

## COLUMN: PHOTOGRAPHY

ALICIA ANSTEAD

### In The Moment



Elsa Dorfman's photographic studio is in the basement of an office building on a bustling block of Massachusetts Avenue, not far from Harvard Square in Cambridge. To find Dorfman, clients have to pass through a wood-paneled lobby and head down a stark industrial staircase to the bottom floor. The first burst of color is Dorfman in red velour pants, maroon sweatshirt, multicolored vest, and sneakers. This is her work area and this is her clothing style. Neither has changed much since 1987, when she moved into the space. "I hate to tell you this," says Dorfman, "but I don't think my work has changed much, either."

How could it? Dorfman, who is seventy-two, has spent more than two decades shooting portraits with a large-format Polaroid that weighs two hundred pounds and has bellows, wheels, doors, bulk, or, as she says, "gravitas." But for all the mechanical beauty of the camera, which

looks like a museum antique, the technique is very limited. "People sit, stand, flowers, no flowers," she says. "Given the camera, the room, and that different lenses for the camera don't exist, well, there you go."

Growing up in nearby Newton, Dorfman moved to New York City in 1959 in hopes of starting a writing career, but the "hippie, druggie" crowd there was too wild for her taste. She wanted to marry, have children, be an artist; New York seemed too ravenous, both psychically and aesthetically.

A year later, she returned to Cambridge and, by age twenty-seven, had a camera in her hand and was documenting the world around her, especially Beat Generation poets she had met as a poetry-reading organizer in New York City, and others who passed through her Flagg Street house in Cambridge. In 1974, the photos were collected in *Elsa's Housebook: A Woman's Photojournal*.

It turns out that Cambridge, not New York City, is her muse. "The Cambridge I've created for myself is so compatible and forgiving," she says. "I'm inspired by the material and the people in my little world."

Unlike the massive Polaroid camera that has consumed much of her career, the studio is modest: a suite with two rooms, low ceilings, and professional lights (whose bulbs, she says, have been there as long as she has). Three images dominate the studio: the late Julia Child; a poster from Errol Morris's documentary *Fog of War*, for which Dorfman took the photo of Robert McNamara; and a family portrait of Dorfman, her husband Harvey Silverglate, and their son Isaac.

When clients arrive, Dorfman situates them before a white screen in the posing area—they choose their own clothes and props—and she painstakingly focuses the

camera, sometimes moving it out into the hallway if the group is large.

The centerpiece of the room is the imposing, iconographic camera. Built in the late 1970s in Cambridge, it demands reverence for its history, romance, and rarity—it is one of six of its kind in existence. Dorfman started taking photos at studios in the Cambridge area in 1980—her first portrait was Allen Ginsberg—and has been taking portraits with the model #4 in her private studio since 1987. In 2008, when Polaroid stopped making its one-of-a-kind, instant-development film, investors (including Dorfman) purchased the remaining raw material and production equipment, which is now housed in New York City. Dorfman estimates that the supply will last about three more years.

Back in her studio, near the camera, a wire rack displays more than two hundred postcards, miniatures of her portraits of individuals, couples, families, celebrities, pets, and people from various series, such as breast cancer



Top left: Elsa Dorfman, *Me and Camera #3, in NYC, 2007, 20 x 24"*. © Elsa Dorfman. Above: Elsa Dorfman, *A Great 17 Years, 2007*. © Elsa Dorfman.

survivors—all standing in front of the same white backdrop with a rough-edged, Polaroid border. Because Dorfman takes only two shots at each session, which may last only thirty minutes, most of her subjects are smiling and relaxed enough to be expressive. This personal aspect to the aesthetic may be at the very heart of why Dorfman's works are in permanent collections at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the National Portrait Gallery, Harvard's Fogg Museum, the Portland Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Fine Art, and various other museums and libraries.

"There is a humanity and sincerity evident in Elsa's portraits," says Michelle Lamuniere, an assistant curator of photography at the Fogg. "The effort she puts into making people feel comfortable and happy results in portraits of real people that you feel like you know. She doesn't have a critical eye, and doesn't judge her sitters or try to make them better than they are or something they are not. As she says, she doesn't interpret her subjects; they interpret themselves. She turns the formal scenario of the studio portrait into an informal and enjoyable experience."

A second hallmark of Dorfman's works is her hand-written captions, which lend insight into the moment. One caption for a shot of Dorfman and Susan Van Valkenburg wearing Marimekko designer clothing (from another series) reads: "Isn't it still the sixties?" A smiling woman with her arms open as if holding a ball: "Fabulous at 40." A young girl dressed as Lady Liberty: "Happy Birthday Daddy."

Dorfman works with her subjects to develop the captions, a collaboration that contributes both to the stake they have in their own representation, as well as to the spontaneity and intimacy felt by viewer.

Defining, naming, and characterizing what happens in that confluence—the meeting of the artist and the sitter in a miraculous flash—is mysterious for art historians, and even for the photographer herself. On her website, Dorfman writes: "I have come to realize that my portraits are about affection and survival....I am touched by the love my subjects have for each other."



Top: Elsa Dorfman, from *The Big Apple Circus* series. © Elsa Dorfman.  
Above: Elsa Dorfman, *Head to Head*. © Elsa Dorfman.

But getting at the deeper evocation, the spirit of the portraits, the *moment*: elusive. "I can tell you when it happens," says Dorfman. "There's a split second in time: in creating the moment, taking the picture, catching the moment out of that stream. The art it's closest to is dance." And documentary filmmaking.

"Really good documentary filmmaking and good photography always capture the relationship between the photographer and the subject," says Errol Morris. "That's what Elsa excels at. She's not removed. She really cares." Dorfman photographed Morris's son Hamilton at age three or four. He's now twenty-two, and she has been taking pictures of the Morris family, including the family dog, ever since.

"The work is the perfect combination of Renaissance portraiture and dime-store photography," adds Morris, who also lives in Cambridge. "The photos have a powerful combination of change, spontaneity, self-presentation. The photography is not about tricking out her subject. It's the antithesis of that."

Never is that self-presentation more apparent than when Dorfman walks into the white space on the opposite side of the camera from where she usually stands. She is merely explaining the way the camera works to an onlooker, putting herself where she has, thousands of times, positioned others. Her eyes never stray from the lens, as if the camera mesmerizes her, as if she is talking to it. She smiles. Quietly, artist and camera seem to have an understanding.

In a way, Elsa Dorfman is an artist ahead of her time. The "hand-held" look that she embraced many years ago has become more standardized with the pervasiveness of digital photography, through cameras, cell phones, and other devices. Though her camera is a dinosaur, Dorfman is not. She describes herself as "obsessed" with her website, which drills deeply into her rich biography and career. She is also an iPhone junkie.

"The things I still want to do: use my black-and-white dark room and make cell phone pictures," she says. "Do you know there are hundreds of applications for cell phone pictures? That's revolutionary!" Her comfort zone, like Cambridge itself, straddles an old and a new world.

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