



Wayne's World

October 4, 2010

Wayne Lawrence found his true calling—and landed the 2010 PDN/Sony Emerging Photographer Award—by focusing on the stories that matter to him most. So far this year, Wayne Lawrence has been selected as one of PDN's 30 photographers to watch in 2010, received the PDN/Sony Emerging Photographer Award and signed with LA-based agency INSTITUTE—yet only a few years ago he was working as a carpenter in Reseda, California.

Born in 1974 in St. Kitts, Wayne left his birthplace in 1994 for the West Coast and soon found work as a carpenter, building cabinets for freelance clients and making parking structures as a member of local union 409. But he was living paycheck to paycheck, the work did not inspire him and the routine got boring quickly. It dawned on him that he wanted something to be excited about.

In the photography section of his local library, he found that something in the form of a VHS tape on Richard Avedon; the book *Black in America* by Eli Reed, the first African-American photographer with Magnum; and Gordon Parks' autobiography, *A Choice of Weapons*. Enthused by the idea that every photographer has a distinct way to tell a story, he gave himself a mission: "Pick a story you want to tell and be passionate about it."

What story is Lawrence passionate about? "Individuals and rituals within communities that are overlooked by the mainstream," he says, adding that he aspires to create positive images of people of color. Lawrence has won wide praise for his documentary work, such as the earthy series "Orchard Beach (The Bronx Riviera)." *Mother Jones* published eight selections from the project as a photo essay at its Web site—portraits that the magazine described as "intimate, arresting."

Though he shoots paid commissions digitally—for magazines such as *Essence*, as well as for people he's met through his personal work—Lawrence says he's "a diehard film person," historically shooting 6x7 on location. After winning the PDN/Sony Emerging Photographer Award this year, he decided to address his reluctance to use digital cameras in his personal work and to embrace the spontaneity of using a 35mm body. He contacted Sony about their Zeiss lenses, and they sent him a 16-35mm f/2.8 and a 24-70mm f/2.8 lens, which he uses with his Sony Alpha 850 body.

This past Memorial Day, Lawrence was at Urban Beach Week in Miami—his third time documenting the five-day hip-hop festival, which attracts some 300,000 young people—sporting his new lenses. How does he like working with them? "I love them," he says. "I was hesitant to use digital in my personal work, but after trying these lenses, I will incorporate film and digital in the future. At 100 ISO especially, with fill-in flash, it looks like medium format to me."

It is clear from the Beach Week images that Lawrence makes a firm connection with his subject. His photos are illuminating socioecological essays on youth culture, with no hint of judgment, even though Lawrence is a little perturbed by the level of materialism and the extent to which the kids will go to attract each other: Gucci headbands, grillz

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and chains that would make Swizz Beatz do a double-take. "I get a level of respect because I approach people with respect," he says. "I read body language to see if they're open to conversation, and I always explain who I am and what I'm doing."

Lawrence says there's no question that being a part of PDN's 30 has opened doors for him, to editors in particular. Colors Magazine, he notes excitedly, has recently contacted him. Meanwhile, he's been avidly using Facebook and his Web site to promote his work ("Orchard Beach," for example, is on view at waynelawrenceonline.com). And right as Emerging Photographer was going to press, he got another big boost: INSTITUTE for Artist Management, which also represents Jodi Bieber, Rob Hornstra, and Rena Effendi, signed him.

So it's no surprise that Lawrence is unabashedly optimistic about his future. "I have no fear," he says, "and I feel good about my work."