

OK PEDERSEN

Interviewed by
ÉTIENNE LACELLE



(OK PEDERSON, MAGIC CAPITAL OF THE WORLD)

Where are you from? How did your artistic sense develop?

Like many people who come from migrant families, 'where are you from' is less of a fact and more of a life quest. I'm a first generation American, my family is Assyrian and Armenian. My family moved to the United States after escaping Baghdad for Beirut in the middle of the night. They took their mattresses with them and told the agents at the border they were going on vacation. It was the end of the 1970s and Saddam Hussein had just taken power. People's neighbors were being murdered on their own front lawns. But my grandfather was not eager to leave behind what power the Middle East afforded him as a man. When they finally made it to the United States after a year of waiting, spent in Beirut and then London, my grandmother took a job at a linen factory on the West Side of Chicago. My grandfather found out about it and called the police. The police told him that this was America and everyone has to work, including women

and children. Then not long after, my grandfather had an aneurysm and died. My grandmother and my mother and her sisters were free to spend the life insurance money on business degrees and cars and pantsuits.

And we have spent our lives with packed suitcases, most of us settling in California. I think many immigrant families, or children of immigrant families, see themselves performing their social rituals on the outskirts sometimes – both accepting and rejecting American social rites, making a sort of mishmash family culture. I'm drawn to the outskirts, to wandering, and to the apparatuses of faith and communion. A church is not a place but a body of people, and communion is not a cookie but an act of sharing. My practice is an investigation into the depths of daily ritual and I am interested in archiving the small secrets of faith.



(OK PEDERSON, WHAT HUMBLE PLACE AS THIS)

Over the past eight years, I have been working with my mentors Greg Scott - an ethnographic filmmaker, harm reduction advocate, cowboy – and Zack Ostrowski – designer, performance artist, Detroit native. We had been basically drifting through the outskirts, obsessed with Midwestern vernacular culture, and attending all kinds of gatherings and events. These include the tent revivals at God’s Ten Commandment Park in Montana and the 79th-Annual Magician’s Get Together in Colon, Michigan, the self-proclaimed Magic Capital of the World. These encounters manifested as books, printed matter, films, and archives of ephemera – archives of the weird and the wandering.



(OK PEDERSON, MAGIC CAPITAL OF THE WORLD)



(OK PEDERSON, 2018)

What was something you learned reading “Le mystère de la cathédrale?”

I loved this book, I drank it like water. It was so full of secrets. It’s written by Master Alchemist Fulcanelli, who has allegedly never died. He’s writing about a few specific cathedrals – Notre Dame in Paris, Notre Dame in Amiens, Chartres, etc. All these Cathedrals were set in stone by Initiates – alchemists, templars, freemasons – and filled with sacred symbols to be read almost like instructions. And of course the cathedrals themselves are built in accordance with sacred geometry and sacral architecture. I’m interested in the idea that a higher truth can exist not in language, not in images, but in negative space – in the air that sits between stone.



(OK PEDERSON, 2020)

When I first moved to Montreal last year, I was overwhelmed by all the upturned stone – all the upturned concrete, roads, sidewalks. The built environment became so obviously temporary in my new eyes. But at the same time, if you set something in stone, or carve something in stone, that stone is going to last forever. Stone operates at its own timescale, it has its own consciousness and growth rate that is unfathomable to us. Right

now I'm really interested in these transitional structures – these structures that may themselves be temporary, but also inherently facilitate transition and here-to-there-ness, like bridges, gates, etc. I see stone as the medium which gives that which is temporary its now-ness.



(OK PEDERSON, 2020)

What is your relationship with faith and was “God in Search of Man” enlightening?

Yes, this is a book I am always reading. I get something new from it every time I’m ready or in need of a deeper understanding. In the book, Abraham Joshua Heschel lays out a philosophy of Judaism. One of the foundations of this philosophy – or perhaps not foundation, but the necessary condition – is an attitude of wonder and awe. Information may be the predecessor to knowledge, but wonder is the predecessor to wisdom. The only way to know God is to approach the world and the spiritual text with an openness to that which is so wonderfully beyond us – to humble oneself to the mystery.

Rudolf Steiner also writes something similar – that a necessary condition of inner knowledge is reverence. And reverence blooms like flowers on a healthy vine of patience. As a photographer, I am trying to see all things with reverence. I am not necessarily looking for beautiful things, I like messes. To be sure, I am not looking for ugly things or to make ugly things beautiful. Rather, I am trying to give deference to the minor keys, to the things that someone in a rush may just see as *in their way*. For me, imminence and immanent being bubble beneath the surface of everything. And that’s all pictures are – surface. So I’m looking for this door – or this gate – between surface and immanence.

There is a Hebrew word I recently learned, which has affected both my practice and my faith. The Shekhinah, which literally means *dwelling*, is the word used for God’s immanent presence on earth. It is a feminine word, and is the feminine aspect of God. The Shekhina is the divine presence of God. (Whereas Elohim (masculine) is used most often to talk about the divine will or actions of God.) But don’t get me wrong, there is no dualism here - just like we all have the femine and masculine within us, so too is the divine One and All. And the main thing that is written about The Shekhina is that it is in exile. The immanent presence of the divine in our world is in exile - it is beneath the surface, or somewhere the naked eye cannot reach. We look around and, most often, we do not see divine presence, we see concrete and city trees and supervisors and subservients. So the project here is to reunite the feminine and masculine aspects of the divine - to reunite (and not impose upon) the will of the deity with the immanent divinity within all beings and all things.

And of course, as a photographer, light pretty much does all the work for me.



(OK PEDERSON, 2018)