

Celebrating a National Geographic Icon

Long after the heyday of the bygone picture magazines, *National Geographic* steadfastly remains a masterpiece of effective branding. Even during the couple of decades when it shared newsstand space with the large format books, notably *LIFE* and *LOOK*, *Nat Geo* resolutely kept to its comparatively modest dimensions, kept its stuffy, retro logo type (Times New Roman Condensed, in case you were wondering) and it kept that iconic yellow border. If your dentist's office was ever ground zero in a nuclear blast, you'd probably be able to spot remains of a tattered *Nat Geo* cover in the rubble.

Photojournalism's Resilient Bastion

Some recent editorial sprucing up notwithstanding, the real genius of this comfortably familiar magazine still lies its manicured swathes of spectacular images, meticulously reproduced, powerful and original—collectively, the gold standard for editorial photography. That's the flip side of the *Nat Geo* brand. It's no secret that the universe of visual media is still awash in an ongoing pageant of transformation: a profusion of still imagery without a home; blogs, YouTube, smart phones on the rise; invasive real-time cable and broadband video ogling the whole planet. Throughout this metamorphosis, *National Geographic* continues to coax dazzling images out of the micro, the macro and sometimes the galactic reaches of our reality.

Among the elite corps of shooters who keep this unique brand



intact, William Albert Allard has 50 years of seniority and he may be the single most influential photographer in the book's history. His 1964 photo essay on the Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, PA., made when he was a 26-year-old intern for the magazine, is widely recognized as a milestone in the evolution of *National Geographic's* characteristically probing and intimate use of photographs. It's no surprise, then, that NGS' book publishing arm chose to celebrate Allard's extraordinary career last year with a stunning collection, *William Albert Allard: Five Decades, A Retrospective*.

If this book were just a compilation of Allard's published work from *Nat Geo's* pages, it would be a remarkable anthology on its own. After his breakthrough Amish essay, his output was prolific and diverse. He produced nearly three dozen major stories for the magazine, among them landmarks like "Rodeos: Behind the Chutes," "Untouchable," "Welcome to Bollywood," the remarkable "Hutterite Sojourn," and most recently, "Under the Big Sky," which ran in the magazine's October 2010 issue. But, though a smattering of Allard's familiar work is represented, almost 80 percent of the pictures in *Retrospective* are previously unpublished. These are fresh, deeply personal and often shocking images, charged with Allard's signature passion for saturated colors and painterly light: rawboned American cowboys, the textures of life in the Basque country and the alleys of Paris—Paris, his





favorite city in the world, where "wandering the streets," he says, "is like walking through a series of one-act plays." Allard thinks of himself partly as a finder of images, a street photographer of sorts, not searching for "anything in particular...simply allowing myself to be open to what serendipity might offer. Just looking." But the dark paths he's willing to follow suggest the instincts of a serious predator, a hunter, "watching and waiting," searching out powerful, poignant images on a shadowy Sicilian backstreet, in a dilapidated dance studio in Turin, a slaughterhouse in Peru, a rowdy juke joint in Memphis.

The Social Contract

Together, *Retrospective's* images form a touchstone for the amazing breadth of Allard's talent, and, with his people studies especially, a testament to his almost supernatural flair for connecting with strangers. The occasional scenic or streetscape aside—many of them abstract exercises in composing with color (Allard shoots exclusively in color, and has for practically his entire career)—the core power of Bill Allard's work is in his photographs of people, both the candids and the posed portraits. This collection is rich with touching, unself-conscious moments, faces, bodies, attitudes of people who often seem to bend to Allard's will. Let down your guard and your artifice, Allard promises, and he'll capture you in a tableau so powerful, you won't recognize yourself. He shares Cartier-Bresson's notion of the photograph's role in formalizing a fleeting moment, and he writes in the book's introduction of the admonition that a photograph find "order within chaos." But for him, the elusive *moment preserved*

depends on a kind of social contract: "Many of these pictures were not really taken," he writes "they were given. The subjects trusted me. They projected something of themselves to me and it became my privilege and pleasure to receive that something..."

A Bit of Theater

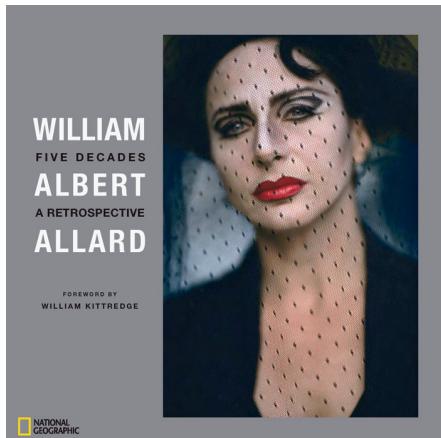
There's a little false modesty at work here. In person, Bill Allard is a gentle bear of a man, comfortable in cowboy boots, baggy denim, and given to wearing hats, usually loose fedoras. His prized headgear is a custom made "silver belly 10X with a Montana crease and full pencil-rolled brim..." Any man who owns such a hat has a bit of theater lurking inside. Allard's honest and direct, but not without an actor's flair for conveying his vulnerability. It's part of what puts his subjects at ease, and almost certainly defuses the threat level of a big, strapping guy pointing a camera your way and waiting for you to react. Whatever the alchemy, Allard can become a fly on the wall, to capture, say, a sleek, voyeuristic glimpse of Emanuel Ungaro's Parisian ramp models backstage; then just as adroitly, he'll coax a lush portrait from a Brazilian prostitute, with the narrowest wisp of afternoon sunlight, or materialize for a moment in Mountain City, NV, as the sympathetic saloon companion to a tired cowboy.

Beyond what's already become its status as one of our most important one-man photographic collections, *Retrospective* is a powerful memoir as well. Allard is an expressive storyteller in words as well as pictures. The images throughout this book are woven together by his own candid, intelligent narrative—travels and travails, photographic anecdotes, quirky encounters ("Give me some money and I'll eat a banana," says the dirty-faced

little boy begging along the road to Sikar, Rajasthan") and frank revelations about close calls with relationships and substance abuse. He also writes, quite passionately, about the strong role of music in his life. Like scores of other photographers, Allard no doubt lives and works to his own imaginary soundtrack. In one intimate musing on what his future holds, he cites the lyrics to an iconic Pink Floyd song:

*The child has grown, the dream is gone.
And I have become
Comfortably numb.*

"I've somehow managed to avoid becoming comfortably numb," Allard writes, "I'm going to do my best to stay that way."



William Albert Allard: Five Decades, A Retrospective

William Albert Allard
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