

Recoil

by Om Rupani

Photographer's Statement

These images belong in the Portrait genre, but they are not conventional portraits. The conventional portrait goes something like this: It's usually commissioned by the subjects because they want an image of themselves. They want this image in order to display it in their environment, or sometimes to give it to a loved one to display the image in their environment. Sometimes the portrait is for public display or publication if the sitter happens to be a public figure. In that case the portrait affirms the sitter's public persona. In modern times, the public figure may conspire to have a humorous portrait made, in that case an element of irony is added to play off the sitter's public persona. Conventional portraits depict the subject in a flattering light---the subject looks poised, calm, attractive---someone worthy of having their portrait made.

There is none of that at work in this series.

There is another class of portraits we could call the Documentary Portrait. In these images it is clear that the making of the image was not initiated by the subject of the portrait but by the artist. The artist is out there with his or her implements, hungry to capture humanity, to show life as it is and to dig up something of the underneath and bring it to the surface. In photography one could look at the work Dorthea Lange, Mary Ellen Mark, Diane Arbus, Robert Frank and many others. In painting we can see such portraits in the works of masters like Cezanne, Van Gogh, Manet and many more. In these images the subject is not even identified by name. It is not their social importance that is the reason for the portrait. It is their humanity that is of interest to the artist and to the viewer. We don't need to know anything about Van Gogh's mailman or his landlady to appreciate the portraits he made of them.

This series of portraits does not belong in this last class of Documentary Portraits either. There are a couple of similarities though: These images were initiated by the photographer, not the

subjects. And the humanity and emotions of my subjects (though not their biographies) is the whole point of this series.

I wanted to explore a particular juncture in the human experience---a moment or event of great challenge in our lives. A point in time when we feel overwhelmed by life, when we feel knocked down by life. Moments when we feel life is too much and we can't bare it, that we don't have the wherewithal to make it through this crucible. And yet, we do of course. We find a way. These are the parts of our life-story that if we had the choice, that if we were the authors of our narrative, we would never include these events and emotions in our story. And yet, these crucibles are the forces that determine our mettle, they set the course of our remaining narrative. They shape our world view, how we live and love and face the next crucible.

So I got a bunch of friends and friends of friends into my studio. I put them in front of my camera, and I asked each to visit such a moment of crisis in their past and to let flow whatever emotions that come out of that zone. That's what you see here.

I have titled this series Recoil because often while exploring this emotional terrain the image of a spring or pendulum would come to mind. Our experience of anything is never just a singular moment in time. It feels more akin to extending or twisting a spring. What follows from that overwhelming event is a whole series of oscillating emotions and states. Many emotions come up over a period of time. And when enough time has passed, that state of Recoil settles into a new equilibrium.

Here I think I can see and feel the different places each person went in their journey. There is anger and indignation and fear and loss and terror and prayer and forgiveness and rage and vengeance and insanity. The series depicts the experience of the subjects who were generous enough to share these intimate zones with an outsider. And in it I think is a reflection of what any of us has gone through in our own crucibles.

---Om Rupani

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