

Leonard Nimoy Secret Selves

Behind The Scenes

By Richard Michelson

Let me begin by acknowledging the elephant in the room. Many of you picked up this book because of the name on the cover. Some of you might not generally peruse photography or fine art books. Some of you are predisposed to like what you see, while others might expect only the work of a “dabbler” or “celebrity photographer.” I see this everyday in my gallery. People stop in out of curiosity, often skeptical and ready to dismiss; but they leave as converts, appreciative of a refined artistic skill and vision. (Leonard Nimoy has been engaged with photography since he was 13 years old, a serious student and practitioner of the art form.) When I first exhibited Leonard’s photographs, I called up some of the best collectors I know and invited them to see a “new artist I was considering taking on.” In thirty years I’d never heard such enthusiasm. Only when they had confirmed my own judgement of the work did I mention the name of this new artist. The work speaks for itself.

Crowds flock to museums to see a Picasso, or a LeWitt, and they are naturally curious about the life of the creator. But the art that keeps us coming back tells us less about the artist than it does about ourselves, or about our “secret selves.” This brings me to the “production” of the *Secret Selves* studio shoot. “Who are these people,” I am asked continually, even though the sitters are showing you who they are in this book. What I am really being asked is “Where did you find the subjects, and why didn’t you call me?”

So here is a peek at the process behind the scenes:

It began with an email I received from Leonard saying he was interested in the idea of dual personalities, or people’s view of themselves versus how they are seen by the world. In his previous books, *Shekhina* and *The Full Body Project*, he had very definite

ideas of what he wanted to bring to the table, as he posed and molded his subjects. But what if Leonard allowed the subjects to direct their own images? To show the side of themselves that no one knew, or perhaps the half of themselves they were searching for. “I’m particularly looking for people to surprise me and possibly themselves,” he wrote. “To reveal a secret self. I’d like to ask them, ‘Who do think you are?’”

To find out, we turned an area below the gallery into a waiting room and photography studio, and invited 100 people to participate over a three-day period. At first I thought I would just call on friends, but many of my friends are artists and writers, and it became apparent that the project would be more interesting if we were to get a wider cross section of the social strata, and include people who are perhaps less comfortable revealing themselves than many artists.

I emailed a letter to some acquaintances, and clients, and friends of friends—I wanted businessmen and bus drivers, social workers and house-husbands, clergy and those in their congregation. (Interestingly, the only profession with a 100% refusal rate—four out of four—was bank president, all of whom answered in similar fashion: “My secret self is just as dull and uninteresting as my public self.”).

A reporter heard about the project, and printed a short piece in the local paper. My in-box was inundated with volunteers, and everyone had comments and questions, both soul-searching and humorous:

I was wondering if Mr. Nimoy is looking more for an expression of the self that we keep hidden from others, or of the self that we would really like to be?

Shall we come in costume—like a Frieda Kahlo painting? Must I be nude? Can I paint Hebrew letters on my boobs?

Thank you very much for including the Mayor in this invitation. She considers it an honor to be asked to participate.

I eat MAJOR chocolate when no one’s looking. Does something like this count?

Weird project, this. Sign me up.

What an interesting question to ponder. Who am I? Does Mr. Nimoy have any more concrete instructions for discovering that secret self?

Leonard’s instructions were minimal. “The ‘self we keep hidden from others’ and ‘the self we would really like to be’ might be one and the same,” he suggested. “I leave it

to the subjects to decide what they want to show to the camera. I hope the title is open enough to encourage broad interpretation.”

Time slots were assigned, and subjects showed up. My daughter drove up from New York City to help check in everyone, and my wife stood in front of the gallery and convinced a few passersby to take a half hour out of their day and reveal their inner selves, so we would have a “control group” of random subjects. In the studio, three assistants helped with the lights, the recording, and the computers. (For those interested in technical details, *Secret Selves* was shot with a Hasselblad H3D digital camera with 28mm, 80mm and 120mm lenses, Sekonic L508 light meter, Apple Macbook Pro laptop computer and additional calibrated LaCie 319LCD monitor for viewing images—although most of Leonard’s earlier work is shot with film.) Leonard’s wife, Susan, helped enormously with suggested poses, and insight into how best to draw out the story the model was trying to tell.

As each subject walked into the studio, some eagerly, most nervously, Leonard approached each for a short conversation. The goal was to put them at ease, find out their “real life” identity, and what inner self they hoped Leonard might capture. At the last moment, we decided to video the proceedings, more as a method of archival documentation, than with the idea of expanding the project. But it became apparent immediately that these exchanges were illuminating, and would have a greater role in the final exhibit than anticipated. Within a few minutes, Leonard was able to bring the subject deeper inside their own self than they had intended to travel. What began as a lark for many turned into a truly revealing and emotional experience. And at just the moment they were most themselves—and often off-guard—the shutter snapped. And snapped again.

Why were so many willing to take time out of their busy schedules to take part in this project? I polled people on their way in to the shoot, and the answer almost always had to do with their appreciation of Mr. Nimoy’s artistic career. But the conversation on the way out was much different. If they had come to meet the personality, they left transformed, discussing the art and the artist, the man who had brought out their secret selves, and with his craft and vision, captured it at a moment in time.

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