CONCEPTUAL PICTURES

While it is true that the art of photography relies on knowing how to use the camera to the best of its ability, it’s also true that not knowing what you’re doing is only a temporary and not necessarily crippling condition. You learn as you work, and you certainly can ask for advice. Larry Schiller was one of the photographers who gave me useful advice early on. Larry is an eccentric genius who has worn many hats—publisher, writer, filmmaker. I met him shortly after I began working for Rolling Stone. He was making a documentary about Dennis Hopper, who introduced us. Larry had worked primarily as a photojournalist in the sixties, and one of his favourite stories was about being sent to photograph the test of an ejection seat. This particular seat was designed for a plane that was on the ground, not in the air, and it required terrific thrust. The seat was going to be thrown up three hundred feet in a split second. Larry knew that he would get only about three frames of not very interesting film if he worked on the ground with the other photographers, so he had a 150-foot tower built and he put a remote-controlled 70mm camera on top of it. The camera was normally used for baseball games. For photographing fast-moving objects. Larry measured the wind velocity and calculated the likely arc of the seat, and when the seat shot out of the plane he got several frames of it coming straight at his lens.

Larry had another story that he liked to tell about figuring out how to photograph a plane exploding on the floor of the desert. They were testing the volatility of fuel. Larry attached a Nikon to the vertical stabilizer on the tail of the plane. He had a 250-exposure back for the camera so that he wouldn’t run out of film if the plane didn’t blow up right away. Everything worked beautifully. The Nikon survived the explosion, although it took three hours to find it where it was buried in the sand. The only problem was that Larry had forgotten to put the film in.

Larry was excited about those jobs. He was thrilled to have a problem to solve. He took something of minimal interest and made it interesting. Larry knew that you are limited only by your imagination.

I have always been curious about how other photographers make their pictures. How things are done. I began collecting photography books in a serious way in the late seventies and started studying the history of photography more carefully. I read about Eadweard Muybridge’s motion studies, with the calibrated backdrops and multiple cameras with stereo-graphic lenses that revealed the position of, for instance, a horse's feet in mid-gallop. And about Harold Edgerton's development of the strobe and his photographs of events that couldn't be seen by the naked eye—a bullet passing through an apple or a playing card, a hummingbird hovering. They were great moments in photography. Feats. And the photographs were beautiful. That galloping horse and Edgerton's photograph of a bullet slicing the Queen of Hearts in half are romantic pictures. Poets took those pictures.

I had rudimentary technical skills when I started working. I had never shot in colour when
Rolling Stone began printing four-colour covers in 1973, although by then Jann Wenner had given me the title "chief photographer." When I shot in black and white, the printer who processed my film, Chong Lee, saved me. He would inspect the film under a red light in the darkroom and push it until he saw something. But he couldn't help me with colour. The exposure is critical with colour transparencies. One of the first cover pictures I took in colour was a backlit photograph of Marvin Gaye in Topanga Canyon at sunset. It looked gorgeous when we were there. The Kodachrome transparencies looked great too. They were fine-grained, saturated, very beautiful. But the picture was a disaster when it was published. The ink sank into the newsprint and everything clogged up. All you could make out was the sunset. Marvin Gaye was in silhouette. There was no detail in his face.

To survive the printing process at Rolling Stone, I began adding strobes to natural light. This produced very graphic images in terms of form and colour. There was a lot of contrast and colour saturation in the pictures, but on the newssprint pages of Rolling Stone they were muted and off-register. I didn't realize how bright my transparencies actually were until my first book was published, in 1983. It was printed in Japan. I didn't have anything to do with choosing the printer. It never occurred to me that it made a difference—that Japanese printers are known for bright colours and that Italian printers have a palette that can make photographs look like Renaissance paintings. When I saw the first copies of the book I was shocked. The printer had reproduced the transparencies in a literal way. The pictures that had seemed fine when they were printed on newsprint looked garish on coated paper.

When I photographed the poet Tess Gallagher on the horse, I didn't have much control over the strobe. It lights her and then falls off in the background. There was just one umbrella light on a stand and it produced a crude effect. Other photographers—Diane Arbus, for instance—had used straight-on light in a much more sophisticated way to get the look they wanted. Arbus was a great admirer of Weegee's pictures of crime scenes and various catastrophic events and had studied them carefully. Weegee used an on-camera flash out of necessity. He was photographing at night and in dark rooms and other places where it was impossible to rely on natural light. Weegee was a newspaper photographer and he didn't care about the pictures being pretty. Arbus discovered that Weegee's work with the flash brought out the main thing you wanted to see and also revealed moments you hadn't anticipated. I wasn't thinking about any of this at the time, of course. I was just throwing up a light haphazardly and hoping the picture would come out.

That portrait of Tess Gallagher and the one of Robert Penn Warren are from a series on poets I made for Life in 1980. Tess Gallagher wrote about horses. She showed me a home movie she had shot on horseback. There were masks all over her house and coat racks full of clothes. She wanted to get dressed up and she pulled the sequined dress out of her closet.
When you were with Gallagher you were in her world and you could see the way her imagination worked. The Tess Gallagher portrait is the beginning of placing my subject in the middle of an idea.

Robert Penn Warren had been writing about death. His poems are infused with an awareness of mortality, with the fleshiness and fragility of living things. The first time I visited him, I photographed him lying under a tree reading and in his office with his books. Conventional writers' poses. I knew I'd missed the picture, so I called him up a few days later and told him I'd like to come back. When I drove up, he was standing in the window of his bedroom, staring out at me. I asked him to sit on the bed and take his shirt off. I wanted to see under his skin, to see his heart beating, his lungs pumping. He didn't care whether the shirt was on or off. He was seventy-five then, very distinguished, with many awards for his novels and his poems, and he was at peace with himself.

The basic ideas for the portraits of Tess Gallagher and Robert Penn Warren came from reading their poems, from doing my homework. If I were preparing to photograph a dancer, I would watch him dance. I would listen to the musician's record. Somewhere in the raw material was the nucleus of what the picture would become. It didn't have to be a big idea. It could be simple. There's a case to be made that the simpler the idea the better. Putting blue paint on Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi, for instance. The first Blues Brothers album had gone double platinum, and they were taking themselves very seriously as musicians. I remember Belushi saying, "Did you hear Aykroyd on the harp? Better than Paul Butterfield!" Things were getting out of hand. I was thinking of them more as actors and comedians and I thought it would be funny to paint the Blues Brothers blue.

I told Aykroyd and the writer, Tim White, what I had in mind. Neither of them thought that Belushi would go along with it. We took the photographs in a bungalow in West Hollywood that looked like a motel room. In most of the frames they're just horsing around on a bed. Jumping up and down with their sunglasses on. Their faces aren't painted. Then I asked the makeup artist to put the blue paint on and I managed to shoot eight or nine frames before Belushi stalked off. He didn't think it was funny at all. He didn't speak to me for six months. I did a lot of that kind of thing when I was young and cocky. I wouldn't even know how to do it now.

The source of the picture of Bette Midler lying in the roses was also simple. Bette had a movie coming out, The Rose, which was loosely based on the life of Janis Joplin. She played the main character, Rose. Having her lie on a bed of roses seemed like a good way to create a background for the cover, although when I look at the picture now, it seems a little rough in terms of execution. She's underlit, and her body is at an awkward angle. We were winging it then. We hadn't thought about de-thorning the roses until an hour or so before Bette arrived, and we barely got them all clipped off in time. I got up on a ladder and took the picture. We were using Alex Chatelain's studio in New York. I didn't have my own studio. At that point in my career, it was helpful to rent other photographers' studios because I could see what kind of equipment was out there and how it was used.

I had begun using a 2¼ x 2¼ camera by this time to accommodate the change in the shape of
the pages of *Rolling Stone*. After we moved to New York, in 1977, the magazine had been redesigned and had become wider. Almost a square. The larger format camera produced a square negative. It was also more appropriate for shooting prearranged, set-up portraits. If the subject was in one place and could be lit, there really was no point in taking the picture with a 35mm camera. The 35mm cameras were small and portable and appropriate for reportage, for moving around quickly. But the 2¼ negative produced more detail, which was a mixed blessing for me. You see everything a lot clearer in a bigger negative. Depth of field and lighting become more critical. You really have to focus. The 35mm negative had masked a lot of technical inadequacies.

The picture of Meryl Streep in whiteface was made during a session that didn’t start out well. Meryl had only recently become a movie star. I had already done a fashion sitting with her for *Vogue*, and *Life* had used a head shot taken from that sitting on their cover a few months earlier. Francesco Scavullo had just shot her for the cover of *Time*. This round of publicity was for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Meryl was uncomfortable with all the attention she was getting and she cancelled the first appointment for the shoot, but she was finally persuaded to come to my studio for two and a half hours one morning.

She came in and talked about how she didn’t want to be anybody, she was nobody, just an actress. There were a lot of clown books lying around the studio and some white makeup left over from an idea I had had for either James Taylor or John Belushi. I told Meryl that she didn’t have to be anybody in particular, and I suggested that maybe she would like to put on whiteface. To be a mime. That set her at ease. She had a role to play. It was her idea to pull at her face.

Steve Martin had just played the lead in *Pennies from Heaven* when I photographed him and he had developed his tap-dancing skills. That’s why he’s dressed in the white tuxedo and tails. He was collecting modern art, and he was particularly proud of a big Franz Kline painting he had just bought. When he showed me around his house he told me that he saw himself in the picture. I looked at it and saw what he meant. It was as complicated as he was. I decided that I could paint him black, like one of the brushstrokes, and put him in the painting. I wasn’t sure this was going to work. I had tried something similar one time before with Mick Jagger and it had been a disaster. I had wanted to put Mick in a Turner painting. A late seascape. The person who came to paint him took about four hours and when she was finished he stood for thirty seconds and then said he was leaving.

I hired a scenic painter from the Disney studios to paint Steve Martin. She came over to the house, looked at the painting, looked at Steve in the tux, and in about two swishes she had painted on the black brushstrokes. Then she said she had to go back to work and she left.
The brushstrokes were perfect. She made that picture.

The portrait of Whoopi Goldberg was shot just as her career was taking off. She had had a big success with a one-woman show at a club downtown in New York. I had looked at some grainy tapes of her act and was drawn to one of her characters, a little black girl who thinks that she’s white underneath. The little girl bathes in Clorox to get rid of the black. My original idea wasn’t very good. I wanted to paint Whoopi white and let the paint drip off her. Then I thought she should be in a white bath. A photographer who worked in advertising a lot said, Oh, use milk. Milk photographs as white really well. I met Whoopi in her house in Berkeley and looked at her bathtub. A friend of hers next door had a better one and we decided to use that. We heated pots of milk on the stove and poured them into the bathtub and Whoopi got in. I didn’t know how it was going to look, but I kind of thought that she would be sitting up in the bath and scrubbing herself. She sat back, and suddenly we had a very strong image. It was a total surprise.

Most of my pictures that people consider exaggerated or visually extreme—like Whoopi in the bathtub, or the portrait of Lily Tomlin with hair from my hairbrush under her arm—were made with comedians, although one was a collaboration with an artist, Keith Haring. It was commissioned by a magazine in Florida that went out of business before the picture appeared. Keith and I had talked on the phone and I asked him if he had ever painted himself. He said no, although a couple of years earlier Andy Warhol had arranged for him to paint Grace Jones and to have Robert Mapplethorpe photograph her when Keith had finished. We decided that he would paint his torso for me. We shot in the studio, on a set constructed to look like someone’s living room and then painted white. When Keith arrived he painted the room with black lines in less than forty-five minutes. Then he painted his upper body in about five minutes. When he came out of the dressing room he was wearing white painters’ pants, but it just seemed obvious to both of us at that point that he should paint the rest of him.

It’s hard to paint yourself. Keith did only the front. I loved the way he painted his penis. It was so witty, with an elongated line. The pictures took only a few minutes, and when we finished, Keith didn’t want to stop. He said he felt dressed and wanted to go out. I suggested that we go to Times Square, which was a few blocks away. This was 1986, and it was still pretty rough. The peep shows and the porn houses were still there. In the car on the way over I told my assistants that we were going to have to work fast because we would probably get arrested. I photographed Keith in back of the statue of George M. Cohan in Duffy Square and in front of a bank. It was a cold winter night and this painted, naked guy
was walking around, and nobody, including a couple of policemen who were there, paid any attention to us. Creating a portrait with a strong concept was in part a response to taking so many cover pictures for *Rolling Stone*. I thought a cover picture should have an idea. I still do, although it's become more and more difficult to do conceptual covers. Covers have to sell magazines, and publishers are always trying to figure out what's effective and what isn't. The great master of the conceptual cover was the art director George Lois, who created so many legendary covers for *Esquire* in the sixties. When Muhammad Ali was convicted of draft evasion and stripped of his heavyweight boxing title, Lois had him photographed as the martyred St. Sebastian, with arrows sticking out of his body. He drowned Andy Warhol in a can of Campbell's soup.

In the early days at *Rolling Stone*, the subject of the cover was whatever Jann Wenner was interested in, or whatever story some writer had finally finished. Now covers are always pegged to something. And who's on the cover makes a big difference. For a while, Jann thought that all the *Rolling Stone* covers should be shot against a seamless white backdrop, in the style of Richard Avedon. There is a recurring idea that there should be some kind of formula for the cover—that all the covers should look the same and that familiarity sells. Not many chances are taken.

After the *Rolling Stone* cover picture of John and Yoko was published, I felt that it was important to try to keep up that kind of intensity. The next cover subject was Bruce Springsteen, whose album *The River* had just come out. *The River* is a very moving set of songs about memories of better times and about human fragility. I photographed Bruce skating on ice. He could barely ice skate, but he did it. I was thinking of that beautiful late eighteenth century painting of the skater by the Scottish artist Henry Raeburn, but the picture works on several levels. Simple portraits can convey concepts too. Cartier-Bresson took a photograph of Giacometti running in the rain with his coat pulled over his head. He looks like a Giacometti sculpture.