

2016 Interview with Armen Elliot – Photographer and Investigator

Kate: So I remember that you're really interested in insects. And in college you majored in zoology?

Armen: That was my degree.

Kate: I wondered if we could start there. Why were you interested in pursuing that initially?

Armen: Well, as a kid in my backyard, I would always see insects and I was always chasing them. My mom was very much a nature person as well so she gave me a butterfly net so I could catch them. She realized that I was capturing these creatures and couldn't identify them. She said if you're going to capture things, you really have to know what you're doing. So she gave me my first field guide. It was a kid's field guide.

Kate: Cool.

Armen: And that kind of established me as an expert in my neighborhood.

Kate: Okay.

Armen: And so all the kids would ask me what things were. I'd hang out with the daredevil guys. Back in the days when I was growing up, you actually had clover in your lawn.

Kate: Right.

Armen: These were lawns that contained some interest for insects. Right now, we have sterile lawns.

Kate: True.

Armen: So back in those days we put bees in glass jars and we would get our faces up really close and scare ourselves to death with the proximity of these “dangerous” creatures.

I had insect collections. I would put them on cotton- and mothballs. And butterflies I would pin them. As a kid I did little science fairs and that sort of thing.

My dad was an engineer and he had his PhD and my mom was really into the natural world. One of her heroines was Rachel Carson. And so at a young age, I was basically told: this is a closed system. You don't use DDT and in those days you could still get DDT.

And my dad would buy something and my mom would tell him “no you can't use that. You can't use DDT on this because Rachel Carson said not to.”

And so that was my indoctrination into thinking that everything is a closed system and what you do here is going to affect something else.

My mother's father was a dentist but his hobby was horticulture.

Kate: That's interesting.

Armen: And he actually published a little pamphlet on grafting fruit trees. So this interest in nature goes back to that side of the family. My mother's brother did a whole field guide on the birds of Armenia.

Kate: Yeah, I've seen that field guide, actually.

Armen: Right. And his son used to like collecting trees. So it kind of runs in the family. And my dad was the engineer so he insisted we take the hard sciences, physics and math. These were not electives for us, so that's where I get my organization from. Otherwise I think I would be a little more all over the map, you know.

But just to go back to something that you said before we started.

Kate: Yes?

Armen: I see parallels between what I'm doing with my photography and what you do with your writing.

Kate: Really?

Armen: Because your writing takes you to a place that understands other people and other people's lives and you're curious about them. I'm curious about these other women's lives. I think that's fascinating and it's the same thing with my photography. If I'm curious about something, I take a camera and that is my tool of investigation, whereas writing is your tool of investigation. And you know it's being a scientist in a way. Your writing is a magnifying glass. I'm using my camera as my magnifying glass.

Kate: Brilliant.

Armen: It gives me permission to cross boundaries that people wouldn't normally say is okay. It allows me to go into a dressing room or private area, where as an acquaintance, you would not really get access.

Kate: Sure, sure. That's an interesting way of thinking about it.

Armen: As I think I might have mentioned before, as a woman there are constraints on your behavior [put on you by society] and as a scientist it can stunt your ability to function. Like for example, you're not supposed to stare.

Kate: That's true.

Armen: In many cultures women are not allowed to stare and with a camera in my hand, I'm allowed to stare. I mean you can imagine as a scientist, if you're denied one of your senses to explore and understand the world that would be a real setback.

Kate: It would.

Armen: My camera gives me some legitimacy into being where I want to be, you know? And credibility. I don't know why when you have a camera in your hand, all of a sudden you command some sort of power.

Kate: It does seem that way. Is it because people can then understand what you're after? They understand who you are in this crowd of people or what you're supposed to be doing?

Armen: And you're helping them and right now in this day in age, where ego and appearances are everything, I become really important.

Kate: Right.

Armen: Because people want to look good. And I can help them by using really lovely light.

Kate: Yes.

Armen: And I do try to do that.

Kate: You do it well.

Armen: I understand the power of a photographer, and that is if you don't like someone, you can make them look really bad. Your prejudices and who you are, the mind and the heart behind the lens -- people underestimate that.

Some people can come out and take pictures of political figures that they don't like and really do a job on them with their cameras. And that's a political statement at that point.

Kate: Sure.

Armen: I use my camera these days, at least with my wedding work, the way old masters used to paint portraits. I want to show a person or family in the most positive light. And I don't do it necessarily with making them look "pretty". You know you do want them to look good, but it's to show them in authentic light and their authentic relationships.

Kate: I love that about your photographs.

Armen: I look for the kindness and compassion in these people. And basically it's holding a mirror up and saying this is really how beautiful your life is and can you see your life through my eyes.

And when I show it to them they love it because, especially on a wedding day, everything is happening so quickly that they don't have any time to really see what's going on. They're in the moment and they can't...

Kate: Sure, they just go from one thing to the next, right?

Armen: Right. So I tell people I have the ability to stop time. And that's my forté.

Kate: Yeah, that's one of the things that really struck me when I was here before and you were taking my picture and you were talking about weddings and your job as a photographer. I know other photographers and people who take wedding pictures, but I was struck by the idea that you really wanted to bring something to the wedding family – that it was about them and capturing the beauty of the day, for them. I just thought that was so powerful. On Facebook for a while, there were these series of photographs of the same person, but each photo was taken by a different photographer. The photographers were told different things about the person before the picture was taken.

Armen: Yes.

Kate: And what those photos showed was certainly that, what you're saying, your presumptions or assumptions about a certain person comes through.

Armen: Right, absolutely.

Kate: CEO versus homeless person or artist. It was incredible how this same person was portrayed in all these very different ways, depending on what the photographer thought they knew about him.

And you're looking for kindness in people. Having you take pictures of that and bring it back to these families --- what a gift.

Armen: Yeah, for me it really is. When I show examples of my work, some people say your weddings all look different.

Everyone is so different from everyone else. And the dynamics in each family are so different. It feels like a different situation each time and the novelty of that doesn't really wear off because it's an investigation each time.

Kate: Sure.

Armen: It's new and I never know what I'm going to get and I like it because it's a microcosm of life for me.

You know who everyone is, the main characters of this play. But you don't know what the weather is going to be like, how they're going to react, what if there is a little accident or something. You plan for everything and then it's your reaction to everything that happens in your life.

That's what's interesting and I'm there to document it and try to understand these people.

So I can take my camera and try to understand what's going on and when it's a wedding day, they're a little stressed out. You can't hide who you are.

Kate: No, I was going to say you're never truer than when you're under pressure.

Armen: That's what I believe. When you're under pressure, you kind of really see who that person or what that person is really like.

And I realize, and as I do it, over the years, I become less and less judgmental. And it's because I realize that we all want to have a good day and we want everyone to enjoy themselves.

Early on, one of the bride's uncles came over to me and said you know, after this is all over, your viewpoint, your perspective is the only perspective that everyone is going to remember this wedding by.

Kate: Interesting.

Armen: And that felt like a really heavy responsibility to me.

When I was in graduate school, I shot weddings strictly for myself. And it was totally an investigation. I was never the main wedding photographer. I was just there taking pictures to figure it out.

Kate: Interesting.

Armen: So that was my thesis. All my friends were getting married and I didn't know because I was kind of a tomboy. I wasn't into the girly stuff. I was dating my husband-to-be at the time and I said you know what, I really don't know what I'm supposed to be doing? What do women in this country do on their wedding day? And so that's when I picked up my camera and went to the marriage license bureau down in Lower Manhattan and when couples came out, I approached them and I said hey I'm doing my master's thesis, can I come to your wedding and I'll give you some eight by tens. I'm just going to be kind of the fly on the wall. And that's how I shot my first couple of weddings.

I went all over the place. I was in the Upper West Side. I was in Harlem. I was out on Long Island. I was everywhere and I had freedom because I had no responsibility to really capture what they wanted. I captured what I wanted to see.

And I could get behind the scenes and see everybody getting ready and all the things that women do to get ready, so that's why I did it. Like I said, it was my tool of investigation.

I did that project, and then right after that I did a project on women in labor and delivery. Why? Because I was curious and it's a mysterious thing that women and people don't talk about. What goes on in that labor room?

Kate: That is the truth.

Armen: So I realized that from those two experiences I was previewing my life.

And trying to figure out what happens in this culture, what's expected. So I got right in the middle of it.

Kate: That's so fascinating.

Armen: That was the time when I could work with a doctor who was treating and taking care of my sister-in-law who was pregnant. Her doctor gave me permission. He was one of the first doctors who had his nurse act as a Doula (birth coach). She would stay with you during your entire labor and that's so unusual.

And St. Luke's was one of the first that had larger rooms that could accommodate people staying in with you. So he was affiliated with St. Luke's and he was a cutting edge kind of guy. And so my sister-in-law was the first birth that I wound up going to.

Kate: Do you use your camera for other reasons, beyond exploring everyday lives?

Armen: Yes, absolutely. I've been going for the past five years to Lincoln Center during their Mostly Mozart Concert series. I'm interested in musicians and not the finished product. I'm more interested in the process itself.

The finished product is interesting but if someone shows me a painting I'm like, great, but I'm really interested in *how did you do that?*

Kate: That is more interesting.

Armen: And it's the same with musicians. My first experience with the "behind the scenes" of an orchestra was at Lafayette College. My daughter played the cello - she was in the Young People's Philharmonic of the Lehigh Valley - and they announced that there was an open rehearsal of Orpheus at Lafayette College. I was like, what's that? So I went over and you could sit in the audience while Orpheus practiced and they would discuss what they were doing.

Kate: Oh wow.

Armen: They'd talk about what they wanted changed, or not, or pick up a tempo here or whatever it is and I was then aware of this communication that goes on between musicians that the audience is pretty much unaware of. This was really interesting. My daughter wound up interning with this musical ensemble, a young thirty-something group of musicians playing contemporary composers' music. And I basically wound up going to their rehearsals and watching them play, photographing their instruments too. You know, I was interested in everything.

Kate: I'm sure.

Armen: So I basically got a pass to go behind the scenes and follow them around for a week before and during their performances at Lincoln Center, all different venues too. Black Box, Alice Tully and the other halls. I would never photograph during the performance because it's disruptive and Lincoln Center has a lot of rules about that.

Kate: Sure.

Armen: So I would be backstage, behind the curtain to capture that tension right before they went on stage and the exuberance when they got off stage, and all of the tuning up and the prep and how they psychologically kind of go into a quiet room to center themselves.

The stage at Alice Tully Hall is really curved and there are two sections. You can actually drop the entire front part of the stage down for smaller ensembles and expand it for larger orchestras.

You have to know what you're doing and you have to do it quickly, and they're deadly serious about these things. That was really interesting. Seeing all the monitors backstage during the performance and then the lights, and I mean it was really fun.

Kate: The word subtext comes to mind. Like the subtext of the performance.

Armen: Right.

Kate: Like the thing that's in between you as a viewer and what you see. That's always fascinating, isn't it, for anything? Like there's always so much more than you know.

Armen: Exactly, that you just don't know about. There are so many different worlds, you know.

Kate: That's very cool. One thing I've been asking people is about identity. Like some people start out as one thing and shift toward another.

Was that your experience? Were you always interested in photography from the very beginning or is that something you grew into?

Armen: I was a painter when I was in elementary school and I would do too much of that, my mother thought. She'd say, you have to focus more on academics. But she took me to ceramics classes and all that stuff and I had to take ballet, which I hated. My sister was really graceful and I really stunk at it. But you know we had our fortés. I used to climb trees and my sister didn't. She was the nice girl and I was the one always getting into trouble.

She was older so she was, you know, more dignified and I was usually doing something I shouldn't do. Which was also a source of amusement for my mother so I got these kind of funny mixed messages. Which was good, you know, because I'd have my butterfly net going into lots that were abandoned because that's where the milkweed was and that's where the monarchs were. I was also kind of creative early on. I would sew.

And so, on the weekends, I would tell my high school friends that I was with my church friends and tell my church friends I was with my high school friends. And I would sit at home and basically create, either sewing or other stuff. I was very happy by myself. I didn't have to have people around to be happy. And I played musical instruments and my dad actually had this old tape recorder, reel-to-reel, and I had a couple of tracks so I'd record myself on different tracks, playing different instruments and then play along. I spent hours in my room playing my guitar.

When I was in college my dad was kind of old school and was like, well okay, you just need your degree to get married and raise kids. My mother was more progressive.

Kate: How did that manifest within you? Like at the time, were you of your dad's mind or your mom's or of some combination of the two, or were you of your own mind completely? I mean in my early twenties I was totally of my mom's mind because I hadn't figured out my own mind yet.

Armen: I watched other people's relationships and I didn't like what I saw, so I was like, no I don't think I'll do that. Because my roommates all had boyfriends, you know?

Kate: Yeah.

Armen: And I dated, a couple of times, but I wasn't really into a long-term, one to one relationship. I felt that my whole life would be dictated by this particular person. I could predict what I was going to do for the rest of my life with this one person.

In high school, I dated someone who was Armenian. He was from the same ethnic group, and I thought that this would be too traditional for me. I was like, you know, this is not where I want to go. I don't know where I'm going, but this is not for me.

Kate: You just knew that.

Armen: So I knew that when I got into college I really was not into getting into another relationship of any serious manner. But I saw everything around me and I saw women that were changing their personalities to suit their boyfriends and I saw all of these different manifestations. I was picking and choosing for myself mentally. Do I want to do that? So I was kind of still focusing on my education and still following what I was curious about.

Kate: So that piece, that curiosity ...Has been strong from the get-go?

Armen: Even though I had to jump through hoops, like my dad said, you know this arts thing, you know you can't do anything serious with this. He was an engineer. So I got my piece of paper, my bachelor's in science. I said 'okay dad, I've got my bachelor's in science now. Now can I do what I want to do?'

Also, I realized you really can't do much with a BS in zoology. I applied to the Brooklyn Zoo, you know? But you can't do anything there. I mean I would have been shoveling stuff.

Kate: Yeah.

Armen: So you had to go on for a higher degree. And at that point, I said what I really want to do is art.

Kate: Right.

Armen: And photography was the medium that I wanted to do even though when you get your masters you have to take all of these other art classes.

Kate: Oh, because it's a masters of fine arts.

Armen: Lots of drawing and other stuff. People would look at me in this program and go "this is your first drawing class??" I was like, well, my undergraduate degree was in science.

By the way, I got an A in the class because of my improvement. I went from stick figures to three-dimensional charcoal figures. You know it was pretty interesting to get all of that as well. But I still think that art school should give you some business skills so that you can be self-supporting.

You need the technical ability. That's what's so interesting about photography is that you have to be technical -- all of that physics and light...

Kate: Sure.

Armen: And apertures and diffraction and diffusion and all of that. I loved physics because it was practical, it was applicable.

Kate: Sure.

Armen: Finding whatever profession you are best suited for is a combination of your personality and your life experiences.

I actually have to fall in love with my subject and I can fall in love with them for twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours or whatever. I find out who they are. My sister just went to a wedding and the bride, weeks later, was complaining that the photographer really didn't know who anybody was and didn't take the right photographs. And that's why I make it a point to go to rehearsal. Nobody else does that because they're usually shooting three weddings a weekend. But I know who the godmother is. I know who the aunts are. I know the grandparents. I know where they're from and I don't have to be prompted when someone approaches them because I know who they are. The really inner core group of people.

Kate: Because you've watched this.

Armen: Because I've watched and they've filled out forms and talked to me about their relationships with other people.

Kate: Yeah.

Armen: And I make it a point to know each and every person in the bridal party, so that when I'm taking pictures, or whatever throughout the day, I'm not "hey you, can you move over?"

Kate: And that makes a huge difference.

Armen: You have no idea. I have freaked people out. They're all lined up. And I'll go: "Jennifer move over here. Stacy just down a bit. Claire over here." And everyone is usually surprised because I'm quiet up till then.

I'm watching. I'm an observer, that's what photographers are. They're usually kind of quiet observers.

Kate: Right.

Armen: So I don't know whether I'm an introvert or an extrovert but when I have to be, I'm an extrovert and I tell people that on a wedding day, you don't want someone that's such a large personality that they take up all the air in your room.

Kate: Sure, right.

Armen: I've heard problems with photographers who are very much observers and introverts and then when it comes time to tell people where to stand, they can't do it. And so I have had to learn how to switch from observer to take charge.

Kate: You have to direct.

Armen: And I always use humor. To direct.

Kate: You'd almost have to, I imagine.

Armen: And I usually make people laugh when I do that so ... And people will say oh you're so patient. When I'm in the flow, I don't notice how time goes by. I don't even feel it. Sometimes I don't drink or eat properly and I get dehydrated so I have to constantly remind myself to hydrate. Because I'm working, it's all in the flow. It's like when you write or when you're working on your painting and time flies by.

Kate: Right.

Armen: That's the rush. And with a wedding, the experience is a non-repeatable thing.

The pressure really is on. You've got to be part athlete because you have to have good eye-hand coordination and you have to get it right, the timing, you have to anticipate, you have to have empathy, you have to know who the people are, you really have to go in having done your homework. And in a culture where everything is speed and the same and...

Kate: Superficial.

Armen: Good things take time.

Kate: How about your environmental interests? You talked about your mom's influence on you in that regard. Is there more like that, more about your background or your interest there that you want to say or...

Armen: You know, having Chot as a husband is really great because of his environmental interests. In fact, when we got married he was working on the nuclear reactor case in Limerick Township, PA. So he started out his environmental law career doing it *pro bono* and, back then, we actually worked together on cases. I was a handy dandy assistant for the Pfizer case, which involved the destruction of the sewage treatment plant here.

And CORCO, which was the Coalition of Religious and Civic Organizations. It was a grassroots organization. That's how we met our friend, Bob Sun.

Kate: I was going to say that Bob Sun's name came up in my brain but I wasn't sure why.

Armen: Right and that's how we met Bob, who was also kind of an activist, and others. At that time, the powers that be in this town were Pfizer people.

Pfizer was a big employer. We went to the Justice Department to get some action against Pfizer because everyone was backing Pfizer and we were this little group of people. In the end the Justice Department also sued Pfizer and we got the largest fine against a company for water pollution at that time.

Kate: It was a huge deal.

Armen: Yeah, it was a huge deal. Because everything that got dumped into the sewage treatment plant, wound up in the Delaware.

Kate: Right.

Armen: So there would just be awful stuff going directly into the Delaware River. And no one really was paying attention. I mean that happens all over the world right now. People aren't paying attention.

Kate: Yes.

Armen: And so, yeah, so that was the first big one. That was like our first couple years of marriage.

Kate: Wow.

Armen: We would go in and copy documents at the sewage treatment plant and you know just a little bit in the trenches but then you know it's tough to do that with little kids.

I always looked up to Chot, respected the work that he did and we're absolutely kindred spirits as far as "yes, go get them."

Kate: For sure. Incredible story. Can we circle back for a moment? Are you still interested in insects, generally?

Armen: I am. I'm always watching.

I'm constantly learning new things. In fact, I have some lamb's ear here in the backyard and just a couple of summers ago, I was watching a carder bee. Those carder bees were rolling up the fluff off the lamb's ear so they could use it to build their nests.

I've just become so much more aware of the natural pollinators. You know it's not just the honeybees.

Kate: They are fascinating and people generally don't know they exist.

Armen: Honeybees are important and commercialized. They were introduced but there are also hundreds of natural pollinators. On the side of my hill, some come out in the spring and they buzz all over the place.

I sit and watch. People must think I'm crazy but I observe. I hear things too. For instance, when you take zoology you have to take classes like ornithology and paleontology.

So I can recognize birdcalls. When I'm in my kitchen, I can hear something going on outside. There's either a cat in the neighborhood and the blue jays are screaming and my antenna are up. I'll go out and see what they're upset about and then I'll see a red tail hawk. So they've given out an interspecies call. Everybody look out. There's a predator out there.

Kate: Yeah. Right.

Armen: And so that is something that's ingrained for someone who is sensitive to it. Native Americans or indigenous people, it's in their makeup. That's what they grew up with and we're so out of touch with that.

Kate: Yeah.

Armen: And we're in front of our devices and my fear is that because we have a generation of kids that are at screens and not outside, we don't value nature. We don't, they don't understand it. They're afraid of it and that's why we're destroying it. Because we don't appreciate it.

Kate: Right.

Armen: We're just not seeing the signs.

Kate: ' There are very few people who notice birdcalls. Who would notice that noise at all? Like it just doesn't click as a noise that's happening out there.

Armen: Right right. Most people don't know their insects and they're afraid of everything. Like you know the crane flies?

Kate: Right.

Armen: They look like big mosquitoes. And people freak and I'm like, 'Look. These are not radioactive mutant mosquitoes. They're just crane flies. They're not going to hurt you.'

And so I will pick up things and show people they're harmless and they'll be like, whoa. It's sad because it's almost like parlor tricks. There are a few nephews in my family who will text me pictures for identification purposes.

Kate: So that's interesting. The same as when you were a kid?

Armen: Yeah, I still get that. And when I first moved into the house, a neighbor behind me looked over the fence and said what are you going to do about your lawn? I said, what do you mean? And she said, well, you have dandelions, you have weeds, you have violets. I said well this is my classroom. I live more outside than indoors. I believe houses are just elaborate tents. My kids would be outside all the time learning about seed dispersal and whatever. When the violets come up, we'd talk about swallowtails and this is larval food for the black swallowtails. I wasn't putting chemicals on my lawn. I'm a parent. I'm my children's first teacher. You know?

Kate: Yes, for sure.

Armen: Both my kids are healed by nature. My son will go into the woods, go to Jacobsburg Park, walk there with his friends, and it's something that they take seriously as part of their mental health. My daughter is now living in Brooklyn and she's filled her apartment with plants.

Kate: That must be kind of cool to see what your kids keep from your efforts.

Armen: You know it.

Kate: It remains to be seen whether our kids will like nature. I keep telling them here's the name of this plant, that plant, and this is what you can do with this and that.

Armen: You know what, they get it passively. They really do.

Kate: Yeah. I'm hoping that's true.

Armen: Absolutely.