



A BEAUTIFUL AND LUSH COUNTRY WITH RICH CULTURE IS THE PERFECT PLACE FOR ENVY-WORTHY PHOTOS. YET, MENENDEZ TAKES A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE BY PUTTING CONTEXT AND CONSENT INTO EACH SHOT. THIS NUANCED AND RESPECTFUL APPROACH IS WHAT CREATES LONG-LASTING AND MORE ACCURATE EXPRESSIONS OF THE SURROUNDINGS WE CAPTURE.

## **"Chan Kor Thaiy Roop Khun Nboi dai mhai" –**

"May I take your picture" in Thai. I had the phrase written everywhere during my month in Udon Thani, Thailand, on my notebooks, napkins, even on my hand. I have always admired photographers who travel the world and return with portraits of all the beautiful people they saw and met. What better way, after all, is there to capture a culture than by highlighting its people. For me, it was just as important to ask for and receive consent to do so; I wanted to feel like every photo I took was a collaboration, even if that meant embarrassing myself with my terrible Thai accent. It wasn't until I returned home that I began to delve into the politics of photography abroad and while asking for permission is a great place to start, it is more complicated than that. Consider, for example, the famous National Geographic portrait of eight-year-old Sharbat Gula by Steve McCurry. The portrait is especially famous for Gula's green eyes as she looks at the camera from behind a red veil. National Geographic captioned the portrait, "Haunted eyes tell of an Afghan refugee's fears." In reality, Gula was

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fearful of McCurry, a photographer she had never met, who pulled her aside to take her photograph at school, pressured her to move her veil (which is against the commandments of her religion), and who went on to publish her image and a misleading story without her, or her family's, permission. Yet, the iconic

portrait launched McCurry's career and is still admired by many. That's the danger of a photograph, it does two things: it flattens and it lasts.

In the case of McCurry's portrait, a photograph perpetuated stereotypes about the experience of refugees. It scarred and exploited Gula, who has since lived with the repercussions of this photo while never sharing in the profits -- when interviewed 15 years later she readily shared how the portrait still angers and upsets her. This abuse is not surprising given photography's dark history... Photographs have been used to justify oppression, exploitation, slavery, and genocide since photography's invention.

Today, with social media a photo might be seen by hundreds, if not thousands, of people--and those images will likely last hundreds of years. All of this to say, a photograph is durable, it is not easily

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erased, and that, when combined with the ways it flattens and reduces the person it captures, can have devastating effects. A photograph alone inherently only captures one aspect of a person's identity and experience. It omits not just the person's context and culture, but most of what is unique about that person. You can not possibly explain everything about someone in a single photograph; this creates superficial narratives, especially when photographing abroad. A photograph alone inherently only captures one aspect of a person's identity and experience. It omits not just the person's context and culture, but most of what is unique about that person. You can not possibly explain everything about someone in a single photograph; this creates superficial narratives, especially when photographing abroad. I remember seeing this beautiful poised woman sitting in the doorway of her home every day. I always thought to myself, that would be a gorgeous photo. In an effort to respect her personal space, I never asked.



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My last weekend in Thailand, I was taken to a local temple for an overnight retreat the older women in the area were participating in. At that retreat I was introduced to Boonsri, the woman in the doorway. The next day she invited me to her home to photograph her. We huddled over the little screen of my camera afterwards and chose the photo she liked best together. Boonsri's image is physically flat, but it was born of a dynamic collaboration. It was her home, her favorite photos, her terms. Those are decisions that I, or any other photographer, should never make on behalf of the individual photographed.

Photography is a beautiful form because of how "real" it is, unfortunately, that reality effect also means that people accept information from a photograph too readily without considering what information it might be excluding. When you are taking photos, you have to consider what message your photograph sends, what it assumes about the subject, and especially what it allows the audience to assume about the subject. Because the values we capture in pictures last -- and that is as beautiful as it is dangerous. The photographer thus has a responsibility to look beyond the desire to capture a pretty picture, a cultural moment, or a unique person, and see the values they are capturing as well as those they might be missing. This goes beyond photography as well, many of our actions may flatten others and be felt much longer than we may intend.