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Tom Chambers: Remarkable Connection

A young, Korean couple sits close to each other at bus stop in the middle of a city. They are dressed nicely and look like they are ready to go somewhere important. Miles away a middle aged man stands behind the counter of his flower stand in rural Korea. He stands tall, happy to be doing what he's doing and proud of his work. In the middle of a driveway, a young child sits on his trike with a pair of sunglasses on that look like they came straight from the 70's. He stares at the camera, leaning on his handlebars as if this is just another day of riding; business as usual. All of these scenes are subjects of graphic and photographic genius, Tom R. Chambers. The images previously explained are a few of the results of a trip that Chambers took to Korea in May of 1997. The photos showed up, among many other Chambers photos, in a photo exhibition in the Kumho Art Center in Guangjo. The title of the exhibition is "People to People" and it takes a look at Korean people through photo documentation. Chambers' whole attitude towards photography and life in general can be summed up in the comments he made about his show. When asked about what he was trying to portray through his work, Chambers slowly explained that this exhibition, "focuses on the harmony between a human being and his/her environment. He documents people just as they

are, naturally and truthfully." (tomrchambers.com, People to People) This particular photographer, Tom R. Chambers, is possibly as interconnected to the people, and land that he works with, especially himself, as any other artist one will ever come across.

Even more evidence of Chambers interconnectedness is how he works not only with his subjects, but with his colleagues. For his "People to People" exhibition, Chambers teamed up with Korean photographer, Choi OK-soo, to give a Western/Eastern perspective on photo-documentation. Chambers has done this more than once. In the documentary called "The People of Longhop Town", he paired up with Chinese documentary photographer, Zhao Zhenhai, to mark the first time in Henan province, China, that an American and a Chinese photographer had collaborated to bring an Eastern/Western perspective on the Chinese people and culture. In yet another tag-team photography excursion, Chambers joined forces with Hungarian photographer, Istvan Horkay, to photograph the Budapest and Revfulop areas of Hungary. This incredible connection to other people that Chambers possesses is not only displayed through his willingness to work with other photographers and people from around the world, but also through his selfless actions.

Chambers volunteered for a two-year tour in the Peace Corps to Africa from 1993 to 1995. He then extended the tour for a year to finish establishing a computer information database for the National Gallery of Zimbabwe's permanent collection. While he was there, he taught at art schools and trained staff in numerous galleries in curatorial preparation. He helped mount different works of art for exhibitions and started a vocational arts program called SKIA (Street Kids In Action) for kids on the streets in Harare, Zimbabwe. Through all of his involvement in the Harare community, he was invited to show some of his personal work. This invitation gave birth to a photogram, "Variations of the Dan Mask", which is very connected to African culture.

Chambers used a traditional African mask from the Dan tribe in eastern Libya.

(tomrchambers.com, Variations on the Dan Mask) Although Tom does display a lot of teamwork and connection to people and fellow photographers, this is not to say that he is not able to do independent work and connect to things other than human beings. Chambers once took a trip to Beijing and spent solitary time photographing the Great Wall of China by himself. By looking at the photos, one can almost feel the secluded aura that he is trying to capture. They exude a certain kind of connection between an ancient barrier, the land around it, and the photographer capturing it. Also, Chambers portrays a pseudo-connection to some Hungarian architecture in his photo-documentation of the streets of Budapest and Revfulop. Although, accompanied by another photographer the whole time, his photos give a solitary view of the buildings and happenings in these towns. The interconnectedness to the people and world around Chambers is extremely apparent simply by studying his work. One of the more interesting things about Tom R. Chambers is his remarkable connection to where he came from and the things that have shaped him into what he is today.

Chambers created some extremely interesting artworks called the TOM SERIES. It documents the things or events that influenced him the most, and history as he knew it, by a series of self-portraits with symbols superimposed somewhere on his face. His face remains the same throughout the work, aside from different effects that Chambers digitally put in place to convey a certain mood or message about the particular thing or event being portrayed in that frame. Chambers includes objects such as an aerial view of his hometown, a pair of six-shooter revolvers, and names of states. Symbols like a target to symbolize the Kennedy assassination, the female symbol to symbolize his first love, and the Chinese flag to symbolize his frequent trips to the communist nation. And names of people to reference the people in his life that shaped him

such as his mother and father, his brother that died two weeks after birth, and his son that he never got to see grow up because of an unfortunate divorce. The writer of tomrchambers.com sums it up best saying,

Viewers of the same generation will probably begin to travel down their own personal memory lanes that may or may not cross his own. As they look at a particular image and read the text of TOM SERIES, they may very well have had a similar to almost same experience. If not, they might begin to think about what they were doing during that particular time period when he was involved in his particular life activity and even compare their and Chambers' activities. . . more or less fortunate. . . happier or unhappier... and other situational aspects that determine the human condition. And for particular viewers, their life experiences might weave in and out of his, creating a subliminal connection...similar to the helix that equates all life at the biochemical level. Viewers of today's generation... the young generation... will get a hint of what has come before them and might be ahead of them in an immediate sense. TOM SERIES becomes a litmus test for this generation to begin to gauge their own lives... an indicator of pitfalls to avoid and opportunities to take advantage of. . . a lifeline (in palmistry) to begin to evaluate their own in a projected sense and as it might relate to their parents'/grandparents' lives. TOM SERIES might even bring the young generation closer to their parents/grandparents, and they (younger generation) might want to know more about them (parents/grandparents) and the older generation, generally.

(tomrchambers.com, TOM SERIES

Not only has Chambers displayed this amazing connectedness to his roots through the things that have shaped him, but he has revealed an incredibly intelligent and globally-minded way for people to connect to their pasts-and generations Chambers' work appears to be about nothing more than connecting people to people, people to the land, and people to their pasts. The kind of interconnectedness that Chambers displays through all of his work has touched and inspired a countless amount of people around the world from China to Africa, Korea to America, the photographed to the photographers, and the young to the old. This level of awareness and interconnectedness to the people, land, and himself- is extremely difficult to arrive at and not many people can say they have done it. That is exactly why one could possibly never find a more connected artist than Tom R. Chambers.

Works Cited

Tomrchambers.com. Tom R. Chambers Documentary Portraiture and Visual Arts. 2009. Web 20 Oct. 2009