

SMILE!



Pedro Meyer © 1991

By Pedro Meyer

When we take pictures of people it always seems we are requesting that they smile for the camera. Have you ever wondered why that is? Well, it appears that a "smile" is a universal sign language that states we have peaceful intentions in mind. Therefore, a smile on the face of the person being portrayed will be seen as friendly, or friendlier. A smiling image possesses less of a threat to a viewer, than, let's say, one that is stern or frowning.

However, a good number of the portraits that become meaningful and valued, are not precisely those that present us with smiles. It's likely that a deeper psychological insight is allowed to flourish the moment we transcend the ubiquitous photographic smile. The request for a grin, seems to freeze the rest of emotions in the person being photographed.

In the history of cinema, some of the most touching scenes have been conveyed by ever so slight and subtle facial nuances, the lifting of an eyebrow might become the entire message. A fleeting glance is enough to communicate all that is needed. We

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can learn a great deal by observing how actors are able to portray complex characters with a minimum of expressions.

The next time you take a picture of someone whom you would like to portray, you might want to explore what happens if you don't request that they smile.

The fact that we now have digital cameras allows us to explore the process of making a portrait with a gradualness that is quite different to when we used film. The absence of any direct costs in taking a lot of pictures, and the possibility of studying their results with much greater ease on the computer screen, allows the photographer to work with much more abandon than ever before.

This gradualist approach can also contribute, under certain circumstances, in building up the comfort levels of the sitter, as well as becoming a process for discovery on the part of the photographer. You ought to consider that taking numerous images is the equivalent to what a painter or someone who draws, might be doing when creating a picture. Give yourself ample time, a photographic portrait is still a process in spite of its instantaneous nature. It is not about snapping a few frames and be done with it.

I have always found that one of the most difficult things in taking portraits is the small talk that usually is associated, or expected, from the person behind the camera. It is very difficult to be talking about one thing while thinking about something else that demands a high level of concentration in order to decipher the moment. Yet as a photographer you must offer the person posing for you the needed assurances, that he or she is doing what you expect of them. Remember, you know what you are looking at through the viewfinder, they don't.

In essence what is expected of you, as a photographer, is guidance. "What do you want me to do?" Is a classic question. I have found that sometimes remaining silent is also an option, it creates a tension that leaves the sitter without any directorial suggestions of what to do, which in turn leads to some very challenging reactions, something to which you have to remain very alert so as not to miss the opportunity to capture an interesting expression.

If all fails, you can always go back to request a SMILE!

Pedro Meyer
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