

RELIGION & FILM AT THE WHITNEY HUMANITIES CENTER (FREE SCREENINGS FOLLOWED BY REFRESHMENTS AND A DISCUSSION)



Roberts '65 captures fading cultures

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Tuesday, September 7, 2010

The colorful silk saris of Indian women, the piercing eyes of Southeast Asian children, and the harvests and festivals of villagers are the subject of Fred Roberts' '65 photography, currently on display at the Whitney Humanities Center.

Roberts, who was a high-powered investment banker, said he left the financial sector and took up photography after becoming disillusioned by the money-hungry culture around him. The Yale photographer sat down with the News on Monday afternoon to talk about his focus on preserving the villages in Southeast Asia, his experiences traveling in the region and his favorite class at Yale.

Q: Why was Southeast Asia the focus of your project?

A: I have been traveling to Southeast Asia, especially India, since the mid-'70s. I particularly like the cultures and the way in which the people have conducted their lives despite numerous and varied hardships. It never dawned on me— until I took up photography in August of 2000 and began returning to many of these countries —that they were also visually fascinating and beautiful.

Even people who have nothing in terms of economic wealth create very rich lives for themselves. I've always admired that. [This is in] contrast with people in this country who have millions of dollars but who seem to never be satisfied, who always have to have more to feel as though material wealth is an endless quest. No matter how much they have, they're never happy or they're jealous or they're bitter. When I look at the quote "Who is rich? He who is happy with what he has," I find that these cultures are much richer than our culture in many respects. I would say as a sweeping generality that these people are happy with what they have, that they are richer in that regard.

Q: In so many of the photographs, you are very close with your subjects. How did you get them to open up to you? Did you feel any distrust toward you because you are a foreigner in their country?

A: It begins with my basic and genuine respect and regard for these people. If you really like them, they will sense it. If you're a phony, they smell it quickly. Most photographers look at these people as if they're subjects. They see them only through the diameter of a lens. They experience little outside the boundaries of the viewfinder. The lens becomes a dehumanizing weapon which demeans the "subjects." My approach is to relate to the people — to spend time with them and develop as much of a real relationship as time will allow. That's why I have to spend a good deal of time there. I can't rush and start photographing like a machine. Then, and only then, will I begin to photograph, if the situation permits. I experience firsthand photograph second.

Q: What were some of the challenges you faced?

A: I always try to avoid areas that have been heavily travelled by tourists. This causes ritualized behavior by the local people as regards foreigners. Often, these locations can't be avoided, but it's a problem. Also, I prefer to travel by car, as it keeps me closer to the people, and car travel can be torturously slow at best and treacherous at worst, especially in remote locales.

Q: You find yourself drawn back to Southeast Asia again and again. What draws you there?

A: There are two [things] primarily. The first is that, when the work is completed and exhibited, the local people love it. It is a tremendous validator of the work. Second, as these areas develop, and satellite TV and the Internet begin to impact the cultures, my work becomes an archive of the original, essential cultures — clothing, housing, family relationships, rituals, etc. These cultures are melting very quickly. The impact of [technology] is incredibly powerful. To give you an example, five years ago, I went to go look for a tribe in Myanmar. I flew to the middle of nowhere, and I drove to the middle of nowhere and then hiked to the middle of nowhere. When I got there, they said the tribe people were waiting for me. I walk into this big community house, and everybody was wearing jeans and T-shirts and watching and doing karaoke. I just can't tell you how disappointing it was. A tangential but very powerful part of what I'm doing now is to become an archive of the culture. Sometimes I'm the last photographer to capture them.

Q: What was your favorite class at Yale?

A: Vincent Scully's '40 GRD '49 History of Art. Oh my God. Of all the classes I had, his was the one that had the most fundamentally lasting effect on me. It was an amazing, amazing class.

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