

Eyes *on the*



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Above is a fashion photograph Tytell made in New York City 1992. At top left is a photo of a father with his children taken in Suriname in 1974.

World

Globetrotting Photographer Mellon Tytell Captures Kaleidoscope of Images

By Sandi Switzer

Observing human nature through the viewfinder of a favorite Nikon camera, Mellon Tytell has channeled her passions for travel and traditions into a successful 30-year photography career.

She has journeyed to exotic and ordinary destinations to capture images of young and old celebrating the everyday rituals of life. Her portfolio resembles a geography lesson with assignments around the corner in Quechee and around the world in Katmandu. She has captured brief snapshots of time with images of Haitian voodoo ceremonies, models donning the latest Chanel fashions in Paris, and farmers hauling their 150-pound pumpkins to the Tunbridge World Fair.

Tytell has paddled a dugout canoe up the Amazon River, and hiked with 30 psychic pilgrims to the sacred Inca sites of Machu Picchu. Her black and white photographs of Rainbow Family gatherings in East Texas are in stark contrast to the essence of innocence displayed in colorful images of kindergarten gradu-



Mellon Tytell at home in Danby with her dog Hunter.

tions in Port-au-Prince.

National Geographic, Time, Life, People, Stern, Geo, Fortune, Playboy, Photo and other magazines have printed her name next to stunning, evocative, and provocative portraits of the famous and the familiar, the downtrodden and the destitute.

And through all of this, Tytell's most enduring trait seems to be a spirit of adventure that is mirrored in her work.

Sitting in a pre-Revolutionary farmhouse high atop a hill in a remote section of Danby, Tytell sips a cup of tea while recounting an extraordinary career that's a montage of people, places and of course photography. She traces her adventurous side back to that 5-year-old girl attending summer camp on Lake Horton. Her first memories include the scent of pine groves, struggling to swim, and mastering the intricacies of paddling a canoe.

Camp counselors wrote home to her parents in Long Island that the youngster was turning out to be quite a pioneer. It was a trait that served her well later in life as a novice venturing into the male-dominated field of profes-

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A bloodless bullfight in the Camargue region of France, 1989.

Below is a photograph of a young Haitian girl made by Tytell while on assignment in 1980. At left is a buffalo in a neighboring field on Colvin Hill in Danby in the late 1970's.



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Mellon Tytell turned a passion for travel and traditions into a 30-year career

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sional photography.

Tytell graduated in 1969 with an undergraduate degree in English literature and philosophy from the University of Chicago's New School of Social Research in New York.

"It was an interdisciplinary program for very eccentric students that didn't want to function in a structured environment. But what do you do with that kind of degree, you work in a nightclub," she said.

And that is exactly what she did. Tytell waitressed for a brief period in 1970 at a New York club called Salvation whose patrons included Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Liza Minelli. It was there she first began observing human nature.

"That's where they would all hang out, and I remember Jimi Hendrix falling into my lap less than two months before he died," she said.

Tytell then landed a job on the fringe of photography as a stylist for noted still-life photographer Tosh Matsumoto. Her responsibilities included buying and arranging props as well as selecting and booking models. It was Matsumoto who encouraged Tytell to pick up a camera and put her own creative energies to good use.

"He used this eight by ten Diersdorf camera, and I was always looking over his shoulder," she said. "Tosh told me one day that I had a really good eye, and invited me to use his equipment and studio, but said he didn't have the patience to be a teacher."

Tytell accepted the challenge by traveling to the colonial town of Sturbridge, Mass., and capturing simplistic images of men and woman wearing traditional garb surrounded by farm animals. A New York neighbor working in the fashion industry for Ralph Lauren, selected a Sturbridge photo for one of the company's annual Christmas cards.

"On the day I was to deliver the cards, an assistant for Ralph Lauren was in the waiting room screaming she needed a picture of Ralph for The Boston Globe," Tytell said. "I piped 'I'm a photographer,' and she said, 'Be here tomorrow at 9 a.m.'"

With only a marginal amount of experience to draw from, Tytell arrived in Lauren's office the next day carrying a plastic shopping bag containing a camera body, one lens, a dilapidated tripod and a \$2 spotlight that stuck out of the bag.

"Ralph really liked the way I was dressed. I was wearing black and white saddle shoes from the fifties, and it was the seventies, and nobody wore shoes like that," Tytell said. "He asked me where I got them, and I told him in a thrift store."

Lauren also liked the portraits taken that day, and invited Tytell to provide the photographs for his first press kit, which she did in 1973.

"Ralph at that time was a tie designer, and he was just doing his



Tytell photographed Norman Mailer in his South Londonderry home in 1970.

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first collection of men and women's clothing," she said.

After a crash course in fashion photography, Tytell shot 54 rolls of film in one day for the press kit, and spent the next four days developing the film with the help of a friend.

"That's how I started doing fashion photography for Ralph Lauren, and I've been doing fashion on and off ever since," she said.

At the same time Tytell was honing her newly acquired skills in the early 1970s, she was also spending a fair amount of time with friends in Vermont. One happened to mention he was having author Norman Mailer's fields in South Londonderry, and that was all the inspiration Tytell needed for her next subject.

"I just went up and knocked on (Mailer's) door, and asked him if I could take his picture, and he said yes," she said. "At that time, he was interested in boxing, so I took a picture of him boxing."

Mailer's sparring partner happened to be a real estate agent who later showed Tytell a farmhouse on Colvin Hill in Danby, which she bought and settled into with her husband, John Tytell, in 1971. The couple have countered their whirlwind New York City lifestyles, where John has taught literature at Queens College for more than three decades, with frequent respites to this remote haven atop a Danby hill ever since.

The image of Mailer in boxing gloves can be seen along with a collection of Tytell's photographs of writers, musicians, painters, activists

and playwrights in a book written by her husband about the Beat Generation titled "Paradise Outlaws."

Even with these early strides in photography, Tytell still felt the need to prove herself in a field dominated by men. So in 1974, this young woman in her mid-20s set off on a photography expedition to Suriname.

"I took a thousand dollars, bought another camera and four more lenses, and a pair of Army jump boots, because I was terrified of the jungle," she said. "I spent about three months in Suriname photographing the Afro-Caribs and doing a lot of industrial photography."

Tytell utilized her paddling skills gleaned earlier from summer camp days to maneuver a dugout canoe 300 miles up the Amazon River.

"I took this trip alone except for the navigator who didn't speak any English other than 'oh look, oh look, monkey, monkey' and that's about it," she said with a laugh.

Tytell made camp on a small island on one of the river's many tributaries, and visited the descendants of ex-slaves bought by the Dutch to work the sugar plantations.

"These Afro-Caribs came from West Africa and just refused to be slaves, and ran into the jungle and attacked the sugar plantations until they became autonomous in that region," she said. "I thought it was a really good subject to do as a young photographer."

The entire South American venture was funded on borrowed money.

"It was a complete risk and I was really hoping to make my money back, and hoping that this would be the beginning of a life doing feature stories for magazines," she said.

Upon returning to the states, Tytell sold the entire body of work including photographs of the Suriname banana industry, and a wood-chipping operation.

"That was 25 years ago, and I've been on the go ever since," she said.

It also led to other magazine assignments including photographing the flower industry in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley for The Magazine of Natural History. Years later there were excursions to Haiti to shoot the primitive art movement for Islands Magazine, and Haitian voodoo ceremonies for Time.

National Geographic hired Tytell to cover the United Nations' crop substitution program in the Burma, Laos and Thailand region in 1975.

"The U.N. was doing all these experiments to try to stop the growth of poppies, and give the people another means of income," she said.

Tytell photographed the hazards of the drug culture including a Buddhist monastery detoxification center in Bangkok, and the funeral of a small child who had consumed opium.

"My work wasn't published then, because the editor said it was too realistic. At that time, National Geographic Magazine was very conservative, and everything they did

was either butterflies or bathed in pink light. And I had all of these shocking photographs."

The images have since been used in numerous magazines in over 40 different countries, Tytell said, adding she still receives the residuals.

By the early 1980s, John Tytell was teaching at the Sorbonne in Paris, and his wife spent most of the decade traveling across Europe on fashion and feature assignments.

Her subjects ranged from Euro-hippies in Spain, Italy and Germany to Chanel and Karl Lagerfeld fashions in Paris. She took side trips to the Camargue region of France to photograph a 2000-year-old ritual of bloodless bullfights.

"A bull has a flower between his horns, and young men dressed in white try to grab the flower and run out of the arena," she said. "What I love about the Camargue region, is the people are still living their traditions. It's similar to Haiti, where the people really haven't lost their traditional way of living. And it's similar to what I felt about Vermont when I first came here."

Tytell had the good fortune to spend eight consecutive seasons in Danby in the early 1990s, the longest period of time she has spent at any one location in her entire career.

"I had gotten a contract to write a book called "American Margins" about Americans living alternate lifestyles," she said.

One section was dedicated to a Rainbow Family gathering in East Texas where 5,000 people camped out in a forest. Another described traveling with 30 New Agers to Machu Picchu and the ancient Inca sacred sites to try to communicate with extraterrestrials.

"But the book never got published because the publishing company went bankrupt right at the finish of the book," she said. "It's just one of those things that happens. You have to have 10 things going on and maybe two come to pass."

The disappointing turn of events was lessened by the realization that she had acquired a new skill — writing.

"I had bought this computer, and exchanged photography with this poet. I did her book cover and publicity photographs, and she taught me how to use WordPerfect over the telephone," Tytell said.

An even greater benefit was meeting the other great love of her life, Hunter. This large, mixed-breed Danbyite dog teeming with energy had an unexpected effect on its adopted owner.

"I've never wanted to be in one place for more than two months at a time. But when I adopted Hunter, it caused me to lose the taste for traveling," Tytell said.

Surrounded by the peace and tranquility of this rural existence,

she began organizing the enormous body of work collected over the past three decades.

"Through the years, John has been interviewing Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Ken Kesey, all the figures of the Beat Generation. And I've been tagging along with him, having the privilege to be able to experience that part of American culture, and photographing these characters."

The result has been a combination of wit, humor, intellect and hearsay in their book just published titled "Paradise Outlaws: Remembering the Beats." It has been described as part memoir, part photo album of the last American literary movement, and is now available in bookstores.

Sotheby's will be auctioning off a portfolio of her work related to Ginsberg on Oct. 7 in New York.

Tytell is currently compiling material on indigenous ceremonies, rituals, and gatherings in Haiti, Bali, Indonesia, Nepal, and even Vermont for her next book titled appropriately enough "Gatherings."

Since first picking up a Nikon F-3, her work has been influenced by many noted photographers who have introduced her to a range of techniques.

Jay Maisel, an industrial photographer hired by high visibility companies like General Motors, taught her classical techniques, and how to compose images in the lens.

She learned panning and movement from Ernst Haas, who photographed several Marlboro advertisements.

Robert Frank, part of the Beat movement, had a freer approach to his work.

"By knowing Robert, I loosened up a lot, and learned spontaneity. And over the years I have synthesized all of these different strains and experiences, and become more personal in my work, and it has really made doing photography much more fun."

She hopes one day to be focusing on the offspring of American soldiers born in Vietnam, or securing an assignment to Ghana, the melting pot of Africa.

And the camera bag she will be toting will be filled with the same equipment she has relied on for much of her career.

"I've been using the same lenses that I've had since I went up the Amazon River. These lenses have been to the Himalayas, to the Andes, the Golden Triangle, and all around the world."

But at the end of each assignment the mountains of Danby beckon her return.

"With all the traveling I've done around the world, when I come back to this hill I have to say it matches anything beautiful I've seen anywhere. It's totaling entrancing to me, and I just love it."