

## INTERVIEW: Allen Frame – “ASX Interviews Allen Frame” (2013)

Raphael Shammaa with Allen Frame for ASX, October 7, 2013

Raphael: Allen, you've accomplished a number of things in your career: photographer, curator, writer, director, producer of a highly acclaimed movie, called *Four*, which received awards at the Los Angeles, Urbanworld, and New Orleans Film Festivals. Let me ask you... are there enough hours in the day for you?

Allen: It's always a struggle – that balancing act. There was a period, probably up until the early nineties when I was much less busy and had a lot of free time to pursue all of these different interests, and then in the nineties I got involved with nonprofits and took on a lot of responsibility: I was a co-founder of a contemporary art space in Memphis called Delta Axis, though I was living in New York, and on the board of Art in General, PS122 Gallery, now The Camera Club of New York, and curating occasionally, and my schedule got loaded. And the reason for doing all this had to do with wanting to be part of a community. I think I was seeking relationships with other artists, and also wanting to support other artists and help them get opportunities.

Raphael: I would think the teaching itself would be what takes a lot of your time because there's the preparation and then there's the time with the students before and after.

Allen: It does, but to me that's a given. And since it's part time, I can't complain too much. It's really what I'm doing the rest of the time that is a challenge to balance.

Raphael: We were talking about your movie, but speaking about movies there has always been cinematography that rivals anything you see in galleries and museums.

Allen: As a still photographer, I've definitely been influenced by film.

Raphael: All the imagery in the movies.

Allen: Definitely. My attraction to film noir, Italian neo-realism, etc.

Raphael: Yes.

Allen: The photographers of the New York School in the late forties and fifties were going to movies all the time. I don't think still photographers today are as avid about film as that generation was.

Raphael: Yes.

Allen: And then filmmakers are looking at our work all the time as well. But creating a still image that works requires a certain formalization of the image that is different from what cinematographers do.

Raphael: Yes, but there are similarities. Regarding your own photographic work, in which ways has southern culture, and in turn gay culture helped shape it? There was an item in Saturday's news about anti gay heckling at the University of Mississippi, which I think is the state you come from.

Allen: I didn't see that.

Raphael: And does that kind of tension fuel art, or does it simply color it? It must have some kind of impact on artists.

Allen: I think it contributes to one's sense of being an outsider. I grew up in a particularly conservative culture.

Raphael: Yes.

Allen: But there was a lot of queer activity going on behind the scenes, I'm from a town that was an anomaly in the Deep South by being a very creative and literary place with progressive influences, with a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper, for instance. A lot of writers were from there and there were creative institutions— a little theater and a symphony—and a number of the people who led those things were gay. They might also have been married. Some of them were bi, it was all something that people knew, but didn't discuss publicly. So when I went back to live there after college I became really aware of all those contradictions, about how much was really going on versus how much was talked about. I had this mentor named Leon Koury, a sculptor, who was the mentor for a lot of people, not just gay people growing up there, but for anybody creative, and he was out. He was always out. He had left Mississippi to live in New Jersey/New York for many years and then he returned in the late fifties or early sixties, and had a studio where he gave classes and a lot of us hung out there. He was a very philosophical, interesting person, and in that period when I was back there in my twenties, I spent a lot of time around him. It was a platonic relationship. I've had several older gay mentors who shared gay folklore with me that I always found really interesting, so I wasn't completely cut off, but definitely I understood this kind of outsider status,

Raphael: But how does all that manifest in the work?

Allen: I think it has to do with the element of suspense.

Raphael: Yes.

Allen: A feeling of mystery, secrets, subtexts.

Raphael: So ... ambiguousness?

Allen: Yes, and then also the trauma for gay people in the eighties and nineties of AIDS also had an impact that was too enormous ever to process, and that's definitely a part of everything I do, in terms of the sense of sadness and the sense of mortality that came from the whole AIDS pandemic. I lost many of the friends that I had. It was very very traumatic.

Raphael: I remember that time.

Allen: Recently I saw a young gay photographer post something on Facebook: "Where are all the collectors? I need to sell some work." And he was being a little bit glib and I told him recently when I saw him on the subway, "They're dead! You know, they died." Many of the collectors of photography that has queer content are gone, like many of the photographers themselves — Hujar, Mapplethorpe, Darrel Ellis, Scott Heiser, Jimmy DeSana, the list goes on. What if they were all here still, how would that affect us?

The cultural founding father of my hometown was a gay man who was never married and I think everyone around him understood he was gay, and my mentor was his protégé. His name was William Alexander Percy. He was cousin and guardian of the writer Walker Percy, who went to my high school years before me. I was very conscious of some of the gay writers who'd preceded me – Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, Paul Bowles... I grew up in a highly macho family. My brother, my uncles, my cousins. All played college football. My sister was an athlete, my mother was an athlete. It runs in my family, and if people in my family weren't talking about sports, they were talking about hunting. My father was a big hunter. So, you know, I had a lot of testosterone all around me, from the men and the women, and it was something I was dying to escape.

Raphael: Yes.

Allen: As a child I was very attracted to movies and the glamour of an entertainment world, and I was constantly imagining leaving, escaping my world to try to get into a world of film and theater. I even subscribed to Variety as a child, and my parents

paid for that, so they kind of indulged these interests, and because I was the youngest and people weren't really paying attention to me, I was allowed to be academic instead of sports-obsessed, and I went to Harvard from Mississippi but nobody was pushing me to do that. I wanted to get out of there,

Raphael: So, photography for you started in Boston?

Allen: Yes.

Raphael: And how did your stylized signature look evolve over time? What did your early pictures look like? How did it all happen? You went back to Mississippi for three years.

Allen: Yes.

Raphael: Took pictures. What did those pictures look like? As opposed to what your pictures look like today. You were in your mid twenties or so...

Allen: I was in college, about twenty, when I started photographing. I was studying art history, I was writing a paper on Caravaggio, I was taking classes in film history, I was seeing lots of movies- more than going to classes, because growing up in Mississippi I hadn't had the opportunity to see a lot of films that I had read about.

Raphael: So you were catching up.

Allen: And I think the period in film that had the biggest impact on me was Italian Neorealism, particularly in the late 50's, early 60's, when those directors' styles were transitioning from something that was more documentary into something that was more stylized and psychological.

Raphael: So who were the directors?

Allen: Antonioni, Fellini, De Sica...

Raphael: That was a great period.

Allen: Visconti, Pasolini

Raphael: Yes.

Allen: The movies had to do with extended mood, atmosphere, tone, you know, less about plot...

Raphael: Yes, which is...

Allen: And therefore more like still photography...

Raphael: Like images that we find in your work.

Allen: I think that the interesting thing that happened in early Italian Neorealism was the digressiveness into actual scenes that happened on the periphery of the narrative scenes, so that those elements of the everyday that created mood and context were integrated and had their own life within the film, which I think led later to films that had an emphasis on psychological mood, as in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* and *Eight and a Half*. I was thinking I would go into film, not still photography, but Boston was a real photo city. Rhode Island School of Design was close. A lot of people who were doing graduate work there were living and teaching in Boston.

Raphael: How was photography in America in those days? What kind of status did it have?

Allen: It was expanding significantly. That was when photography started coming into schools as a course: History of Photography. It was when photo galleries were appearing. Photographers already had status through their books and occasional museum exhibitions, but that status expanded through gallery shows. The photo shows at MoMA of that period were hugely attended and paid attention to. **Arbus was a giant** before she died. **Lisette Model** as well. They had cult status. Minor White in Boston, **Harry Callahan** and Aaron Siskind at RISD, all had a lot of respect and status.

Raphael: These were huge artists.

Allen: Yes. And Arbus' posthumous show at MOMA broke attendance records.

Raphael: It's interesting because the work can put anyone off.

Allen: And it put me off the first time I saw it. I thought it was ugly. I was shocked by it. I went to a little show at Harvard in the Fogg Museum, of Arbus, Emmet Gowin, and Les Krims, and I was really shocked by Arbus' work, thinking it was just so blunt and ugly.

Raphael: And gritty.

Allen: And then of course I couldn't stop thinking about it, so she was a huge influence in terms of her penetrating, psychological perspective that registered in the faces of these people.

Raphael: And yet your style is...

Allen: Completely different.

Raphael: Completely different. It's not in-your-face at all.

Allen: Emmet Gowin at the time was an even bigger influence. Arbus was doing strangers, **Emmet McGowin** was doing portraits of his wife's family, but they were both making these intensely psychological portraits. His were done in Virginia, so I was really influenced by seeing a photographer in the South tap into a psychological perspective. It really made me want to go back to Mississippi. Do you know those early photos by Emmet Gowin?

Raphael: Yes, his work is really beautiful.

Allen: I think I was influenced by him and Arbus both, and I had to get them out of my system, which I gradually did through the seventies.

Raphael: So coming back to my question, what did those pictures look like when you first went back to Mississippi? How different or how similar were they to what you do now, what you're known for, let's say?

Allen: Mostly what I was doing was an extended portrait of this friend of mine named David Kain who was gay, very much an outsider. He'd grown up in a poor, transient, Southern white world, and he was a very provocative person. I thought he was fascinating. We became close friends, and I did a lot of pictures of him and his world, and at the same time I was also photographing my family, which was a different world. I like those pictures that I did of him; it's more of a documentary kind of project.

Raphael: Do we ever get to see those anymore?

Allen: They're not online but I have them printed; I could show you some time. I've been wanting to do a book, an artist book. with those images, which I probably will do within the next two years.

Raphael: Well that would be really interesting to see.

Allen: All of that went into my first two shows in New York and the last one was around 1981. David died around 1981 or 82 of AIDS, but it was before people understood what that was. He was only in his thirties so that was the first tragic early death that I encountered. His lifestyle was extreme, he drank a lot. He spent a year in prison.

Raphael: So it didn't come totally as a surprise.

Allen: It did, but I had seen him when he was sick and he had lost a lot of weight, so I was prepared.

Raphael: He lived on the edge...

Allen: Yes. When I moved to New York, I started photographing my own world of artist friends and I've pretty much continued to do that. The work has evolved from more of an atmospheric documentary approach to something more informed by theater and film and that is somewhat more stylized – not really more controlled, but the framing has become increasingly structured and composed, even though I don't stage things. I think sometimes people think I stage things because the composition of the image is so...

Raphael: Well yes, it's an interesting question that comes up, which is "Is the captured image the product of preparation?"

Allen: I photograph in two different ways: One is that I'm around people that I want to photograph, maybe traveling or living with them, and I see things and respond to them quickly, and that's easier. And the other way is when I know that I want to photograph someone and I ask them whether I can come over, or if they can come to me, something like that, so it's a portrait situation.

Raphael: One is about following an impulse, and the other is following up on an idea?

Allen: Right. They wind up looking the same, but when I've told somebody that I want to photograph them and we're both self conscious about that, then I have to struggle to find spontaneity so that it feels natural instead of contrived.

Raphael: Which says a lot about great actors: You never see them acting

Allen: Exactly, and I don't want these portraits to feel posed.

Raphael: So what's your relationship to the intimacy that seems to be playing out on the other side of the camera? What's your priority at that moment? You're there, you're behind the camera, something is playing out in front of you, and how do you make the decision to click now and how many things do you keep track of simultaneously as you're taking the picture?

Allen: That's a good question, because it addresses something that is hard to talk about, which is that part of photography that's not mechanical or technical. It's about all the things you do with your personality to make the pictures possible that you want to wind up with. Generally, I know the people well, so I'm usually having a conversation with them as I photograph.

Raphael: You speak to them as you photograph them?

Allen: Yes, and I hope that it's going to be involving so that it puts us in a real place instead of an artificial place and then there are all the things that are happening that aren't physical or can't be seen between people. And I'm constantly thinking about the formal terms of the image: the relationship to space, the relationship to form, color, light, all those things. I have to shoot a lot, because I don't have time to edit in the moment.

Raphael: Which leads me to my next question, and it's an interesting one: When you review your images, how do you know this is the right one? How do you know you have a good picture there? You're looking at them and you have to make a choice, and sometimes we decide this is the right one, and some time later we come back and we change our mind.

Allen: Usually it's not that difficult, but occasionally if it's a toss up, I print everything and live with it and look at it until I figure it out, but coming back years later, I can't remember a time when I've chosen a different negative of a major picture that I took, so, it's usually clear.

Raphael: If you live long enough with an image before you make the final decision, you're pretty close to the truth.

Allen: Reviewing work that I've already decided about, I generally come up with the same selection.

Raphael: So tell me something about your excursion into color.

Allen: I was doing color from the very beginning as well as black and white.

Raphael: You were?

Allen: I took a class in color photography in 1973, but I kept going back and forth, and it really bothered me in the eighties, when I was shooting color, that the color prints were so unstable.

Raphael: Yeah.

Allen: And that kept me from doing more. The big factor in the nineties had to do with the light levels because...

Raphael: It was slower film.

Allen: I was photographing in a lot of dark situations. To do that in color would have meant using a really limited palette, so I prefer, when in low-light situations, the tonal range and the palette of black and white.

Raphael: Yes, actually, the subject matter dictated black and white for emotional reasons and also for technical reasons, both.

Allen: Right. And, there was a lot of color work I did in the early eighties that people don't know, but was not that unlike what I'm doing now in color. Now, I work almost exclusively in color...I missed it. I started photographing in Mexico and Brazil. I couldn't not pay attention to the color and the light in those places. I can't believe, looking back, how long a period I went through of not photographing in color, and how I could give that up, but I think it was because I was so interested in that transitional time between night and day, and to see how little light I could make the photographs in, and pushing my film – using fast film. T-Max 3200, I used it exclusively, even when I went outdoors in strong sunlight so that the grain in the prints would match.

Raphael: So let's talk a little bit about your exhibition at Gitterman Gallery. You say your inspiration comes not from photography, but from fiction and film and theater, and also from keeping yourself involved and immersed in art related environments. Your friends are all from that world – they're all actors or authors or writers and painters...

Allen: I have a lot of photographer friends, too.

Raphael: And photographers as well.

Allen: Mostly.

Raphael: They're artists as well.

Allen: Yes. And there are some photographers that I pay a lot of attention to. They're mostly not that known.

Raphael: And one sunny day at the age of fifty, you stumble upon that poet and author, Roberto Bolaño, is that how you pronounce it?

Allen: Yes.

Raphael: Bolaño – whom you describe as one of the most important literary voices of your generation. In fact, your exhibition at the Gitterman Gallery is called “Dialogue with Bolaño”, which is an interesting choice of terms because you never met the man. Can you tell us a little bit about this experience of discovering Bolaño?

Allen: One of my good friends, Barbara Epler, is the editor-in-chief of *New Directions*, and she gives me their books to read, and she had given me the first two books by Bolaño that they published, posthumously, in English for the first time, *By Night in Chile*, and *Distant Star*. They were short, haunting novels. Both have to do with the consequences of fascism in the context of Latin American politics and some of the political crises of the seventies. They’re very elegant novels, and I was completely struck by them. And then *New Directions* was publishing the first collection of short stories by him in English and she asked for one of my images from Mexico to use on the cover.

Raphael: She is familiar with your work?

Allen: She has my book, *Detour*, and she has found a lot of images from that, but sometimes she asked me to look through my archive for a certain kind of image. The first one was for the short story collection, called *Last Evenings on Earth*. She used my picture of mariachis in Mexico City from the book *Detour*.

Raphael: Yes.

Allen: And apparently the sales reps loved it so they asked for more. Bolaño started getting a huge amount of attention, and *New Directions* had a contract with his estate to publish everything within a certain time period to maintain their right to publish at all, so one after another of these books came out. Barbara kept asking for images for the covers which was very exciting to me, and I was reading them, of course, as they were coming out. When she did the story collection, *The Return*, there are some very extreme and weird stories in that There’s a tale of necrophilia, and she said “Find the scariest picture that you have,” and I didn’t think they’d use it because it is so extreme but they did use it. It’s a picture of a man in his S/M dungeon in Berlin. For *The Secret of Evil*, another short story collection, which comes out in May in hardback, she was looking for something disturbing again and I found something. In the exhibition there are four images that were used as covers, and the rest of them are in the same vein, including four new color photos.

Raphael: So it must have been surreal for you to contribute your images to the man whose work...

Allen: Yes, totally. When I go to literary parties, if I’m with Barbara, then she’ll introduce me as the photographer who did those covers, but I also hear it from friends who buy the book without knowing I did the photo and then they discover the photo credit.

Raphael: And what happens when your pictures are cropped... to fit the cover of a book? Who does that?

Allen: Their designer.

Raphael: Their designer.

Allen: And I never have any problems with that. It’s obviously a commercial context.

Raphael: Yes.

Allen: I haven’t released those images for any other commercial use, but I love book covers and I love books.

Raphael: Yes, it's very exciting. But I have to say that even when they're re-cropped they work really well. They work well for the application, and they really function extremely well visually on the covers of books, so it was interesting to see that.

Allen: Thanks. Yeah, I think it's hard to use photographs, especially ones that have figures in them, on books because it's sometimes too much information. It gives too much of a direction to the reader about how to picture something or somebody. But I think that because of those low light levels and use of the dark in my pictures, and the loss of information, there's a degree of abstraction around any figure that makes it work.

Raphael: Right, they're sort of open-ended in a way...

Allen: Yes.

Raphael: What do you think oriented Bolaño in that vein, in that type of literature, that type of tone in his work?

Allen: He has a huge range and the capacity to create incredible portraits of a large cast of characters who are very different from each other, which I think shows how deeply interested in people he was -

Raphael: And a good observer.

Allen: Yes. And since my work is primarily about people, I really admire his capacity to identify in that way.

Raphael: But did his background prepare him for this artistic turn in his work?

Allen: He started as a poet, and he was really interested in finding new territory in poetry. He was a young rebel in the seventies and challenged a lot of existing bodies of work, and platitudes and conventions; he was trying to find new ground. And poetry is like photography- not so plot-oriented. Narrative is not such a big thing in contemporary poetry.

Raphael: It's all about mood.

Allen: And poetry is very attentive to form

Raphael: It's also very evocative.

Allen: To me that's so much what photography is. Bolaño was obviously brilliant, and he could have supported himself in any number of ways, but he put experience before comfort and immersed himself in a kind of marginal world through the eighties and took any number of low-paying jobs in strange environments and situations that kept him close to the kinds of material that he was interested in. Very few people are willing to make that sacrifice, especially ones who have the kind of talent he has, but I guess he decided he was going to be a poet in the first place, which has such a small audience today, and that is hardly something you can expect to support yourself from. To have even decided that was already committing to certain values ahead of materiality, but around 1990 he got married and had a family. Maybe with the first child that came along he had a different sense of responsibility, and now he was responsible not just to himself but also he had to take care of children, so he decided to commit to fiction and try to get novels published. It is amazing that he didn't do it before because he was so good at it. I think he'd written fiction, but never had the ambition to become known as a novelist or a story writer but once he turned his attention to that, he became very successful in a fairly short period of time. Within five or six years he was getting significant attention in the Spanish-language literary world, and then he died.

Raphael: It's interesting to see how circumstance often shapes the art and the artist and what they produce, and how unexpected things take place.

Allen: Yeah. It's one thing to think of him going from being a poet into the kind of literary stylist who wrote those short novels - *Distant Star* and *By Night in Chile*, the first ones that came out. That's kind of understandable because they are so elegant, you get can imagine that a poet has written them, but for him to write those long novels, *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*, is impressive, to say the least.



Raphael: So did you say to me that experiencing his work or being exposed to his work opened a door for you for starting more new work?

Allen: No, I have been moved by his work and identify with so much of it but I'm on a path in my own work that was started earlier. Still, his work is highly stimulating to me. When I travel, I'm usually reading him. That's when I do the most reading. Being able to find that kind of voice that I identify with in my generation is so satisfying.

Allen: I think behind that question is a question about what motivates me, or what would renew my motivation, and definitely, teaching is something that takes up a lot of my mental space and time when I'm doing it, but in the long run also stimulates and keeps me in the medium, so that in my vacation time and the times that I'm not teaching, I still work on things. If I hadn't had that connection to the medium through teaching, I might have stopped. But that kind of contact with photographers and the work that they're making and just the medium, in general, I think keeps me...

Raphael: Interested. Keeps the momentum

Allen: Yeah. Although a lot of that also drains my energy, but in general it gives me something.

Raphael: So talking about teaching: what is it that you transmit to your students that keeps them in good stead as developing artists?

Allen: As much as I'm interested in the formal aspects of photographs, the thing that I am most involved with as a teacher is content. I teach in the MFA program at Pratt Institute where I sometimes share critiques with professors of other media and it's always interesting to me that the conversation around painting and sculpture are always so formal. It's all about how you do it – the process and the nuances of the process, but photography is so different because it starts with aspects of reality for the most part, and knowing where to start and what to work with as your material is unexpectedly difficult. So usually, that is the first conversation that I have with people. If people in my class put up something that has no direction, I'm not interested in telling them technically how to make that better. The conversation needs to be how to find the direction, so I ask a lot of questions about what their material is, trying to find out what they're thinking about, getting them to listen to themselves think, getting them to value their own existing preoccupations, to actually know what they're interested in and thinking about. You would think that would be the easiest thing, but that's actually very hard, and a lot of times we have blocks against knowing that, because if we knew it, that might be overwhelming. We might have an overwhelming need to address it, and we don't want to be overwhelmed, or we might be terrified of it, or we might feel like addressing it but it might hurt somebody else, or any number of obstacles. But first I think you have to know what it is that you want to address that is significant to you. I think it has to be significant to you, because once you're working in your own material, all those decisions about how to do it and what form to use follow easily.

Raphael: Yeah, they are secondary decisions. But often one is too close to it.

Allen: And sometimes people need to say "Oh, that's interesting", because people might know what they're thinking about but they don't think it would be interesting to someone else and they need to hear someone validate it and say "Wow".

Raphael: Exactly. Sometimes they are surprised to hear someone tell them that one of the things they're doing is interesting; in fact, it comes as a revelation.

Allen: And I think people have to learn to step back from their own lives to see that although things might be painful, annoying, etcetera, they might also be interesting, and to see that requires stepping back.

Raphael: You once said something and I'd like to ask you what you meant by that – what did you mean when you said that you were ambivalent about being a visual artist? Do you remember saying that?

Allen: Yes, and I could still say that. I didn't grow up around visual art. Visual art was very marginal. I grew up in a culture that was more literary and musical and I identified with the literary particularly. I think the writer has a different place in our society than the visual artist. The visual artist is particularly marginalized and infantilized, and I'm uncomfortable with that.

Raphael: Which part don't you identify with?

Allen: Either the marginalized or infantilized, and romanticized, and I find that all those things are heavily projected onto visual artists still. They don't have a central role in the culture. In New York, art stars are celebrities, commodified, but that's another story.

Raphael: Sometimes I look at a photography exhibit and there's very little photography in it and I ask myself why; the photographic part of the work is minimal and the rest of the work is essentially painted over with bits of wood and plaster and all kinds of things, and still it's labeled as photography, so there is that kind of hybridization of the medium with other mediums.

Allen: I think what has been interesting recently has been the experimentation of painters and sculptors and installation artists beginning to use photography as another tool. One of the interesting hybrids now is photography and sculpture, which is really hard because those two mediums are so different, but whenever someone attempts that, they seem to get a lot of attention for it, and it's because it has rarely been done. It's interesting.