profession. I don’t think so much here in the States, but I do think it still exists overseas. It was also part of the reason why I wanted to go to Asia, to make photographs that felt a little more nostalgic.

SL: Many of the photographs are quite humorous. I’m thinking of the images of attendants in the middle of practice drills, the photograph of the perplexed-looking Hooters girl on Hooters Air, or the shot of the stewardess carefully selecting a toothbrush at a convenient store. What role does humor play in the work?

BF: I think it is part of my personality. I like the balance of doing things that have some humor but then also things that might feel more nostalgic. I think it would be easy to do all of one – to only have humor, poking fun at or sarcasm – but other feelings are important for telling a story with photographs.

SL: For many photographers, publishing a book of photographs is one of the most rewarding moments their career. Would you say the same?

BF: For me, publishing a book is the most rewarding thing to do. It’s why I started taking pictures. But also publishing images as mini portfolios in magazines and having exhibitions in galleries are very important and rewarding outlets that reach different viewers. That’s one of the things that I think is great about photography – it can work in all of these different formats. But doing a book, like so many people say, is a nice sense of completion. And looking at books is how many people originally discover photography.

SL: How involved were you in the editing and design of the book?

BF: Originally, I did an online book dummy. It was very simple, basically like flipping through the pages of the book. I wanted a blank page and an image, allowing for the viewer to just look at one image a time. PowerHouse was really great in the sense that they left a lot of the creative control up to me and I was able to work very closely with designer Mina Suda. Everything she did was very clean and elegant and I loved the real subtle things that she did with the text. She did a great job and completely understood the look and feel of the book that I was envisioning.

In terms of sequencing, we played with things slightly. It was like a year of printing out color copies on paper, flipping through things myself and setting it down for a few months to go back to it. It was pretty close by the time that I was sequencing it with PowerHouse and with Mina, but we changed a few things that helped with the flow.

SL: Considering all of your work as a whole, which in many ways can be seen as an accumulation of unusual ethnographic studies, what do you hope that viewers take from it?

BF: I photograph subject matter that is very familiar and relatable. A lot of times people tell me, “I am buying your book to give to a friend of mine that is a flight attendant” or “so-and-so that I know is a flight attendant/cheerleader.” Whatever people take from looking at my images works with me.

SL: Now that *Flight Attendants* is complete, what’s next for you?

BF: After flying around photographing the flight attendants for the past few years, my wife has come up with the idea of photographing construction workers. I’ve started doing it this summer in New York and hope to travel to other cities in different countries around the world.