

SUNDAY — July 20, 2008



ANTHONY REYES Northwest Arkansas Times

Craig Nelson is working on a photo project, called "Strangers & Not So Strange," which contains intimate portraits of Northwest Arkansas residents. The portraits were taken at Brewski's Draft Emporium in Fayetteville.

Finding focus

PHOTOGRAPHER'S 'ACCIDENTAL' IMAGES RESULT IN NEW ARTISTIC DIRECTION, PROJECT

BY KEVIN KINDER
Northwest Arkansas Times

There are no shortage of words that can be used to describe a human face. The hurts and happiness of lives reflect in blue eyes, in taut lips, in wrinkles, in furrowed brows.

The adjectives come quickly. Pensive. Nervous. Amused. Melancholy.

FACES — of — FAYETTEVILLE

Craig Earl Nelson.

Why the smile? Why the frown? Why wear goggles indoors?

Perhaps the most asked question is this: Who are these people?

Well, says, Nelson, many are strangers, someone pulled randomly from the streets because their faces seem to tell a story. Or they are acquaintances of his,

I want to see their inborn beauty, the scars they bear. I want to see fear, compassion, humanity. The good, the bad, the ugly — that appeals to me.

Craig Earl Nelson
Photographer

friends who have agreed to a quick photo.

"Strangers & Not So Strange" began as an accident, a way for Nelson to forget about a string of bad days. He took his camera with him to one of his favorite hangouts, Brewski's Draft Emporium on Dickson Street in Fayetteville.

He snapped a few photos of friends, in the process forgetting about what needed to be forgotten. Upon further examination, the small, instant prints he'd been snapping were telling a story. Nelson returned to Brewski's often in the next few days, taking more images. The project, which Nelson said wasn't planned as much as it just happened, turned into a full-blown series quickly. Since March, Nelson has collected more than 150 images of strange, content, sad, distraught and beautiful people.

Taking photos, chances

Nelson, almost 41, didn't take up photography until later in his life. It wasn't until 2003, during a family trip to St. Augustine, Fla., the state where he was born, that he began to discover what was capable through photography. Snapping photos at dusk on the beach, he noticed photography had much in common with another of his pursuits: writing. It was in those images, taken in the warmth of fading natural light, he saw the potential of the craft.

"I saw something, the same structure I saw in poetry," he said.

He left his corporate job at a prominent Northwest Arkansas company in 2005 and went back to school. He wasn't a good college student in his 20s, he admits, and he looks at his tenure at NorthWest Arkansas Community College as something of a second chance.

He's also been working hard to master his new passion. Through a series of cameras and experiments, Nelson has taught himself what he needs to know about photography. He's quick to tell a visitor about his favorite types of cameras and the technical elements of his gear.

See **NELSON**, page B8

Nelson

Continued from B1

His current camera isn't complicated or technical. It's a Mamiya RB67 medium format camera, fitted with a Polaroid back. Through it, he shoots Fujifilm FP-100C instant film, just like he did that first random day that lead to the creation of "Strangers & Not So Strange." He's experimented making with many types of digital and film images, but the small instant prints was what he decided to shoot that first day, and he's followed that procedure for the duration of the project.

Point-blank photography

He never expected any of this. Not the warm reaction to the images, or the opportunity have 30 of them installed at Mullins Library at the University of Arkansas campus in Fayetteville, where they will remain through August.

And he clearly never expected so many participants. There are men in suits. Women in dresses. There is also a man wearing goggles, clutching his pet snake. Many of the people photographed are, like Nelson, artistic types, members of the visual arts community or local rock bands.

But there are others too, like the man Nelson spotted walking down Dickson Street with a ZZ Top-length, beautiful beard.

"I could not let him walk by," said Nelson, so he ran to the street and asked this



ANTHONY REYES Northwest Arkansas Times

For his ongoing portrait project, Craig Nelson uses a medium-format camera with instant color film.

man he'd never met if he'd be willing to have his picture taken. He agreed.

All of the shots have a similar feeling. They are taken in the foyer of Brewski's. Using only the natural lighting that swirls around the bar in the afternoon hours, the subjects tend to be lit on one side of their face, fading toward blackness on the other.

Almost all of the portraits are taken at point-blank distance.

"I want to see their inborn beauty, the scars they bear," Nelson said, who admits there is a bit of bias toward working-class types in the series.

"I want to see fear, com-

passion, humanity," he said. "The good, the bad, the ugly — that appeals to me."

Some of the images were made with just one click of the shutter, a process of mere minutes. Others required more than one session, something mandated when Nelson or a subject didn't think they really captured the essence of the person.

"There is what the eye sees, and what the camera records," he said.

But he's quick to note he isn't judging anyone. Each photo was taken in a moment that actually existed, regardless of what the photographer or subject thinks is going on. If

a volunteer is nervous, he often asks them to find their reflection in the camera lens, which is often just a few inches from their nose. The goal is to get the real person to emerge, not the facade that many people put on.

"I'm trying to get them to expose themselves," he said. "I'm not judging them, and not labeling them. ... It's about getting people to drop their guards."

The power of a portrait

The results have surprised many, even some of those who volunteered for a photo session.

"Craig's portraits are very intimate, I feel, and that's why I appreciate them," said Megan Chapman, a Fayetteville-based visual artist. "I think his work has a sense of realism, and a stripped-down, intimate view of the person he's photographed."

Chapman is among those in the series. The individual frames are not named, just numbered, beginning at No. 1 and continuing until the project ends.

When that will be, not even Nelson knows. He is on hiatus until later this fall, giving him time to restock on the instant film — which costs about \$9 per 10-shot pack — he uses for the project. He is also considering a

'STRANGERS & NOT SO STRANGE'

When: through August
Where: Mullins Library, University of Arkansas campus, Fayetteville
Hours: 7 a.m. to midnight Mondays through Thursdays, 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Fridays, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturdays and noon to midnight Sundays
Admission: free
• To see other images or to contact photographer Craig E. Nelson, visit www.nelsonfoto.com.

new location.

But it will continue, much in the same way it has before. It will feature a natural light setting, and it will also focus on individual subjects, Fayetteville's best, brightest and otherwise.

It's not a unique project, Nelson knows, as others have taken candid, single-subject photos before. But it's his project now, too, something he's been looking for since he became serious about photography.

"That's the question I've needed answered for the last several years."

Of course, the photos will continue to show emotions, ones that are created as guesses when a viewer locks eyes with a photo that is staring back at them. Only the person in the photo, perhaps, really has a clue what is going on. Nelson is certain about one subject captured in the series: himself. A friend took his camera for one frame, then used a similar technique.

And just like the other photos, the image of Nelson emotes: someone feeling tired, grateful, happy, and frustrated, all at the same time.



EARL NELSON Special to the Times

Craig Nelson



EARL NELSON Special to the Times

Megan Chapman



EARL NELSON Special to the Times

Jonathan Holder