



For Pelle Cass, people-watching is a necessary part of his job. The Massachusetts-based street photographer debuted his series “Selected People” over a decade ago, and it has continued to inform the human experience ever since. Last year, Cass began to reconstruct his images to account for the new normal — “Selected People” became socially distanced and what started as “Crowded Fields” in 2017 dissipated to show non-contact sports.

In any case, Cass abides by his cardinal rule of photography: “everything remains in its exact original place, and nothing is changed, only kept or dropped.” Time-lapsed into a single frame, the result looks unbelievable, but rest assured, it all happened in a day’s work.

Pelle Cass, 2019
Men’s Fencing, Close Up



Pelle Cass, 2018
Water Polo at Harvard

.artist talk *pelle cass

Since the pandemic, you’ve had to rework your archives to reflect social distancing. What has been the most challenging part of reimagining your work? Will it ever look the same?

In early March, I’d planned to do two commissions in Europe and one in the US. It all came to a halt in the middle of March when Massachusetts shut down. The whole thing was awful and disorienting; it was frightening just to walk around the neighborhood. Everything looked strange and sad, multiplied by the knowledge that everybody else in the world was suffering. It’s uncomfortable to admit, but the nervous energy and fear of those days, dire as they felt, had the same effect on me as excitement. I was in a kind of creative panic; it was surprisingly easy to get to work.

In April, the idea of social distance was completely novel to me but devastatingly real. It made my pictures look wrong — crowded, filled with activity, and utterly irrelevant. The current mood was silent, attenuated, and somber. My photos looked like relics. I realized I could rework them to be empty, to look like what was unfolding in the real world that I was prohibited from entering. It should be hard to focus on the trivial work of art-making when your heart is breaking, but it wasn’t. I was very lucky to have no particular personal hardship during the lockdown, but I was tense, afraid, and aware that most people were worse off than me.

I don’t know how this period will affect my work. I haven’t been out in public beyond my neighborhood, so I haven’t taken any new pictures of people on the street. Of course, photographing sports is out of the question for now, but I’d like to keep trying new things — fashion, dance, and other bodies in motion. The pandemic will pass one day, and I hope to remain open to new things and new ideas.

Your “Strangers” portrait series demonstrates that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Are “Selected People” and “Crowded Fields” similar in this respect?

In my “Strangers” series, I tried to devise a new kind of portrait, one that says nothing about personality or resemblance. The paradox is that these portraits are made up of many extremely accurate observations that don’t add up to what we think of when we think of portraiture. The pictures look nothing like the people they depict!

“Selected People” and “Crowded Fields” take a different tack. They let time pile up so that the photos convey much more information than an ordinary still photo.

Further, the process allows me to add a subjective angle. I don’t want to simply compile all the events of a given hour. I select events that interest me and skip the ones that don’t. The viewer gets more than a record of a game or a street corner; the pictures convey my thoughts and feelings.

One of your rules is that if twins wander into the frame, you leave them in so that people think it’s a Photoshop trick. How often does this happen?

It’s very rare for twins to turn up, unfortunately. But I use the principal all of the time, which is to include a lot of true stuff, so the trickier bits look more real. For example, athletes in uniform all look the same, so I can include natural clusters of figures along with photoshopped ones, and it’s hard to tell one from the other. Animals tend to look the same as our species, so including multiples of an individual can easily fool the eye into thinking it’s many individuals. It works for dogs and birds, but footballs, tennis balls, and hockey pucks, too.

Recently you were commissioned to do a fashion shoot for SSENSE. What was this experience like for you compared to a typical shoot?

SSENSE shipped me a big box of clothing. I tossed each item up in the air and photographed it. Then, just like “Selected People” or “Crowded Fields,” I combined the elements in Photoshop, keeping each item of clothing in its real, original place in the sky. The biggest difference was that I could control my subjects, although the wind kept things unpredictable. It was also quite strenuous to toss the clothing thousands of times as high as I could. Meanwhile, I had to learn to press the cable release with my other hand at just the right instant. It was summer, and it was hot! I enjoyed moving around since usually, I’m rooted in one spot for the length of a lacrosse game or swim meet. It was also nice to have coworkers — the good people at SSENSE who offered support and made the pictures better with their insights and suggestions. I normally work alone, so this was more collaborative than usual. It was also entirely new for me, even though it relied on some tricks I’d developed before.

You’ve said before that your insistence on the truth has nothing to do with art and everything to do with journalistic integrity. Why is this distinction so important to you?

My photography education revolved mostly around documentary and street photography

and ideals of truth and accuracy. It started as a received idea, one that I’ve rejected at times since. Photographs can lie, too. That’s the whole point of The Pictures Generation from Cindy Sherman on down. But even the most out-of-context, lying photograph conveys so much more factual information about the world than painting, for example. Photography’s fact-gathering is a miracle that stuns me every day. You can point a camera at the most complicated thing in the world, or the planet itself, and the camera will record it all, every bit. So maybe I’m more connected to journalism than I think! My pictures may look false — they are not what the eye sees in a single instant — but they are more true to how we remember an hour of time, a crowded mish-mosh of images, and important moments elbowing to the front.

In a way, your work renders competition meaningless. Do you think seeing this brings people closer together?

I think my photos try to scramble sports so that you can’t tell who’s winning or losing or even what the players are trying to accomplish on the field. The players are no longer enemies or contestants. They appear to be cooperating, arraying themselves according to some kind of principle of aesthetic pleasure or oddity. And, literally speaking, my photos do bring people closer together. Ideally, after you looked at one of my pictures, you would turn off your computer, go outside, and find a bunch of people to play with.

What’s been the most interesting observation you’ve made while people-watching?

People move in patterns, ones that I’m not able to predict. I may point my camera at a sidewalk or plaza and expect people to fill it, but they tend to stick to set paths and rarely stray. It’s the same with animals and athletes. One time, I was taking pictures in a park, and a squirrel climbed up my tripod and scared the shit out of me. Another time, a skateboarder mooned me. And another time, I got (politely) thrown out of a gym because there were little kids doing gymnastics along with older athletes. But, to tell the truth, the picture-taking part of my work is relatively tedious. It’s a lot of standing there and gathering up the raw material so that I can really get to work back in the studio.

How does your work inspire a sense of autonomy?

I think my photos can seem a little other-worldly. You know that what you’re looking at is real but very strange. You notice time and how odd it is that it passes, things and people disappear, and you’re still there.



Pelle Cass, 2017/2020
Government Center towards North End

Normally, the ‘bigger picture’ reveals itself over time, it’s not something you see in a flash, but if you could, it would look like a Pelle Cass photograph.

It allows you to learn from the past, live in the present, and plan for the future, but ultimately, it reminds you that wherever you go, there you are.



Pelle Cass, 2018/2020
Futures, Friday Court 4 (balls)