

## #15 November 2014 *Cameraderie* Sedat Pakay (1945-2016)

Sedat Pakay is a Turkish photographer, who lived for much of his professional life in the United States. I ran across his work last year in Seattle at the Northwest African American Museum (NWAAM) in the exhibit, *Bearing Witness from Another Place: James Baldwin in Turkey, Photographs by Sedat Pakay*. My wife is Turkish and our son and daughter-in-law took us to this exhibit while we were visiting them in Seattle. Who knew that James Baldwin had spent many vacations in Istanbul amongst his Turkish friends? I got to know Sedat by email because I purchased two prints from his Seattle show as presents to my wife and our son. Sedat kindly agreed for me to interview him for this column.

Here is the link to the NWAAM announcement of the exhibit:

<http://www.naamnw.org/enewsletter/baldwin.html>.

And here is the link to the YES! Magazine article that Sedat co-authored on the exhibit: under the image in the article is another link to the exhibit photographs:

<http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/james-baldwin-in-turkey>



Here is an image of Baldwin in Istanbul from the NWAAM exhibit. (This is one of the two images I bought from Sedat.) Baldwin's almost completely silhouetted distinctive profile is set against the touristic old side of European Istanbul as seen from the Galata Bridge over The Golden Horn (an inlet from the Bosphorus). The wheeling sea birds are typical of the setting—but look at how they symbolize the restless personality of the well-known writer. The railing and skyline are roughly at the one-third and two-third levels, following the rule of “thirds” in composition. But look at Baldwin's head centered in the frame, and with a great empty sky above him. What does that enormous sky say about Baldwin? Helped by the wheeling birds, perhaps that the famous writer has great universes of thought wheeling through his head?

Sedat studied under Walker Evans at The Yale Art School, from which Sedat received a MFA degree in 1968. He assisted Paul Strand's photo executor, Walter Rosenblum, during the summer of 1967 while Rosenblum was teaching at The Yale Summer School of Art and Music. Sedat's images are in several permanent museum collections.

Sedat has made films about James Baldwin, Walker Evans, and Josef and Anni Albers. Here is the link to his cinematographer's web site: <http://www.sedatpakay.com/>.

## THE INTERVIEW

Q: How did you first become interested in photography?

A: I became interested in photography when I was about 10 years old, after I received a Bakelite box camera. Then I was promoted to using my father's 1938 Zeiss Ikon bellows camera. Then upon my much insistence I was given a Rolleiflex. That camera is truly the beginning of my taking photography seriously. I would go to our neighborhood photographer's studio and ask him whether I could watch him processing film and making prints in his darkroom. The first time I saw an image appear on a sheet of paper while it was still in the tray, I was hooked. It was total magic!

I did not study photography. I just took photographs with my beloved Rolleiflex, while roaming around the streets of Istanbul. I would come home and develop the films in my small basement darkroom. I had a makeshift enlarger made from metal tubes and an old lens attached to the bottom pipe. It was made by a metal worker in my uncle's steel factory. Soon after, I got my first real enlarger and started making prints without deformities at the corners.

Q: You had formal training in photography, yes?

A: I came to the USA in 1966, after I was accepted to the Yale School of Art and Architecture, following my sophomore year at Robert College in Istanbul, skipping the last two years of college and going straight into the Masters program at Yale. I am sure this had to do with my portfolio of photographs. Luckily for me, Walker Evans was the newly appointed photography professor, who was very supportive of my work. The Yale Art School did not have a photography department at the time: photography was under the Graphic Design Program. Later, an independent photography department was established. After getting my MFA in 1968, I worked in New York as a freelance photographer and magazine art director.

Q: You told me you are acquainted with a number of other prominent photographers. Please tell us some personal stories about them.

A: I met Eduard Steichen in 1967 and spent a day with him at his home/farm in Redding, CT. I believe he was in his nineties then. I photographed him, and some of that work has appeared in publications and has hung in my exhibitions. Steichen changed his first name to Edward when he came to the U.S. I am sure the old man Steiglitz was instrumental in Americanizing his name.

Q: How did you come to photograph James Baldwin?

A: Upon graduation from Robert Academy (the high school division of Robert College) in 1964, I read an article in a local newspaper that a famous American writer was visiting Istanbul. The portrait in the newspaper intrigued me: the unusual topography of his face, and his small, frail body—James Baldwin was a perfect subject for my camera. Through a friend I got an invitation to visit Baldwin, and spent a good part of the afternoon photographing him. A friendship developed after Baldwin realized that I was a silent observer when recording him. All summer and the ensuing two years I photographed him whenever he was living in Istanbul, accumulating an archive of 2,000 plus Baldwin photographs.

Q: How did the NWAAM exhibit come about?

A: A good friend, Professor Howard Norman of the University of Maryland, loves my work, and thankfully promoted my photographs and my film on Baldwin to be included in various universities' Baldwin programs. His effort along with that of a bookstore owner in Seattle interested the curators of the NWAAM and they flew to New York to visit my home studio to examine my Baldwin archive. They liked what they saw and offered to exhibit a selection of my Baldwin photographs. About this time, a curator from the Museum of African American Heritage and Culture visited me at my home in Hudson, NY and purchased ten Baldwin portraits for the permanent collection of the museum, which is a division of the Smithsonian and slated to open in 2015. Presently it is being built on the Mall in Washington D.C.

Q: What equipment do you shoot with?

A: The Rolleiflex twin lens camera is my all-time favorite. In my student days, I bought a Nikon F—a cumbersome, heavy machine. A 35mm camera comes in handy when I travel, shooting 36 exposures instead of the Rolleiflex's 12. A few years ago I bought a digital Nikon D-80 camera to catch up with the rest of humanity's addiction to digital media. After taking pictures with it for some time, it indicated that there were 2,200 more frames ready to be shot, which panicked me. I will go anytime to my 12 exposures, and pay closer attention to my subjects. I have packed up my darkroom and stored it in my garage hoping that someday silver-gelatin B&W printing will be king again.

Q: What is your favorite subject matter?

A: My favorite photographic projects are making portraits of important artists and ordinary, anonymous people of the streets. To paraphrase Walker Evans, "I collect faces."

Q: Thank you so much for this wonderful interview!