

## Wilderness House Literary Review 7/3

Pam Rosenblatt

### Somerville Photographer Mike Spencer and his Occupy Boston experiences



*On a comfortable, sunshine-filled afternoon in June 2012, WHLR arts editor Pam Rosenblatt sits herself down at a booth inside the Diesel Café, Davis Square, Somerville, MA, and places her camera bag down on the table. With pen, paper, and recorder in hands, Pam is now ready for the upcoming interview with Somerville photographer Mike Spencer, who arrives a few minutes later. The following pages are part of a 55 minute interview for WHLR that happens on that productive day.*

WHLR: Today is Tuesday, June 26, 2012. And Wilderness House Literary Review is interviewing Somerville photographer Mike Spencer. Have you always lived here in Somerville or is this area a new location for you?

MS: I moved to Somerville from Hoboken, New Jersey just about six years ago. So I've been here for just about six years. Around Davis and Porter primarily. I've been here the whole time that I've lived in the Boston area.

WHLR: Do you work in the Somerville area? Or do you work in Boston?

MS: Well, I work primarily in Somerville. I'm not limited. I mean, I don't limit my range to working here. I'll shoot festivals or gigs wherever they may happen. Primarily in the Northeast at this point. But I freelance for the *Boston Phoenix* and other print media venues. So I often go around the city doing personal projects wherever.

WHLR: Which other papers besides *Boston Phoenix*?

MS: Well, I freelance so I've shot for the *Phoenix*. I've shot for the *Dig*. I've shot for *Stuff at Night*. I've had one off project here and there. I've been published in *The Wall Street Journal*. I have sold an image to *The Economist*. But, again, those are one time things over the last couple of years. I don't work for any of them.

WHLR: What is *The Economist*?

MS: *The Economist* is a big financial publication out of the U.K. They bought a picture of one of the Occupy protesters. I have no idea where or when it was published. They bought it from a service that I shoot for.

WHLR: Have you always been a photographer?

MS: No. I'm kind of a corporate convert. I was a long time ago, maybe at the end of high school, interested in photography. But I've never had any formal training. I've never taken a photography class or any schooling or anything like that. I didn't shoot anything for over ten years. And then three or four years ago, I picked [the camera] back up again. I had been working in the corporate world for about 12 years. And I reconnected with photography. And then within the 18 months that I left my corporate job to go full-time and be a photographer.

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WHLR: What type of corporate job was it?

MS: I worked for a large consulting and accounting firm. I was the marketing and PR director. I dealt more with hiring photographers or dealt with media, in a sense. But I didn't do any photography myself.

WHLR: So how did you develop your photography skills? Did you just get an instamatic camera and click?

MS: No. I started out with a film camera when I first started. And then when I picked it back up in these last few years, I was digital. And I basically bought a semi-professional camera when I started and just taught myself from the ground how to do things, just experimental. I learned from doing, from snapping photos and putting myself out there and doing that. I've taken an occasional online training course from a company like a software business. I've done a seminar. But no formal training. For me, the way I've learned to do things or get better at it is to take the camera and go and see what it does. And every year, every couple of months, that gets a little bit better. I'm not nearly there yet, either.



WHLR: I noticed on your website and at your house during Somerville Open Studios that you do color or black and white. Your strength is more on the black and white. Is this true?

MS: I shoot everything in color. I do have a great passion for black and white portraits. I love - as I think many photographers do - the drama that can come from the black and white. I also do that [type of photography] with music. But I don't do it as a rule because color is often very important and crucial to certain images. You know, the time or the place when it's happening. But when an image calls for it, or I'm drawn to it that way, then I'm very happy to work in black and white.



WHLR: What is your specialty? I noticed that you do a lot of different types of photography. A lot of it is profile. What is your specialty?

MS: My specialty would probably be - if you want to call it something - it's a mix of photojournalism and documentary. I wouldn't limit myself to be a black and white photographer, per se. But I think that is the style. I [take pictures] that lends itself to some of that with the portraiture say of the Occupy protests or musicians. Things along those lines lend themselves to this poignant moments that end up I think in black and white when or color or fine art.

WHLR: You seem to take pictures that show a lot more black than white.

MS: Yes. I enjoy high contrast images. I'll do them close up or very wide. But I do one or the

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other. I'm not very much in the middle. I don't like to do standard frame pictures that look like everything else. I enjoy to focus in on the look of the emotion of the person or take a great wide amazingly odd angle to something.

WHLR: During Somerville Open Studios, at your house, I saw your photos of Occupy Boston. Why take photos of Occupy Boston? I know it is a big thing. Everyone was interested in it. But did it have a special interest to you?

MS: When I was shooting as a professional photographer at Occupy Boston, it was only once or twice that I was on actual assignment for *The Phoenix* or so. A lot of that was personal interest photography. First thing I ever shot in high school when I just had camera because I was friends with the art teacher. I was not even in the photography class. I shot a march in D.C. A Pro Lifer or Anti – one or the other – a significant march. And was just taken by it. You know, there is the backdrop of major political build-ings with people who have these amazing feelings - extreme feelings - and emotions. It's just everywhere. It's just all over. So really, when I'm in that situation, I get very engaged, very excited to shoot. And I find myself producing the best then because I'm really watching. Not necessarily there in any advocacy or not. I'm trying to do it as a journalist, to stay totally neutral. And I think that's only fair to the people that I'm photographing as well. If I was hired by someone to shoot something, it would be different. But in order to maintain some type of integrity to the images, I try to photograph them always as a neutral party – just observing what's hap-pening so that was the very first experience I ever had.



So when I shoot a lot of music and I shoot portraits and I start working with some models and doing editorial work, when I do that for a long period of time, I get a bit stale. And I get a little bit bored by doing the same thing as you would with anything.

And so when Occupy Boston really started taking root around Boston – all these things were hap-pening right around our backyard – I went out on my own. Not on assignment – just to reinsert myself into a situation like that and rein-

vigorate myself. Then it turned into five or six different visits and marches – things that I would go to. And it became a personal project of mine to document it.

WHLR: Do you have a writing/artistic background?

MS: No. I've done some minor amount of writing where I did some band reviews and interactions – things like that. And that's mainly be-cause I'm aware of and have done it in my past working life – doing PR and things like that over the years. But I don't do any professional writing at this point.

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WHLR: What are three of your favorite Occupy Boston photographs that you took?

MS: Let's see. [Mike refers to his laptop with its screen that displays some digital images. He selects one picture.] This [digital image] is probably the most impactful to me if I had to pick one just because of the contrast of the American flag, the corporate symbols, and the young child carrying it with the strange look of almost anger and frustration. This is an [Occupy Boston] march coming through Boston towards Dewey Square that started on the Boston Common.

And I try not to over analyze but I think the contrast of such a young person expressing such an emotion that I almost do not even imagine people of that age being able to grasp or have a real grip on [such a situation] is very strong. It stands out amongst everybody.



This [second photo] is one that I really connect with. This is similar to the young boy with the American flag but of a much more adult nature. And that's just about as pure raw emotion as you get. This gentleman was standing out among thousands – or at least hundreds at this point – of people outside of the Bank of America headquarters. And obviously is a working blue collar guy.... He was very, very, very expressive. So those two [digital images] are very similar.

This [third image is of anarchists] around the Boston scene. And I don't have any direct connection with any of them. But it was a small contingent. I would imagine compared to other cities [where] you would see larger groups. And typically they will tend to be in front of and leading



the marches whether they are leading them or not. But they like to be out front and seemed to have a good relationship between the two groups. But these guys were coming down.

There was a march from the Commons that started. And basically what the group did was – in a kind of



passive aggressive nature or tactic was march and take almost nonsensical turns into the neighborhoods. And so the police couldn't catch up or figure where to go. So it was like a rush. And at one point we were coming right down to the park – across the top of the park – ... and they would run ahead. And I just thought that image of this crowd just standing in front of

this I'm sure \$100 million building and just proudly looking back down at Boston was striking.

WHLR: Doesn't the word "anarchists" suggest lack of rule?

MS: Yes. That's the basic idea. One of the signs you would see is "Of course the people who do not believe in leadership want to take over your movements." One of those kind of things, kind of snarky, kind of comment that is humor. But that image I find it nice. And they were out in front of the march.

And here is another one that I have been drawn to, an interesting image.

This [scene] is at the Federal Reserve across the street from Dewey Square; it is a unique thing. Their whole camp was across the street from the Federal Reserve. What better symbol of what they were protesting against can there be? So what had happened, they had rushed



the building from two sides. So I am in front of the building. And there are protesters behind me. And inside you have various people. [Mike points to the digital image on his laptop's screen.] This is a window; that is the lobby; and the back is seen through another window out to the other side. So right here you have a pile of protesters that you can see reflected! In the middle are employers or visitors of the back that are all kind of laughing and watching the protest and taking pictures of the protesters as they just sit. And it's entertainment for them. And then as I looked past them, I realized then that there's a whole other group that had tried to get in the side entrance. And there's a whole row of police blocking them off. So it is an interesting picture.

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And this guy is taking pictures inside. Yes. These two guys are in the lobby of the Federal Reserve. And these guys are giggling and laughing to each other. And this gentleman is taking pictures of the protesters. And you can see them behind and in front.

So I have been drawn to working by some reflection. It's not just around the Protest but in some of my personal fine artwork, too. And how they reflect society and what's happening on any given day but not necessarily quite literally as feeling a little bit of confusion to it.

WHLR: Do you have any other photos that you would like to mention?

MS: Yes. Sure. These are highlights. [Mike points to the laptop screen filled with tiny digital images.] But they are in this gallery. Many, many black and whites. But let's see if there are anymore that – Well, there's a little bit of humor in there, too. Which? Let's see before I get to the humorous one.

This [fifth digital image] was taken at the same march. And after they had gone kind of in loops and loops, getting the police out of order and into where they had been going, they went straight up the hill to the Capital. So they are coming up the hill to the Capital. So basically they had gotten in front of the motorcycles. And so the motorcycles were trying to come up the sides and get in front and take back control. And as they were doing so, several of the motorcycle police got very frustrated, looked at

the younger officers. Usually, people have very good relationship with the protest leader at this point because they were together every day. And this particular [police officer] was very frustrated and you could hear him. So I basically had a very wide angle. I'm standing right here [Mike points to the place where he formerly stood in the photo.] He almost hit the back of my leg. I could feel the heat of the motorcycle so I hopped up onto the curb. And I turned around as he did that. This guy would not get out of the way. And he

continued to ride right over his bicycle, just crushed it and kept going .... So there's a wider angle of it.

WHLR: That's an impactful photo.

MS: Oh, yes!

WHLR: What have you gotten from this whole Occupy Boston thing?

MS: As a photographer, as a photojournalist, I have been able to work



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with a lot of very talented professionals that are news media, that are much more talented than I. And I have gotten to observe, kind of experience that life which I do not do everyday which is invaluable. At the same time, I get to develop my own personal angle and style to how to deal and where do I go to take a picture as opposed to ...

Outside of that, on a personal level, I find it intriguing and exciting. And I'm much more sympathetic to the greater causes that are being expressed and that are being addressed or attempting to be addressed through these channels.

I'm not an active member of any sort of group related to [Occupy Boston]. But I certainly respect the issues of desire and the passions involved to commit to a greatly overall non-violent protest to try to improve things.



That's as political as I get on these issues because I really like to stay neutral so I am able to circulate around everybody, so I am not as on one side or the other. It is important for what I do.

WHLR: Thank you so much for the interview.

MS: That was fun. I really appreciate it. Thank you very much!

