

The
Photography
Monthly
Interview

Joel Meyerowitz

Five years ago, the World Trade Center in New York was attacked by terrorists, killing thousands of people.

This is the story of one man's mission to document what came next

WORDS BY IAN FARRELL PICTURES BY JOEL MEYEROWITZ



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■ Biography

Age 68; born in 1938 in the Bronx in New York.

Experience Took up photography at the age of 44.

Style Classifies himself as a street photographer in the style of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank, although he work exclusively in colour. Meyerowitz was instrumental in changing the attitude of photographers towards colour photography, taking it from obscurity to near universal acceptance.

Equipment Shoots on a mixture of cameras, including Mamiya medium-format, a 4x5 Deardorff wooden view camera and a 35mm Leica.

Awards and recognition Meyerowitz's pictures are available through museums in New York and Washington DC for research, exhibition and publication. He is a recipient of many awards, and his work is in the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art amongst other venues.

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Interview **Joel Meyerowitz**

The attack on the World Trade Center in New York five years ago was perhaps the defining moment of the 21st century so far. The pictures of the Twin Towers on fire, with smoke billowing up into the sky, are iconic images of our time, captured by a great many photographers on the ground.

Joel Meyerowitz was not one of these photographers. When the towers collapsed into the streets below, killing over 3000 people, he was at his studio on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. But when he returned to his home in New York five days later, he vowed to make a difference by being the only person to photograph what was to come next - the clean-up operation at Ground Zero.

Meyerowitz's inspiration came to him after a police officer stopped him taking pictures of the site as he stood on

a street corner in a crowd of onlookers. "I was appalled," he recalls. "No pictures meant no record of what had happened. No record that we had been attacked and that people had died."

"As I walked home, my anger began to turn into motivation. Motivation that I would document what was happening at Ground Zero somehow. I would really like to be able to thank that police officer, but I didn't see her name badge. In a way she poked me in the ribs and I woke up."

Gaining access to the site was the next challenge for Meyerowitz, and it wasn't going to be easy. "Originally, I wanted there to be six photographers: three older, three younger; three men, three women," he says. "I went home and wrote a four-page proposal that the clean up operation should be documented in the same way the

Farm Securities Administration (FSA) documented the depression in the 1930s, with a shooting script that photographers could use to determine what subjects to look for and how to shoot them. I tried to get the proposal to Mayor Giuliani, but I don't know if it ever reached him as I never received a reply."

With time ticking away, Meyerowitz realised he was on his own. Using a site pass he obtained from a old friend who was commissioner of Manhattan parks, he made his first journey into Ground Zero on 23 September. "I got thrown out regularly," he recalls. "But I had this pass, and with a bit of bullshit and some help from the friends I was making there, I could usually sneak back in. After a while, people assumed I belonged there. If you do something regularly, people perceive you as a regular. Of course, new



LEFT The South Tower, looking west. "The towers had been 'hull and core' buildings - hollow steel tubes constructed around massive central cores without the supporting beams that run through conventional structures. This design made the towers so tall - and explained why they fell so quickly. It was impossible not to feel one's own fleshy vulnerability and it was easy to understand why there were few survivors. Even after nine months of searching and recovery, 1796 people would remain unaccounted for."

ABOVE Five more found. "I saw at least 50 men crowded around a glowing light in the rubble. One of them said, 'We've found five more. They're in their bunker coats and intact.' A fireman came up to me - shaken by the recent discovery - and began to rage against my presence, saying I wasn't a fireman and I had no right to be there. I told this to the fire chief and explained I was only there to document what was happening. He led me by the hand back to the light and bellowed, 'This man stays! He's here for us.'"

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“I want people in the future to be able to sit down with these pictures and see things in remarkable detail”



LEFT “It arrived in pieces on 18 flatbed trucks. Men swarmed all over it, fitting the pieces together. A thousand tons! Two million pounds. The biggest crane in America. Watching the manoeuvres of the operating engineers, it was amazing to see the precision delicacy and skilled intention at play.”

RIGHT A fireman places flowers at the foot of building four. “I was taking shots of this impromptu procession when two men - a rabbi and a priest - called me over and gave me a picture to put on the pile. ‘I’ll take it to the fireman,’ I assured them. ‘No,’ they said. ‘We want you to put it in the pile for us.’ I was overwhelmed; yet the firefighters had been doing this for weeks. I moved towards the pile, blinded by tears. I don’t know how long it took me to do it or where I put the picture. I only know that I knelt down; afterwards I noticed mud on my knees.”

cops would come on duty and see a guy with a camera and ask me to leave, but I didn’t give up.”

Meyerowitz stuck with it, taking hundreds of pictures on a variety of formats in the nine months that followed. Of the 35lb of equipment he carried with him every day, the most unusual item was his Deardorff 4x5 view camera. Large format is not usually associated with modern-day documentary photography, but as Meyerowitz himself points out, it was once the only option.

“When I was planning how I would shoot the project I started to think back to historical photographs I had seen: pictures of the Civil War in America, the Crimean War in the Middle East, even those FSA photographs of the Depression. Many of them were made using old wooden view cameras - 4x5 inch or bigger. And there was a huge documentation of the West, made by the Civil-War photographers. They went out with those mule-driven wagons and coated their own plates. And they had to make all their pictures like that. Pictures came back from India, China, Egypt - all manner of places throughout the 19th century. I thought that 9/11 was such a profound incident, and Ground Zero was such a confined sort of place, that

shooting larger format was the way to make this subject visible in the most physically powerful way. It hasn’t really been in done in recent years, but it has been done historically. I wanted people in the future to be able to sit down with these pictures and see things in remarkable detail.”

And his approach worked: Meyerowitz showed a selection of images at an outdoor exhibition at Ground Zero in 2003. He printed some of them as large as 22ft high, and was thrilled at the public reaction. “People stood in front of them and they didn’t say, ‘Oh, this is a work of art’; they looked at it as information, as you might look at an exhibit in a natural-history museum. It was as if they were actually there - they would point out little figures in the distance and machinery doing its work. And I thought, ‘That is perfect: they are having the experience of being there in surrogate form.’ And maybe all along that is what I was hoping to do: to provide people with an opportunity to go into the picture and experience it.

“Scale is important in these pictures. When you are in an urban environment you are up against buildings all the time and you don’t have the same sense of



Meyerowitz on... THE NIGHT THEY FOUND \$11 MILLION

“When I came across them, they were lying on the ground, reaching into a bank vault that had fallen from a bank’s office in the North Tower. They were pulling out fistfuls of money - yen, lira, pounds and dollars. When they were done, the men stood for their portrait: ten guys and \$11 million.

“As they drove it away on a truck, one bag of money fell off the cart. By this time I had mortgaged my house and was struggling to fund the project. In a brief moment it flashed through my mind: ‘My funding!’ But I let out a New York taxi whistle that stopped them in their tracks.”



Interview **Joel Meyerowitz**

LEFT "Fresh out of jail, Eddie somehow managed to get a job servicing the big machines. Bright and quick-witted, Eddie was a guy whose growl could quickly turn to laughter. This picture was in the *New Yorker*, and Eddie bought up every copy he could find. When I next saw him he came over and hugged me, and said, 'Joel, I'm a made man! My mother loves me now! Even the whores are happy to see me!' If ever he could return the favour - a little trouble he could help with - I was to let him know. 'Anytime, Joelle boy. Any time.'"

ABOVE "I came out of the pile on Liberty Street and saw this team of firemen resting on one of the crazy collections of chairs gathered everywhere around the site. You'd see desk chairs, cafeteria chairs, high-tec stainless chairs all rudely assembled at the edge of the pile, but always looking in on it. Here, weary men and women came to have a smoke, or eat a sandwich, and stare at the spectacle in front of them. No matter how many hours you put in working on the pile, the fascination with it always called you back in."



space as when you stand at the seashore. In a city everything is built to human proportions; everything is built for us to walk around in. In a sense we understand the human scale differently. At Ground Zero, here was a big part of the scene just blown away. It had a vastness to it. Even though it was only four square blocks there was a new emptiness and I kept thinking I had to describe the place so we can feel what it is like when a city is in ruins."

It's ironic that, although the authorities didn't officially sanction his work, nobody working on the Ground Zero site ever objected to what Meyerowitz was doing. "When I explained that this was a historical record and that someone had to do it, they got it," he says. "And when people were in that place, they knew that

they were in an historical location. I remember thinking at the time that this was going to change the way we all live.

"I'd like to say that I was objective through all of this, but I don't think I was completely so. If you could stay objective all the time in a place like that, there would be something wrong with you. In a way, if I had gone in there to do a three-day shoot, I could have perhaps remained cool and just looked at it editorially. But eight months is long enough to have a degree of familiarity with everything. I found myself very attached to places, routes around the site and to the people I would see.

"It was the most remarkable experience I've had as a photographer. Even to sort the role I wanted for myself was something I had to think about a lot.

Sometimes I had to ask myself, 'Dare I take this picture?' I remember a time, on one of those exquisitely beautiful autumn days, thinking to myself that it was good to be alive. And then I was shattered as I realised there were 3000 people who would never feel that feeling again. Did I have a right to feel like that myself, standing in this graveyard? Just to have that kind of discussion with myself was something that brought me into focus. I was making a document that was going to be used historically. I had to find the right voice for it. I was watching millions of tonnes of ruined building disappearing before my eyes. The steel was literally melting away. All those wrecked stories on top of each other become a hole in the ground."

Aside from his use of a large-format

Interview **Joel Meyerowitz****Meyerowitz on... THE CROSS**

"The Cross was found by Frank Silecchia in the Customs House, a building that was nine stories tall and had the WTC fall on top of it, sheering steel girders as it went. In one case, a girder was clipped perfectly so that it formed a cross.

"I saw Frank many times over the course of the year, because he worked mainly in one place on the site. He started as this big burly rough-looking construction guy, but he was humbled by finding The Cross and having the instinct to bring it out. He told me he has stopped drinking and is trying not to curse. He wasn't the most articulate guy in the world when I met him, he was profane and a bit nasty, but he was trying to tell me he had undergone some kind of evolution. From then on, everytime I'd stop and talk to Frank, we would get into a conversation and within two minutes he'd be in tears."

"This project has given me clues as to how I want to go about working from now on"

view camera, part of the way Meyerowitz "found his voice" was to never use a telephoto lens, preferring instead to be physically close to his subjects. "I was standing one-to-one with everything you see in these pictures," he says. "When you look at them it makes you feel like you're in the presence of the place, right up close. Maybe over time that approach helped to build an intimacy in the pictures. It's not the way I work generally, but it has given me clues about how to go about working from now on."

Meyerowitz is now working on a project photographing New York's parks, a project which he says is in line with his aim of incorporating an element of social responsibility into his work - something he is trying to do since photographing Ground Zero. Has he changed a lot for undertaking the project?

"So often in our lives, whether we are artists or individuals, things happen that change our destiny. Little conversations that we have or overhear, or a turn in the road we take. And that happened for me - and I'm so grateful. I was awakened to photography again. Even though I love the subject and I take pictures every day, I had reached a kind of plateau. I was operating in my comfort zone. Shooting at Ground Zero made me uncomfortable and pushed me into doing things that I wouldn't normally do. Out of that, I've changed. I've changed my ideas about photography a great deal. Even though 9/11 was a tragic event, it has given me some late-life encouragement to reinvent myself photographically. Life is interesting now." ■



LEFT "The North Tower Shroud was coming down. This tragic - but now also beautiful - icon was disappearing before our eyes, stick by stick. The sentiment around the pile had been to find a way of keeping this ultimate memorial, and it was easy to see why. It didn't need to be designed by a team of architects; it said everything that needed to be said. But that was not how it would play out."

ABOVE "I don't actually know whose suggestion it was but I know it came from a worker emerging from the emotional experience that working on the pile produced: how about we save one column and make it the last "body" out of the site? The idea went around the site and column 1001B from the South Tower was chosen."

**Meyerowitz on... THE BOOK**

"I never saw the project as a book, but more as an archive for history. But to see *Aftermath* in this final form that people will be able to use is incredibly gratifying. I'm not a writer, I'm a photographer, but I felt that I found the voice that I wanted to take others through this with."

Joel Meyerowitz's book, *Aftermath*, is available from all good bookshops priced £45. Measuring some 15x11in, this hefty volume contains 400 incredible colour pictures of the clean-up operation at Ground Zero, as well as personal commentary by Joel on his experiences at the site.