

# Men

## Michael

## Ackerman

Thirty-two portraits  
and a dialogue with  
Christian Caujolle

Immanences éditions  
Anne-Lou Buzot  
Florent Fajole  
& Nicolas Peyre  
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portfolios

Soissons, 2017

The palladium prints  
of the thirty-two portraits  
by Michael Ackerman  
have been made  
by Anne-Lou Buzot  
on Arches Platine paper.

Size of the prints  
48 x 52 cm  
18.89 x 20.47 inches

The texts were translated  
from the English  
into French by  
Michèle Bergot  
and Florent Fajole

Size of the portfolio  
52 x 55 cm  
20.47 x 21.65 inches

The texts were set in  
Adobe Caslon Pro,  
Baskerville, and Bodoni 72  
by Florent Fajole.  
Letterpress printing  
by Hannah Harkes  
at Labora studio, in Tallinn,  
on Labora cotton paper,  
handmade by Tamara Sobaleva,  
and on cellulose  
Hahnemühle paper.

Price: 12 000 €

Contact  
[contact@immanences-editions.com](mailto:contact@immanences-editions.com)  
+33 (07) 81 67 96 92

First edition print run  
of thirteen copies,  
of which eight  
are numbered  
from 1 to 8, and five  
hors commerce  
numbered from I to V.

Immanences éditions  
Anne-Lou Buzot,  
Florent Fajole  
& Nicolas Peyre,  
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portfolios  
Soissons, juin 2017

These prints are numbered,  
signed and titled  
by Michael Ackerman.

# Men, Michael Ackerman

## *A dialogue with Christian Caujolle*

*C.C.: I was very surprised to discover, in the series of portraits, the one of the young boy in Poland. Why did you add him to all those older men you met in totally different situations? And can you say something about the conditions in which you took those portraits?*

M.A.: The boy in Poland had the same qualities in his young face than the men I was drawn to in this series. He is raw and vulnerable. Damaged. Beautiful but not pretty. Maybe these men were more like him when they were 17.

Shooting these portraits began when I started to be in places where I didn't speak the language - Poland, Cuba, France, Italy and other places. The kind of men I was interested in did not speak English (none of these portraits were made in English speaking countries). I made Polaroids for people who I wanted to photograph with my "normal" camera. To break the ice, to have them accept me. Soon it was obvious the Polaroids were more intense and to the point than the 35mm pictures. And it became something I followed.

*I'm not really convinced! Yes, the boy is at the same time "beautiful" and damaged, fragile, but so different for me than the other ones. I will not say the other men are "beautiful". What kind of beauty do you speak about?*

You are not convinced that the boy belongs with them?

It's hard to describe precisely what I mean by the beauty of these men. Mostly it's that their faces are so naked and true. They can't help it, they can't hide. They are open wounds. Full of longing. These faces are brave even if often the men themselves are not. They are extremely unique but also archetypal. Maybe the boy is less wounded, more "innocent", but I see him as beautiful in the same sense as the others. Your question makes me want to find him again and see how he is now.

*If you find him, let me know! Do you think you will photograph him again?*

I imagine I will photograph him again. I wonder how he's changed in 4 years.

*Taking those portraits was a very special kind of dialogue with people whose language you didn't speak. Did you feel something special when they were "telling" you something with their faces? Was this the reason you clicked and got the image?*

I felt something special, that their faces were telling me something, when I first saw them. I knew right away that I wanted to photograph them. Then, the contact between us was different in each case. Some of the portraits were done once and I never saw the man again. Some were done over time. When I look at the pictures now, I don't remember any of these men being difficult to approach. Some were too shy or proud to say yes right away, but after some persistence and some drinking it was better. I should say that most of the pictures were made in bars.

*If I remember, one of the reasons you photographed those men was also because they were alone.*

I think if they were not alone I would have been more shy to approach them and they would have been too proud. It would be easier for them to say no.

*Sure. But that's just an explanation. I had the feeling that you were taking the photos because they were alone and that what you were looking for was precisely this feeling of loneliness. To figure what it was to be deeply alone.*

Yes. You're right. These men are extremely alone in the world and these portraits are primarily about solitude. Also about self destruction. But I don't pity these men. If anything, I revere them. I have illusions about them, because of what is revealed in their faces. They're heroic to me.

I now remember a quote from Franz Kafka that blew my mind around the time I was making these pictures.

“When you stand in front of me and look at me, what do you know of the griefs that are in me and what do I know of yours? And if I were to cast myself down before you and weep and tell you, what more would you know about me than you know about Hell when someone tells you it is hot and dreadful? For that reason alone we human beings ought to stand before one another as reverently, as reflectively, as lovingly, as we would before the entrance to Hell\*.”

*Those guys are alone and are all around the world. Does that mean that loneliness is deeply linked to the human condition? Is it a feeling that you have? I don't remember who wrote: “What's sure is that we are born alone and will disappear alone”. Could this be an explanation about the way you look at the world or you see it?*

Some people are more alone than others, but yes, in the absolute, we are all alone. Born alone, die alone. But loneliness is something else. It's not about being alone. It is a lack. A lack of contact, a lack of connection. We all live with a hole inside us that is impossible to fill. Photographing is a desperate act. When I'm photographing someone, I don't want it to stop. When it does, I feel empty again. I feel the hole. After you've live a while you understand that every attempt to fill the hole is a very temporary fix. There is no satisfaction. I think it's a lifelong war with loneliness.

*You never had the same feeling with women? You never photographed women in the same way.*

I never made a large cohesive series of portraits of women but the feeling when I photograph a woman is the same. The same need and urgency. What is different is approaching someone I don't know. It's already intimidating with men but with women I'm even more hesitant and shy. Sometimes I see someone in the metro or on the street or in a bar and I wish to photograph them but I'm not sure how, or have no idea at all. I have to convince myself to overcome my doubts and fears, go to them, introduce myself and ask them if we can meet sometime. Usually I talk myself out of it but sometimes I go for it. It's almost like that feeling when you're young and you go to a club with your friends and see a girl you like and want to ask her to dance. It's so hard. The fear of rejection - “no thank you”, and you walk away pretending

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\*Franz Kafka, “Letter to Oskar Pollak”, November 8, 1903; cited from Max Brod (ed.), *Briefe, 1902-1924* (New York: Schocken, 1958), p. 27. Translation from Frederick R. Karl, *Franz Kafka, Representative Man* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1991), p. 98.

not to be humiliated and totally exposed. And if she says yes you have to dance but you are not a good dancer.. I am very dependent on and grateful to the people who have said yes to me and opened themselves in a vulnerable and courageous way.

*I understand the situation. But I don't see, in all your work, any portrait of woman comparable to those of the men alone. Is it a decision, a choice? With women the images are also a challenge about representing the body, the nude. With men you concentrate on the faces, including if some give the feeling that those men are nude, or partly nude. And when you put them together, which you have done including in Half Life, they become a kind of "family". A family of people alone. Women are never seen as a group.*

It's true I never created a family of women. Maybe I don't connect with women in the same way. Certainly I'm more inhibited with them. There is a gap between us that doesn't allow for the same understanding. And of course there's the sexual problem - the cliché of a man photographer approaching a strange woman.

Most of my pictures of women are of someone I had been intimate with. Or someone I passed on the street and quickly made a picture. There are exceptions. Sometimes I made a picture of a woman in the same way but I never collected them, hunted them and put them together like I did with the men. The purpose was different. I don't see the connections between the women I've known and photographed, in the same way as the men. I see them more as individual. Like islands - separate. The men do need to be together, they form a gang, or a family as you say. They share something important. They share many things. I'm pretty sure one thing they share is the impossibility of staying with a woman.

*For those portraits we don't have any element of context given by the background, or clothes, or I don't know what else. "No information". Are those men just "symbols"? Are they a manner of visual existence of something totally abstract?*

There is no context or background because I felt that would get in the way of what I was after. It sounds cliché and banal but I wanted to get as close as possible. I just wanted faces. I wished to communicate the emotional power of each of these men's faces without any unnecessary distraction. I don't think they are symbols. Do you? I think the portraits are very true to the individual men, as seen by me.

*I saw you different times shooting that kind of man in bars. And I never understood what made you decide to shoot. You could spend entire nights without taking a photo. You could also at one moment shoot quickly and stop. Maybe each situation is different, but I always wondered about WHAT made you decide to begin...*

It's that argument in my head - "do it, don't do it". Early on, if I arrive and there is someone I want to photograph and we've never met before, I try to understand if I can approach him. I always wait, even if I wish to start immediately. You can't just jump on someone you don't know. It's too aggressive and it won't work (Or maybe it would for someone else who is more daring and if the subject is willing to be taken like that). Often in photographing I have the feeling that I was aggressive and I hate it.

You're always taking something from the subject and imposing your will on them, even if you have their permission. Even if it's your friend or family. But it can also be tender and I prefer that balance. In the case of these portraits in bars, what made me begin was different in each case - sometimes it was that I couldn't stop myself anymore, I needed to do it and couldn't wait anymore. Sometimes I just felt the person was open, and maybe because I lost my inhibitions, with alcohol, and with some trust in myself.

*Do you continue to look for those men today, do you continue to take their portraits? Or is it something which corresponds to a period, a moment in time?*

It was a long moment. Most of the portraits were made between 2001 and 2007. One in the panel is from 2014 and another from 2016. I've made others during the past 10 years but have not used them because I thought they did not surprise me or bring anything new to the whole. They were less urgent. Just repeating something. Also I am tempted to say that I stopped to have illusions about these kind of men or this kind of life/self destruction but it's not true. I often feel a strong connection with or am moved by someone like that, who is outside, somehow separate, wounded. Tonight in Berlin I went to a bar I used to go to years ago but stopped. Maybe it's because of your question - do I continue to look for these alone men today? I sat there from 10 in the night until 4 in the morning. It was a very strong reminder of something that I was connected to. I didn't dare photograph until almost the end, even if I wanted to all the time.

# Personal story, by Michael Ackerman

One of my earliest, most powerful memories is of being woken up in the middle of the night and put in the back seat of my grandfather's car and taken to the airport in Tel Aviv. It was December 19, 1974. I was 7 and we were moving to America. It was my father's will. He was suffocated by Israel, damaged by the army and didn't want his sons to be soldiers. He wanted America. He was born in Czernowice, Romania, and with his family survived World War 2 in a camp and eventually made it to Israel in 1948 at age 15. 3 years later he was taken in the army and given the job of clearing land mines. My mother's existence is also fortunate. Her father left Poland just before Germany invaded. He got a job in Bulgaria, where he met my grandmother. They fled to Istanbul where in 1941 my mother was born, as they waited for permission to emigrate to Palestine. During his lifetime, while Poland was still under Soviet domination, my grandfather hunted for but never managed to find any information about what happened to his mother and brother.

I can't say how, at the time, I felt about the move to New York. In Israel I had a sunny Mediterranean childhood – the sea, a house with a big garden, fruit trees, flowers, dogs and cats, grandparents (whom we left behind). I was sheltered from the past. And from the hostility all around us in the present. Once, at the start of war in 1973, my father came home early from work and rushed us to the neighborhood bomb shelter. We sat there for a while but nothing happened. To a child it was like a game. Soon after I was in an ugly New York suburb in the winter with big buildings and in a school with a language I didn't understand. It must have been tough but I quickly got into American life. A lot of sports, television and bad food. For my mother, leaving Israel was a catastrophe. She loved her home and her country. It was so bad that she doesn't remember her first year or 2 in New York. It's blocked out. And, 43 years later, she is still eaten up by the guilt of abandoning her parents. Me, a little less so. I left New York for Europe over 15 years ago. I try to remember to call my mother once a week. And I wonder from where will my daughter, years from now, interrupt her busy day and force herself to call me.

A phone call that is burned in my memory – Soon after the move to New York, my mother, brother and I returned to Israel for the summer holidays and stayed in our old house. I was 9. Some of my former school mates came by and asked me questions about America, like was there television there and ice cream? One night I woke up in the dark and got out of bed, left my room and saw my mother on the telephone, crying. She was telling my father that we are not coming back to him. He was pleading with her. I returned to bed and we never spoke about it. At the end of the summer we did come back. Since she was 18 she followed him. When I recently asked her about this phone call, she had no memory of it.

My photography life started at the end of high school. During the last term we were obliged to take one practical course. The choices were carpentry, electricity and photography. The first 2 sounded really difficult, so I chose photography. This sounded



easy. At home there was always a camera around. My parents took a lot of pictures of each other and of my brother and me. I took their Yashica rangefinder. I remember the old teacher, showing us step by step the basics of black and white photography. The correct way to expose film, develop film, make a contact sheet, make a test strip and make a nice print. I couldn't follow. I couldn't then and can't now do anything by recipe. Cooking, putting together a piece of furniture with instructions, finding the way on a map - I'm lost. In the photo class I did everything wrong and it infuriated the teacher. He started to humiliate me, telling the students – "if you want to know how not to do something, look at Ackerman".

I didn't really care. It was just pictures. But something was born - I remember a slight sense of power, as I hid behind the camera and looked at my friends and the cooler kids to whom I felt inferior. Teenagers who, unlike me, read books, drank beer, smoked, knew how to drive and had girlfriends and boyfriends. Next year at University I joined a student photography organization and was taught again the basics by older students. Suddenly I was obsessed. I didn't want to go to classes. I just wanted to take pictures. And I took every bad boring cliché beginner picture. Trees, shadows, buildings, patterns, knife and fork on the table, people walking by. After 2 months I returned home for Thanksgiving holiday with maybe 100 or 200 black and white prints, very excited to show them to my parents. My mother looked at every one and kept repeating how beautiful they were. My father looked at a few, walked away and said "bullshit".

5 years later I didn't manage to finish university but my photography improved. I told my parents I'm leaving school and coming back to New York to be a real photographer. My mother was horrified and begged me to graduate. My father, who didn't finish high school, said that I know what I'm doing. He didn't understand my pictures but he understood the need in life to do what you believe. He didn't give a fuck about career or status or satisfying anyone else's expectations. Maybe the most important thing I inherited from him is this independence and freedom from respectability.

When I was young I felt some allegiance to Israel but I lost it. Nor do I feel American. There are places where I love to be, where I feel connected, where it's a pure pleasure just have my feet on the ground – New York, Napoli, Krakow, Varanasi, some street, some village, some mountain, some sea. Places where I've felt a little less alien. People and landscapes that I see myself in. But I've given up the idea of finding a home. Photography is an act of profound recognition. When I take a picture I have the brief illusion to belong.

Berlin, April 2017.





















