

Isolation, Interpretation and Instinct - An interview with photographer Robert de Boer

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Robert de Boer is a photographer with a special feel for finding space amidst the clutter of the world. I first met de Boer on a flight from Abu Dhabi to Amsterdam, and since then, I have been following his work and have been inspired by his ability to share the world the way he sees it, as beautiful, soulful, isolated and vast. That is the way his photos appear to me. I was fortunate to catch up with de Boer for a phone interview as he was in transit, heading from his home in the South of Spain to Amsterdam for a family visit. I was curious to find out how isolation plays into his work.

TBD*: *Does isolation factor into your artistic process?*

RDB: It's a big part of it actually, and in a few different ways. If you look at my photos, I am always isolating some part of the bigger picture. For example, the man walking alone past the mural in Portugal is isolated from the rest of the street by the photo, but in reality, there were other people around there as well.

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TBD*: *Oh wow, I wasn't thinking of it that way! So you isolate him!*

RDB: Yes, I isolate him... I create the isolation in the photo. I spent three hours on that street pretty much to get that photo, with the right person, with nobody else in it, and without cars coming. I think it was a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, so there were others around, but it is the isolation that makes the photo more powerful.

TBD*: *Many of your photographs portray a solitary figure, do you intend to convey loneliness?*

RDB: Well, loneliness sounds a little bit negative. What I'm looking for is some sort of simplicity, I don't personally see it as loneliness. This brings me back to the other aspect of isolation, the photos I take are not intentionally lonely, but when I take them, I am isolated, walking in the street, or in nature somewhere. I have a vision, but I can only put it into a photograph when I am by myself. Like, if I am hiking with someone else, or doing something with other people, then it doesn't work as well because the other person is not necessarily there for taking photos, they want to be outside or to spend time together. So, it's really hard to create your vision while being with someone because they may not share the vision or realize how long it takes to take a photo. Like for the photograph of the man in Portugal, I was there for three hours, and that was actually the second day that I was there. For the one in China, I was on the street for an hour or an hour and a half at seven o'clock in the morning. Well, nobody

wants to go with you out at seven o'clock in the morning when it's foggy because they would feel, well, this is not fun. So in that sense I have to seclude myself, I have to be on my own to do it. Because people don't understand what you are creating, and they don't know what you are waiting for. And maybe even when I see something, and I take the photo, then they look at me like, "what did you take the photo of? There is nothing there to see."

I was in the mountains with a friend of mine, I think it was two years ago, before the Corona, and we went in the mountains. It was completely foggy and we could hardly see anything. We were about twelve hundred meters high, and suddenly I stopped and I saw trees and fog and the road. And he said "what are you doing?" I said, "I'm gonna take a photo," and he said "what's there to see? You can't see anything, it's like misty and everything." I took the photo, and when we came back, I processed the photo quickly on the computer and then I showed it to him, and he said "Oh wow, that's a really cool photo." So I thought it was interesting that he didn't see what I saw, but still appreciated the photo. So when I'm on a road like that by myself, I can take many hours, and dozens of photos, but when I'm with somebody else, then it's like, ok, I'll do it quick because he doesn't understand my vision or what I'm doing. And there's nothing wrong with that! So usually I have to be on my own to create something like that.

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TBD*: *Do you intend for your work to elicit an emotional response from the viewer?*

RDB: Yeah I do. Whenever you take a photo, you are looking for something special, something unique, and you want to get the viewer to have some kind of feeling with it. But it's funny because people look at photos in different ways, so you can get very different reactions.

Sometimes people say a photo tells a thousand words, or that the photo speaks for itself, but a photo doesn't really speak for itself because everyone creates their own story for the photo. For example, the man and the mural - some people could see it as a stroll, some as a man going to church, some as sad or lonely. But I want to create a photo which has a feeling, because if a person doesn't have a feeling from the photo, then they can't or don't interact with it. When I take a photo, I can make my own story about it and have that emotional response, but if people see something else in the photo, then they will have a different emotion with it.

The street photo in China was taken at about seven o'clock in the morning on a very misty day, and I was really looking for this, or something like this. The man is really going for something, and I see the colours next to him, that was my whole mission, to capture the colours next to him with the emptiness of the bare misty trees on the other side. It's interesting to me to hear what others see in this photo, sometimes different than my original intent.

TBD*: *Does the response from the public inspire future work?*

RDB: Yes, it does. It inspires you when people are excited about your photos. When people are not excited then it can demotivate you. So what happened with me when I started photography was that when I showed people my first ten photos, then, ahh, they liked some, others they didn't like so much. Then I would show them to other people and they would say "yeah, I like that one but I don't like that one or that one," so you get all these mixed reactions. And for me it was difficult because I liked all ten photos. There was one person who didn't like all ten photos, and I thought that if they didn't like the photos, then the photos were not good. Why did someone like the first one and not the fourth one? And it took me awhile to realize that not everybody can like every photo. Because it's a preference. Like Rembrandt, he was a great painter, his paintings go for 20 million Euros, but some people don't like the 20 million euro painting. But they might like something else that is really cheap, by an unknown person... so do you get motivation out of it? Yes, you do, but you shouldn't be too much affected because not everybody can like everything you make. But if people are excited about my work, then yes, definitely I get excited and I'm happy and I talk about it and share it. And there are plenty of people who like what I do so I keep on making and sharing what I do.

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TBD*: *What inspires your work, are you motivated by ideas? or circumstance?*

RDB: I work with ideas. But I want them to be natural, so I have to wait for the right circumstances. So, like the guy in China with the fog. I'd seen something like that, and I wanted to create that, but I had to find a day when it was foggy, and to walk into a guy who was actually walking towards me and then I could actually create that image. Same with the guy on the street in Portugal, - you have something in mind and you want to create that, but because it's natural - I don't use artists in my photographs, or models - so you have to wait for the right circumstances. So circumstances are important, but it is mostly ideas, because without the ideas, you can't create. Even if you want to work with circumstances, or create a circumstance, then you need to have the idea.

TBD*: *So it's not chance? You usually have an idea of what you want to take?*

RDB: Well, I always have an idea, but it doesn't always work. The opportunity doesn't always come when you want it. So, with nature photography, you can't control the weather, and with street photography, you can't control the people, so there is a big chance factor in it as well.

TBD*: *How do the street and city inspire you? How does nature and landscape inspire you?*

RBD: With street and city, I'm interested in people. I am an observer. I like to see how people move around, what they do, how they react and respond to things. So it's the interest in people.

With nature, it is so different from city life. I like cities, I can be there a few days a week, but I prefer to spend more time in nature, and I don't think we see enough of nature, because most people live and work in the city, and maybe on the weekend they can go to nature. I prefer to be five days of the week in nature, and two days a week in the city. Because a lot of people don't see that much nature, I like to show what I find. For example, where I live in Spain, I live close to the beach, but we have mountains and hills around us. A lot of people think that when you go to the South of Spain, there's beach and there's holiday and it's fun, but when you show them what the countryside is, and it's literally only ten kilometers straight inwards from the ocean, it's quite different. You have mountains and hills and little rivers, even some still have water running through them when it's over 35 or 40 degrees in the summer. And people don't expect to see that. So I like to take photos of that and bring them to the people. Many people don't know that Spain has that.

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TBD*: *How does your subject affect your approach and your process? Do you have a consistent method?*

RDB: Well, with the street photos, it's difficult to do, to take photos like that, especially these days with privacy laws, and figuring out what you can take photos of. I don't like to be the person who jumps out of the bushes and pushes a lens straight into your face, and yet, I still want to get a natural looking photo, not a posed photo. But it goes a lot by feeling because you always have to adapt to the subject. Every situation is new, so I work mostly by feel.

There is no consistency in it. I have done the photography courses, where you learn the rule of thirds and how everything should be in certain areas of your frame. And I get it, but I do it my own way. Although if you put the divisions on top of my frame, then probably most of the time it will line up according to the rules, but if you only think of the rules, how you should do it, then I believe you lose your creative capabilities, because you get limited by thinking only about what is right. I think in the end it's more about feeling.

TBD*: *Thank you so much for the interview! Is there anything you would like to say in conclusion?*

RDB: Well, I can say that there are no wrong photos. Sometimes people like things, or they don't, but it's a matter of preference. Yes, there are rules on how to do things and how it should be, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it is right. I have had questions from people

about what kind of gear you need, like, this guy wanted to do a photo tour with me, and he was like, “I only have this camera...” But I am a firm believer that it doesn’t matter what you shoot on, it’s about capturing the moment, and whether that’s with a camera on a mobile phone or whether that’s on a five thousand euro photo-camera, to me it doesn’t matter. As long as you can capture the moment, and bring out a certain feeling to the viewer, then I really think you’ve taken a good photo.

To see more of Robert de Boer’s work visit <https://www.robertdeboer.nl/>
And you can follow him on instagram @robertdeboer.nl