Recalling the Exceptional Eyes of Carol C. Carlisle

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The CFR is honored to partner with POBA.org on profiles of its affiliated artists.

In this post, we focus on Carol C. Carlisle, whose nearly 35 years as managing editor of Popular Photography remains an almost unparalleled achievement in American journalism. She is recalled by her daughter, Jaye Smith, an author, executive coach, strategist and career consultant.

POBA is a unique site dedicated to showcasing, promoting and preserving the creative work of exceptional artists — in all forms of artistic expression — who have died without recognition of the full measure of their talents or creative legacies. POBA is designed to be a great place to see exceptional art that might otherwise not be seen by the public and to be a full-spectrum resource for those responsible for artistic legacies of talented, deceased artists. POBA’s mission is simple: POBA aims to keep their creative works alive, and through them to inspire, provoke, intrigue, entertain, and enliven us. POBA is Where The Arts Live!

Who was Carol C. Carlisle? From her POBA biography: Carol C. Carlisle (1924-2011) epitomized the artistry of the editor during her nearly a 35-year career as Managing Editor of Popular Photography magazine, where she was celebrated for her keen eye and ruthless sense of perfection. It was her reputation as an insightful and meticulous editor that brought both her, and the magazine, such an outstanding reputation. She was also acclaimed for her work as a photographer in her own right, with her images published many times in the magazine and on the cover.

What the photography world did not know about Carol during her lifetime, however, was that she was also an avid collector of almost anything that delighted her eye. She saw beauty and artistic significance where others did not. ...She amassed more than 1200 such prized prints, including
those shown here Each represents a rare piece and specific moment in time that, if not for her artist’s and conservationist’s eye, would have been lost forever. The images embody the spirit of the woman whose ‘waste not, want not’ approach to life and impressive aesthetic vision led her to save these prints from oblivion.

What’s the most perceptive question anyone asked Carol about her work?
She once told me that “Someone asked me why I never used flash” She went on to say that she answered with, “It seems I don’t need it. It was surprising to me that those with a keen eye for technique and subject, and who could see how painstaking and patient my use of available light had to be, would ask this. But I learned something: not everything is obvious even to those who know.”

What’s the most idiotic question anyone asked Carol about her work?
She thought this was a question beyond dumb: “Well, I endlessly took pictures of my children over the years as they were growing up. After all that, someone asked me if I had children? Amazing.”

What’s the weirdest question anyone asked Carol about her work?
Those I mentioned are pretty weird questions. I am not sure my mother would have made a big distinction between idiotic and weird. For her, these qualities shared the same universe.

Some images in Carol’s POBA portfolio are arresting, like a not-yet-famous Sammy Davis Jr. staring introspectively out a window. For her, what constituted a great image? Did her sense of photography evolve over time?
She entered into the world of photography as a young woman to escape the south side of Chicago in search of a better life for her and her young daughter. She was really smart, with both brains and savvy. At first she wanted to pursue a career that used her considerable writing skills and was fortunate to get a job at Popular Photography magazine as an editor. She learned quickly while working there that she loved the black and white images — in some ways even more than the text.

She was happily drawn into the photographic world, especially at a time when some of the best “world class” photographers of the time surrounded her. She learned technique as the magazine taught it to its readers. She practiced using her three small children as subjects to master every technique she learned. Her work definitely evolved over time as did her appreciation for good photography. She began to contribute to editing the photographs that were to appear in the magazine. During the 1960s to 1980s, the magazine was primarily a center for technique and fine photography. She was exposed to the best, like Gordon Parks, Berenice Abbott, [Philippe] Halsman, [Henri] Cartier-Bresson, all of whom clearly influenced her to both appreciate great images as well as to perfect her own photography. For her, a great image was one that told a story, clearly and succinctly. Composition was something she thought a lot about. She would take roll after roll of images. She would say that she was happy if she liked one or two images from any roll of 36 shots. She loved fast film, too. That way, she could really use every bit of light there was to capture her image. Light was as important to her as composition.
Her tastes in subject matter were fairly broad; however, she was not proud of her own images that had poor composition or technique. She was quite a critic of her own work (as well as others!) and wasn’t tolerant of poor execution or images that were too abstract. She loved creativity in composition and technique but was impatient with photographs that were too contrived.

So far as you know, how much did Carol wrestle, professionally or emotionally, with including certain images in Popular Photography? Were there images she was especially proud to publish? Or regretted publishing?
She was disturbed by violent images in general. In the days of the civil rights movement, she was especially disturbed by any that showed violence toward African-American citizens, not because she wanted to hide it — on the contrary — but just because it was so painful to see any humans treated that way. Her “photographic conflict” was that she wanted to show people how damaging and how wrong the violence toward African Americans was, as a people trying to make positive change and to achieve rights that should never have been denied in the first place. But at the same time, these images were painful and heartbreaking, and she knew they could overwhelm viewers, possibly numbing them. She gained both notoriety and positive accolades for her association with African-American photographers like Gordon Parks. She would make sure his images and those of other African-American photographers were acknowledged and considered for publication, just like everyone else’s.

I don’t remember my mother ever saying she regretted publishing any photos.

Can you introduce us to Carol’s own photography? From your viewpoint—but also hers—what were her values, strengths and weaknesses as a photographer? Was she her own toughest critic? In the digital age, what advice might she offer to young photographers?
Carol’s photography always told a story about moments in time that photos captured. She loved people and landscapes, places that she loved and wanted to be transported back to. She especially loved Maine, with the gingerbread Victorian homes, the ocean and rocky coast, and her children loving their time there with her. She was often published in Popular Photography, demonstrating techniques and showcasing her own work. As her career advanced and her own passion and skill as a photographer deepened, she became a mentor to aspiring young photographers, joining the board of Volunteer Photographers of America. Over many years she taught young, underprivileged kids about photography as a visiting guest and mentor, and was well recognized for her dedication there. She was generous in sharing her heart in her images as well as her time to help others less fortunate than she. She ingrained that into her children from day one.

Her strengths were her compositions and use of light, her humor, aesthetic eye and a commitment to honesty and technical correctness. She was especially attentive to the care and treatment of every person shown in displayed photos, balancing all the technical aspects she cared about with truthfulness of the image itself and dignity of the subjects in the pictures. She was ahead of her time on so many levels. She was politically liberal and did what she could to support anyone less fortunate. She made sure to bring them into the fold of her world and work. It reflected in her
photography and the images she chose. She was not afraid to rock the boat and stand up and speak out for others. Ah, but less so for herself. She was definitely her own toughest critic.

As talented as she was, she had limitations, too. For one, the lack of time she had to dedicate to her very obvious talent. She worked ultimately as the managing editor of “Pop Photo,” had three (and then five) children at home, and had a long commute. She had other interests that included being an active member of CORE and refinishing Victorian furniture she collected when on vacation in Maine. She was amazing in her vast talents, aesthetic eye, curiosity about everything, and commitment to living life as a good person, as she saw that: thoughtful, fair, truthful and generous. She cared too much, gave too much and was not as confident in what she produced as she should have been. She had too many self-doubts that prevented her from taking her photography to the next level. She was very much a woman in a man’s world and succumbed to the pressures and lack of acknowledgement that came with that reality, especially in those days. Despite this lack of confidence, she had guts. She broke a ceiling in that world, both as an artist and as a professional editor.

If she were alive today, I think her basic advice would be the same as the advice she gave to photographers in her day: know your light, set up the scene and the subject as you want, take as many shots as you need till you get what your “inner eye” had seen, appreciate the surprises if you get something unexpected, and print only what you can take responsibility for. Then hope you have a good agent or editor. I think Carol would say that while cameras have changed and display has changed, the ability to take a great picture is still with the photographer.

Oh, and she would say: remember to look in your attic once in a while — you might find something amazing. We surely did when we looked in Carol’s attic — that is how we discovered the other talent she had: to recognize, respect and preserve talent of others. She saved one of the world’s greatest troves of images by some folks who would prove to become the most acclaimed photographers of the pre-digital era. Her attic kept these images from oblivion that way. So she’d say: look in your attic — you may be doing history a favor.