

Transcription of Len Prince interview with Catherine Johnson-Roehr on 6/24/11:

Were you aware of photography as an art form when you were growing up?

I was aware that there was something called a camera, and I wanted one. It all started one day when my mom asked me to get in the car to go to the S&H Green Stamps redemption center to get a new iron. We got in the car with a pile of [stamp] books and I walked in and the first things I saw were these Brownie plastic cameras on a shelf. I was completely awestruck and started to wiggle around and whine and cry. I told my mom I absolutely had to have one, which was my expression when I was a kid, and my mom being a gentle, sweet person let me pick out the camera. We walked out with a camera. I was 9 years old, and that was the beginning of it.

I grew up seeing photography when I would go to my Uncle Alvin's house for the holidays. He was a doctor and he rarely charged for his services, but someone always had something to trade with him. One of his patients was always giving him cameras, and he had a big shelf with lots of cameras on it. Every time I'd go over there I'd see them on the shelf and he'd say "Leonard, don't you touch those!" I grew up with the taboo of the camera, so when I went into the S&H Green Stamps center, it was my opportunity to seize the moment.

From then on, we'd go on family picnics and my dad had one of the first Polaroids, which of course none of us was allowed to touch. I grew up seeing these pictures come out of the back of a camera. That was like art to me. I just was amazed by the process of photography. As I got a little older, I was taking family pictures with my little Brownie—my dog, family members. When I got into high school, I had my eye on a more sophisticated camera, and I sold the only share of stock I've had in my entire life, from General Motors, and I bought my first camera. With that first Nikon, I really started to take pictures—broken dolls on the lawn, my friends at the cemetery. When it came time to process the film, I had a friend, Peter, who had a darkroom in his basement, and we used to go out to take pictures together. We were really inspired 15-year olds.

Did you study photography in school or are you self-taught?

I ended going to the School of Visual Arts [in New York] after graduating from high school, and learned quite a bit, but it wasn't really a pivotal moment to be in school because I was sure that that was all I was ever really going to do. At that point in time it wasn't accredited as a college. It was pre-black & white photography revolution as art. I remember going to the Witkin Gallery on 53rd Street to see the first photographs that I'd ever seen for sale. My purpose for going there was that I had this vision of one day being one of those people. They were selling Ansel Adams and Lewis M. Hine, Jerry Uelsmann, and later, more current stuff. I bought my first photograph—a Lewis M. Hine for \$60—it was the famous picture of the little boy holding the newspaper in the Depression. I gave it to my sister as a wedding gift.

I went to school for a little while. It was the sixties and early seventies, and everyone was getting stoned. I had this idea in mind of becoming a photographer, so I left school and I convinced my brother-in-law, who was also going to the same school, to open up a photography gallery. I was 18. We opened up a tandem gallery and photography studio. We had all of my artistic photographs from high school up for sale, and we also did portraits. At that point in time, I had no idea what a seamless background was, or studio lighting, because I was heading down the road of being self-taught. I never really got to the point in high school or college where I learned about lighting, so that was all self-taught when we had the little gallery. I lived in the back of the gallery in a bunk bed that a friend of mine made for me.

My story really is about passion and a life-long objective, and a continuing objective. Yes, I was aware of it [photography], and I wanted to persevere and find myself at one point in the limelight, which I've accomplished, and I'm still working on it.

Are there photographers or other artists who have influenced your work?

I recognized Ansel Adams as being a great photographer, and Lewis M. Hine, for being so passionate about photographing the Depression, because at that point in time, I was in school and my first assignment was to go live on a tug boat for a week and photograph New York from the outer boundaries and men at work. I related to their work and being working class people and the landscape. But the real inspiration of my commercial career is from Avedon. I've used a large format camera for most of my career, and still am. If I had to say who inspired me the most, I'd have to say Avedon, Helmut Newton, Herb Ritts, Ansel Adams. Those are the four most important to me.

How do you view the work you've done on commission versus your own projects?

They are really the same. One sort of leads to the other. My personal projects include *Self Possessed*, *Dance Project: Masterclass*, the *Hollywood About Glamour* series, landscapes, nudes, and flowers—there are so many different categories that intrigue me. Through the creation of these varied works, I'm able to expose my work in different arenas, which often leads to getting the photographs published. I'll give an example that is illustrative of this and one that is the opposite. It's still luck of the draw. For instance, when *About Glamour* came out, the director of advertising for Estee Lauder was given the book as a Christmas gift and he kept looking at it on his cocktail table in the Hamptons. He finally decided to call me, and asked me if I would consider doing commercial work. Now here I am, I've been a commercial photographer for most of my career, and he was looking at the *About Glamour* book thinking I was strictly an artist. I said of course, this is a dream come true for me. I ended up working with him for five days with Elizabeth Hurley. That is an example where the art drew in a very high-end, maybe the most high end, commercial client.

On the other side, Macy's had contacted me—they saw some of my flower photographs—and asked me if I would do their spring flower show, making photographs

for the poster. And of course I said, “Wow, that would be exciting, I’d love to do it, how much will you pay me”, and so on. I went ahead and did all the photographs—there were 50 of them—and at the end of the session, a lawyer from Macy’s contacted me and said that he had a contract for me to sign. When I saw the contract, it said I would give up all rights to all the photographs in perpetuity (that was the first time I heard the word “perpetuity”, which comes up a lot in photo rights contracts). I said “There’s no way I’m signing this, forget it” (once I got the true definition of the word “perpetuity”). I decided not to publish the pictures, and they ended up being the centerpiece of my first one-man show with Fay Gold in Atlanta, who is an illustrious art dealer. At that time I sold many, many of the photographs to Saks Fifth Avenue, Elton John, Giorgio Armani. I followed my instincts, because I just knew I wasn’t going to give my art away, because I didn’t want to lose the ownership. I figured that one day I would want to show it in a gallery or somewhere. I felt that I couldn’t even show it in my mother’s house, with the contract from Macy’s. The turn of that story really is that once I did those flower photographs and started to show them in a couple of small galleries in New York, I found that my commercial clients stopped giving me business. Being a commercial photographer and a businessman, I would call them up and say “Hey! What’s going on?” And they all said “We’ve seen the photographs that you are doing in the gallery and in the book and we figured you’d never want to work with us because you are an artist now.” And I said “No, no, no, that’s not the case, I’m not really an artist, I’m just a photographer! Last month I photographed flowers, and the month before, frozen meat. Art has nothing to do with it!” But they said, “No, you’re an artist and we’re not going to give you our business anymore.” And I thought “Oh my god, how’s this going to work out—I’m going to starve!” I did lose a lot of business, and that was just a natural process of exploring photography as an art.

I guess you do have to suffer to be an artist.

You really do. I mean, once or twice a year someone will pay me \$15,000 to \$50,000 a day to take their picture, but the rest of the year you are like a squirrel, you have to save your acorns because there’s not always food. I’ve learned the balance of art and commerce, which is important to survive and have longevity. If I were to get poetic and write it all down, it would make an amazing novel, of the things I’ve done and the moments of sheer desperation when there’s no money and no one wants a picture, or someone wants a picture and you do it, but then they don’t like it and don’t want to pay you. Film supplies are expensive, camera equipment is expensive, and there’s no mercy at all from the power company. There are cash flow issues. Sometimes I trade pictures. I’m finding it easier to get paid these days, but sometimes it’s still not easy.

You are a very successful portrait photographer—how does a portrait session differ from a shoot involving the nude figure?

I’m always focused on the image, the end all, be all, whether it is someone laying over a rock or someone turned to the camera. I found it advantageous to me to look at everything from a shape and form perspective. I try not to look at a person sitting for a portrait as that person that I want to get to know; I look at them as a shape, as an

object, then I light them and give them dimension, and then I go for the character. So that is the process. If I'm outside, photographing Jessie Mann standing in a river, it's still the same—it's still a composition that I create, and then she walks into the picture to finish it.

Do you think that working with a large format camera helps you get that distance from your subject?

It does command attention, there's no doubt about it. It separates the intimacy. You know, the typical fashion photographer is crawling on the floor with his little camera, saying "OK, wow, that's great baby, wow, a little closer to me, that's great." You don't say that when you have this giant camera and you are underneath a black cloth. It's much more controlled. The big camera does create a sense of separation. Sometimes people will say, "Oh my god, that was the most painful photo session I've ever had!" They walk away a little pissed off, and later, when they get their copy of the picture, there will be no phone call. And then ten years later, I get the call—"you know, I was looking at that picture you took of me, and it's the best one I've ever had done." Because they walked away from the session feeling horrible, I was getting no word of mouth business. It's deep, it's complicated, what happens—it's not just a matter of the setup, in regards to photographing celebrities.

Using a large format camera also means you can't take a hundred shots to get the right photograph.

I'm done in 4 to 6 sheets of film. If I don't get it in the first 2 or 3 sheets, I'm just not going to get it. It's like a bad hairdresser, who will tug, and curl, and heat and just never get there. A great hairdresser will put one big curler in just the right spot, take it out 20 minutes later and there's a masterpiece. The struggle is going to be a sign of weakness.

When did you start working with the nude figure, and what led you to focus on the male nude in your work?

In the late seventies, I was doing a lot of catalogs, and they would always send me the towel pictures to do on models (I guess they thought I could make a sexy picture and that's how you sell a lot of towels). I think the real decisive moment came with an intrigue with sexuality. I was in a very bad marriage, and I moved into my studio and began to experiment sexually. Living in New York, it's pretty easy. That was around the time that I did the flower pictures for Macy's. I started inviting the UPS guys in to pose for \$100. I was very curious, and I basically drew from the street. That was in 1988 and '89, and I had people ringing my doorbell at all hours. It was nice--one UPS guy would tell a friend, and he'd tell another friend, and say "Hey, you have a good body, and there's a guy who's paying a hundred bucks to take your picture." That was how my male nude photography started.

My assistant Nigel, who is in a couple of my photographs (Nigel with Rope & Nigel with Elephant Mask), claimed he never worked out. He became my short-term muse, because he was willing to take his clothes off. My nude photographs rarely showed genitals; they were more about shape and form and content. I became a trusted photographer by guys at the gym and UPS men and New York culture characters. It was probably because I was coming out and was curious to photograph them. There was still a void between subject and artist. I never had sex with them, as Mapplethorpe supposedly did. I created with them, and that was enough. That satisfied my creative libido.

There is one story that I can share. I think it's an image that might be in the catalog. It's called "Leon." He was a salesman from Macy's who called me and wanted to come to my studio to pose naked. I put a little African mask on the tip of his penis, but it was a little too heavy and he couldn't keep it up. That was the first time that one of my models said "Hey, come a little closer and let me touch you, otherwise I can't do this photo." I already had the guy naked on his back with a mask on his penis, and it kept falling over, and it was like, OK, go ahead. It got the picture done. That picture was in my first Fay Gold show and it sold out, about 13 prints in 40 minutes. The shoot was very exciting and I nearly had an orgasm, but I thought, I can't imagine doing this all the time. I prefer to be behind the curtain and to invite my subjects to create with me—I give them equal credit. If you have a crappy model, chances are you're going to get a crappy picture. If you have a phenomenal model, you're going to work hard but you are going to get lots of great pictures, or one super famous one.

Photographing the male nude creates challenges for an artist in terms of finding exhibition venues and places to publish the work, maybe not so much today but certainly in the past. Was this ever a concern for you?

It's still difficult. Bill Zewadski is so intellectual and intuitive that he's able to march that work right into the room and get it on the wall. Today people are so timid around nudity. It's strange—it's kind of what drives everything. It's got to be perfect, that's all. It has to be just the right image. You can walk into a show in a top gallery in New York--it can be a fashion photographer like Louise Dahl-Wolfe--and all the pictures in the gallery will be robed in some way or another, and then the greatest picture in the show will be a photograph of a naked girl jumping into a pool in stiletto heels. I think it depends on the craft, the quality of the craft. It's all about image, image, image. If you create an iconic image that sits in the mind's eye of the viewer, they're not going to care what's going on. There are certain indelible images that create that watermark on the brain, and they allow people to identify with that moment. Is it Bresson who coined the phrase, "the decisive moment"? [Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment*, book published in 1952] That's why photography has become such a huge portion of the collector world. They see something in the image that they can identify with and they decide they can live with it day in and day out.

You have worked with Jessie Mann for a number of years on a collaborative project called “Self-Possessed”. How did this partnership come about?

Yeah, do you have a year? I’ve always looked at photography the same way, whether it’s a famous fashion model or Penelope Cruz or Jessie Mann. Jessie is a case all unto herself, because she’s kind of like a hornet’s nest. Let me put it in order. I have a great friend named Steve Cantor who made an Oscar nominated profile story of Sally Mann called *Blood Ties*. He spent many years photographing Sally and Jessie and Emmett and the other sister. He came to me a couple of times and said “Man, I’m making this movie and these people are amazing. I keep going down to Virginia and you’re going to love it, blah, blah, blah...” Ten years later, I’m on a date, and Steve calls me and says “What are you doing?” I say “I’m on line to go to a movie with a really cute guy.” He says “You’ve gotta get off line, postpone your date, and come meet me here.” I said I couldn’t do that because I was on a date, and he told me to hand the phone to my friend Matt. Matt hands the phone back to me twenty seconds later and says “OK, give me twenty bucks and go meet your friend Steve.” I go uptown, I go into a fancy uptown bar, and I see Steve, who’d just been married a couple months earlier, sitting there with a gorgeous girl lying next to him on a white leather banquette in a white evening gown. I think to myself, “What is he up to? He’s already fooling around!” And this girl sticks out her hand and says “Hi, I’m your new muse.” She told me that she had to come to my studio and take a picture but she was only in town for a few days; that it was going to change my career and was very important. So I said “I don’t need a muse!” She insisted that I did, but I had no idea who she was. I said “OK, come to my studio tomorrow” and I gave her the address. She showed up and we took three or four pictures, kind of like a Hollywood ingénue as it was during my Hollywood phase, kind of stripped down and really sexy pictures. She was actually stretching past her age and they were kind of dirty, not in a prepubescent way but they were just kind of dirty pictures. We just clicked. Then we did it again and did it again, and we thought this is a great project but it really has no meaning, no focus. So we collaboratively decided to make it about the character and all that encompasses that whole area, i.e. Marilyn Monroe—was she Marilyn Monroe or Marilyn Monroe the character? I could go on and on, about what happens when someone becomes a photographic muse or subject. You are taking hundreds of pictures of hundreds of different characters. Is Jessie Mann all those characters or is it art history, or is she all those different personalities from within? It’s very, very complicated.

The process went like this—she would say “I want to be Frida Kahlo.” I’d say “OK, I’d love to do Frida Kahlo.” And she’d say “Have Jason (my partner who’s done all the makeup for the pictures since the second year of the project) paint veins on my chest.” I’d say “Hold a canister with paint brushes, and let’s do it in a deserted room with an easel and a mirror, and you’ll look in the mirror and it’ll look like a canvas, because Frida Kahlo was all about the self-portrait.” So we would collaborate like that—that’s basically how it went. Or, Jessie would come up with a list and say “Let’s do Adam and Eve”, and I’d add Nurse Nightingale, Helmut Newton, Irving Penn, and on and on. We were really inspired. I mentioned I wanted to do a crucifix, and Jessie said “Oh, let’s go get bittersweet chocolate”. I said, “Oh, it’s going to be about death and bleeding.” And

she would say “No, it’s about menstruation.” And then Sally Mann would say “It’s menstruating Jesus!” Everybody got in on it. I never saw the need for a title, that’s why all the Jessie pictures have plate numbers. I’ve always been of the philosophy “let the reader tell the story.” That’s what so great about art—each viewer sees a different story. I’ve got my point of view, and Jessie has her point of view—why not let other people find their own point of view?

So that’s our collaborative effort. But there are also problems with collaborative efforts. One example--I was up at the lab that was printing my pictures, and I happened to have a box of pictures under my arm. There was another photographer or editor there working on a project, and he noticed that it said Jessie Mann on my box. He said “Oh! Do you have some of those new Jessie Mann photographs that she’s doing of herself?” I just figured I’d go along with it, so I said “Yeah, I do have some of those”. So he said “We all knew she’d become a photographer someday, with all the work she’s done with her mother. Everybody’s so excited about these pictures!” So I just said “Oh yeah, me too” and I walked away.

How does working with another artist to create a photographic image differ from a photo session in which you have complete artistic control?

I’ve never had a problem with staying in control of the image. I’ve photographed Kenny Scharf, Sally Mann, Lou Reed, Faye Dunaway, architects, artists, and writers—all kinds of creative and difficult people—and there’s always been a road to pleasure and trust. On the *Self Possessed* project with Jessie Mann, there were many misconceptions about who was responsible those images, but the fact of the matter is that we were just collaborating and the audience created the confusion. I created the image at the back of the camera after Jessie and I agreed on the character, costume, and pose. It’s like if Marilyn Monroe were alive today, would she be saying “I told Bert [Stern] when to take the pictures. He just clicked the button.” We’ve heard all different sorts of things from other people—that Jessie said “I hired Len to stand by the camera and take the picture when I say to”, or “Oh my god, Len is the most wonderful person in the world, working with him is such a delight, we create together” and so on and so forth. One reviewer called me a “dirty old man” after seeing the show in Chicago.

I have great admiration and respect for Jessie Mann, as she has taught me so much about the Muse and art history. She opened up my need for intellectual Art Chatter. In the history of art, the classic muse always strives for authority, admiration, and love. Jessie was right when she announced with absolute certainty that she was going to be my new muse when we first met eight years ago. Our success has been the result of keeping a healthy balance between her goals and my mine. After all these years of working with her, I can say that she has added a lot to the parameters of my career. This project really has been a dream come true.

Is the *Self Possessed* project finished, or will you and Jessie continue to collaborate?

We try to keep our friendship intact—it's very much a sibling relationship—but art moves on. I think that we've created our art that we were going to create, and now it's a matter of getting it published. It looks like we have interest from a German architect who does high end art books. We'll be talking to him in a couple of months.

Is working with a model always a collaborative process?

Of course it is—if I have a gorgeous guy laying on a slab of cement and I tell him just lay there, don't move, while I set up the lighting, load the film, have lunch, but you can't move—that's collaboration. He could just as easily say "Screw you pal, I'm hungry too!" That might be autocratic collaboration. If I'm photographing Penelope Cruz on a fire escape of a building in Paris with the Eiffel Tower in the background, she may lean forward and say "We should make this sadder" and I'll say "Absolutely, put as much into it as you can." There's always collaboration.

An artist's sexuality is sometimes given great significance when his or her work is discussed by critics and scholars, especially when the subject matter is the human body. How much of an influence does your sexuality have on your work?

I think that growing up with sexuality being such a taboo made me curious and absolutely has affected the way I see. On some levels, I think my sexuality brought me there, but my aesthetic took the greater leap, and that's how I enter into the agreement with each photo that I take. How can this be special, how can it be different from my other photos, and how can I offer up a great experience for myself and for the person sitting for the picture. I'm thinking about the viewer too, because I want them to see something that hasn't been done.

You create images that I haven't seen before, which is something that not all artists are able to do.

Here's the formula. I never look at photography books or other people's work. Even though I'm inspired, I never look at anybody else's work to create or copy. The few times I tried it, it never works, because every person bends and folds, and has his own pose basically. The process is intuitive and inspired and of the moment. There are so many factors that go into making a picture that's special. All of us have this one special moment—that is what I believe. Models will have this one spot that they are just great at—I've gotten to the point where I can recognize that, and when I get it, and then I try something else, it just doesn't work. There's that one magic moment that you get out of almost every model or collaborator. Then you need to move on.

What do you see as the value of having your work in the art collection at The Kinsey Institute?

There are a lot of reasons. I have a few objectives, now that I'm approaching 60, and one is to place my work in the right museums or foundations, where they are not going to put them in a drawer or hide them and never show them to anyone. I'm connected to

the Kinsey Institute on several levels. I've lived through the sexual revolution of the Sixties. I saw the Kinsey movie with Liam Neeson, and I related to the characters in the film and the struggle that they had to become more than just the status quo. I loved that movie. Then Bill Zewadski comes along and says "I've got the curator of the Kinsey Institute art collection coming to see your show, and I'm going to give her 200 of your photographs for their collection." I follow my nose. It's a combination of finding a good home, listening to the audience, and taking direction. Direction in the case of the collector, Bill Zewadski, who has a vision for where the art should be and where it will do the best.

How important to your career has it been to have a patron?

It's crucial. If you read the history books about the relationships between artists and patrons, generally they are amazing stories. Bill had a vision from the start. He wants to play a part in the art. I allow him to do that and always with positive results. He can be a little bossy. We became acquainted in 1990 or 1991, and it's been a dream come true. I don't think I'll ever meet another like Bill. He sees the deeper meaning of the work. I'm so busy making the work, living the life, and getting through what I need to get through. He has a vision for who will look at this work, and what it will mean, how long it will be there and where it can go from there. He's the puzzle man. I can't say enough good things about him.

Here's one quick story. It's about my moment, when I decided to go from commercial to art, putting aside losing clients, and heading down a whole new path. I was walking down 22nd Street in New York City, which tends to be a very breezy place, kind of like a wind tunnel. I was heading towards 5th Avenue and a big wind gust came and blew what felt like thousands of pieces of paper at me which stuck on my body, and dirt went in my eyes. I looked down at myself, and there were pages and pages from one of my Macy's catalogs stuck to me, and I thought "This is horrible. I don't want to be remembered this way." That was my deciding moment, when I wanted to take different kinds of pictures. That's New York and that's art—it finds you, everything finds you. I couldn't have dreamt of growing up in a better place as an artist. Art happens in New York.