



In this interview at LCI in 2007, Mathew Pokoik discusses his studies, personal background, and working process.

## Interview with Mathew Pokoik

Conducted by Tenesh Webber

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**Tenesh:** Tell me about the subject matter of *Street Work*, your series of photographs.

**Mathew:** I made these photographs in 2000, during a time when a number of transitions were happening in my life and in my work. I had recently moved into the city. I had begun using a hand-held camera, after shooting on a tripod for a number of years, with a large, 8"x10" view camera. I had begun working in an urban setting, and I was curious about engaging the tradition of street photography. I was also newly interested in certain formal, compositional questions.

**Tenesh:** You began dealing with formal issues. What does that mean to you?

**Mathew:** In the case of the *Street Work* photographs, I was interested in ways to create new positional relationships within the frame. There are certain ways we've been conditioned to create our reality, frame our world. That's reflected in how we take photographs. I was really curious about shifting that—so where am I placing the lines and shapes within the frame? How am I breaking up the space in the frame? How can the frame itself create new relationships, for example, the inclusion of the grass on the billboard on the right side of one of the *Street Work* photographs. Suddenly there is a new relationship that wasn't present before, between all the objects within the frame.

**Tenesh:** Would you say that you were trying to break photographic rules?

**Mathew:** Yes, in a subtle way, and that's what really excites me about "straight" photography—that the tools you're using are pretty much the same tools that photographers have been using for 150 years. You've got a frame, a rectangle. So how can we use that rectangle to expand the parameters of what's been done in photography?

**Tenesh:** Do you see yourself as an innovator?

**Mathew:** I would hope so. I would hope that I'm pushing myself to shift the visual language into a slightly different parameter. It might be that we're all unique people, and if we really engage what we're doing fully something new will be created. I also think it's important to be grounded in a tradition, but explore the edges of that tradition.

**Tenesh:** Is there a specific Pokoik style? And if there is, can you describe it?

**Mathew:** Do I have a style? I don't know. In the sense that I'm me, and we're all different from each other. We have subtle things that are unique to ourselves. This is true even for photographers who shoot in a very neutral fashion, whose photographs create the appearance or illusion of *objectivity*.

**Tenesh:** So what is your signature, what makes your work unique?

**Mathew:** Well, the neutral frame—that's something I've given a lot of thought to, and it's something I'm reacting against in my work. Or rather, maybe I could say I am interested in exploring the neutral frame but in a geometrically off-kilter way.

**Tenesh:** Could you define the neutral frame?

**Mathew:** Lets take the work of Walker Evans as an example. He was interested in this idea of a photographer being transparent. When asked if he was a documentary photographer, he responded that he would rather say, "I photograph in a documentary style." He achieved that by lining the frame up, centering a given building—having a certain amount of space between the edges of the frame and the subject matter. It can seem like a very ordinary, everyday photograph. So, as we look at his photographs, the first thing we see isn't Walker Evans. He's moved his personality out of the way, as much as possible. Of course, he hasn't; it's a style, a façade, a conscious construct. It is the illusion of objectivity. A photograph is not objective, it never is; yet, by photographing in a documentary style, Evans created that illusion. It's why I consider photography to be a subversive medium.

**Tenesh:** Tell me about the photographers you look at. Who has influenced your work?

**Mathew:** In terms of influences when I was making the *Street Work* series, the artists I was connecting with the most were Paul Cézanne and Lee Friedlander.

**Tenesh:** What is it about the work of Cézanne, a painter, that is interesting to you?

**Mathew:** The sense of language and visual structure. To me Cézanne was pushing the edge of how you structure an image to an extreme. A painting or a photograph needs to be balanced in some way, but there is a tremendous amount of latitude to how you balance it. When I look at Cézanne, I see him pushing the structure of placement to this edge, where his subject matter, lets say a still life of apples and oranges, floats in this wonderfully off-kilter, yet perfectly balanced and contained space within the rectangular canvas.

**Tenesh:** How is he doing that?

**Mathew:** For starters, I'd have to say it's a bit of a mystery to me, and that is exactly what I find engaging. There is placement, where he's placing lines. There's his sense of space and flatness, of planes. You see that in his still lifes. Where is the focus? There are surfaces—apples and oranges and maybe a folded tablecloth, and then there's a sense of what's behind the surfaces. There's often a sense of massively deep space. But there's also a sense of flatness. He was acutely aware of working on a two-dimensional surface, of flattening the

surface as opposed to creating an illusion of spatial depth. I feel that Cézanne really broke with the tradition of investigating perspective as a means of spatial depiction, which dates back to the Renaissance. Suddenly, it's no longer purely a sense of creating an illusion of space, using perspective. Now it's this sense of flattening surfaces, too. That's why I say it's a mystery. I'm not sure. Is he flattening the space? Is he creating the illusion of space? He is somehow doing both these things. You can tell he was always struggling with his questions, and that's what excites me about his work.

**Tenesh:** You have spoken of Cézanne's *Mont Sainte-Victoire* as being important to you. The way he breaks up space. In that painting there's a tree right through the center, which breaks the plane completely in half, and there are other structural devices that he's using that break up the frame. This connects to your work: you often have lines dividing images.

**Mathew:** That painting—I think it's so wonderful! He sticks this vertical tree, this vertical line, in the foreground, smack in the middle of the painting. It's just so clearly breaking with any and all visual convention of the time, and even of our time to a great deal. Lee Friedlander is doing that same thing with photography. In his case, it might be a telephone pole. He'll stick it smack in the foreground, in the middle of the frame. It short-circuits how we structure the world. What is the relationship between perception and the mental maps we create of the world? I don't think, in our mental maps, we ever have a tree smack in the middle of the foreground.

**Tenesh:** Relating that to your work in New York City, what are our expectations of a photograph of New York? Are you moving away from what someone's expectations might be?

**Mathew:** Yes, yes. Same thing—playing around with placing objects—geometrically breaking up the frame. Because that's part of what a photograph is—geometric relationships. It's one of the ways visual language is communicated to us. As a photographer, one of your tools is the rectangle of the frame, and your challenge is to structure the world using that rectangle, using geometry. I think it even connects to some of the basic ways we perceive the world, in terms of shape and pattern recognition.

**Tenesh:** You use a range-finder camera. Can you talk about what that is?

**Mathew:** Very simple. Most manual 35mm cameras are Single Lens Reflex cameras, known as SLR. When you look through the viewfinder of the camera, you're looking through the lens. With a range-finder camera, you're not looking through the lens; you're looking through a separate viewfinder on the camera. We tend not to see these cameras very much, because it's a very complicated engineering feat to create a range-finder that's accurate, that will see exactly what the lens sees, and this means they tend to be expensive cameras. However, the range-finder camera has a number of advantages over SLR cameras. It is smaller, lighter, and it is quiet. SLR's have mirrors in them that have to flip up when you take a photograph; they make a very loud noise. Range-finder cameras have no mirrors and make almost no noise. This means that a photographer makes less of a disturbance when taking a photo. The experience of looking through a range-finder is also quite different. With SLR's only a very small area of what you see in the viewfinder is in focus, because you are looking through a lens whose aperture is wide open. With a range-finder you're looking

through a separate view-finder, seeing the world the way it always looks to us, except maybe that the view is rectangular.

**Tenesh:** Is it a digital camera or a film camera?

**Mathew:** It's a film camera. For the most part, I shoot film. I feel that there are a number of reasons to be shooting film. Film is still superior to digital cameras in the way it renders space.

**Tenesh:** How do you print your photographs?

**Mathew:** My film is traditionally processed. I make contact sheets in a lab, then I edit them. A contact sheet is a direct one-to-one impression of the negatives. From there, I enlarge everything that I think is reasonably interesting to an 8"x10" size. I probably print one out of every thirty pictures I take. Then there is a further editing process that continues over months or years as I continue to narrow down my choices and sort the images into groups. I print the images I've chosen once again, this time spending a great deal more time working with the subtleties of color and tonal balance, until I am satisfied that each image has become a self-contained unit within the rectangle of the picture image frame.

**Tenesh:** Tell us about your editing process. How do you select one image to continue to work with, and not another?

**Mathew:** I think a lot of it is trying to figure out what is a cohesive photograph, and what makes a cohesive photograph. Sometimes it's as simple as a photograph that continues to hold my interest. Often I'll look at a picture I just took and I'll say, "Wow, that's great." But then, a month or two later, I'll look at it and say, "You know, I'm no longer continuously engaged by this image."

**Tenesh:** Does this process take place in a studio?

**Mathew:** Yes, I put the photographs up on the wall. Then look at them over and over and over again, until I'm sick and tired of them. And that, by the way, is how I know when I need to get rid of a picture—when I get tired of it quickly. What I want out of the photographs I take is an image that continues to have a sense of mystery; continues to want to engage us—engage me—something that I look at and say, "I don't understand that."

**Tenesh:** When you're editing, are you thinking in terms of a series?

**Mathew:** Yes, I'm thinking about how different photographs relate. I'm thinking about how they may be contained within thematic ideas. I'm thinking about how there may be relationships between those formal ideas; linkages between images. In some ways, photography can resemble novels. Individual sentences, alone, might not have much meaning. But when we give them a shared purpose we create a whole.

**Tenesh:** Would you say that the life of a photographer is an exciting one?

**Mathew:** It can be exciting, but most of it is actually remarkably lonely and boring. I've been working on my current project for about 5 years, and I probably have twenty five pictures I'm happy with. That represents only a small percentage of the time I'm at work. When I'm out working, hours might go by without my taking a single photograph, there's just nothing there. But when things happen, when the picture comes together, it's amazing. It doesn't happen often—it's a lot of work getting there—hours or days. I travel a lot for my current body of work, *The Global City*. I go to a city, I have a few days or a week to photograph, it's a big investment of time and money. Sometimes I might come out of that week with only one or two photographs, if I'm successful. That's hard.

**Tenesh:** I like the way you describe it as the work toward taking the photograph: the work may consist of just sitting in a foreign city and looking around, or wandering the streets. It's what you're looking at and how you're processing what you're looking at that lead to the photograph, and that *is* the work.

**Mathew:** Yes, it is a process. When things do come together there's a sense of mystery, of things lining up, of everything falling into place. But to come to that moment is a process that requires me to be patient, to watch, to be attentive, to enter into the journey.

*For a complete, unedited transcript of this interview, contact the Resource Center at rc@lincolncenter.org.*