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# Photographer Alexander Morel Talks About Education and Haiti

JULY 10, 2013 BY RAMON NUEZ

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Until I spoke with Dee Campos, the other day, I had no clue [who Alexander Morel](#) was. But she made a personal request — *“You must speak with Alex Morel. His photography is incredibly moving.”* Or something to that effect 😊

So I did. And Dee was right. Alex’s stories are incredibly moving.

## Interview

**LBTL: You were born in New York City but grew up in the Dominican Republic. Between there and your BFA at St. John’s University. When did you decide that photography would be journey?**



**AM:** It is curious that you ask this first because I have gone over that question in my mind countless times. There was indeed a specific moment, and it came as a surprise. As a child, painting and drawing was an almost daily activity, art supplies was the best part of starting the school year, but never did it occur to me the possibility of a carrier within the arts. I was better at math and science, curious about history and the international section of my

father’s newspapers, and politics was like coffee and bread at home.

Those were my true interests, and so in college I was undecided during my first two years jumping from one program to another, (environmental science, cosmology, psychology, political sciences, and others), unable to permanently choose. My first photography class was an art elective to fulfill part of the university’s common core, but it turned out to be the recipe that



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brought all the ingredients together: the personal, the social, the science, and the creative process.

Another photography course followed and then it became clear that through photography and art I didn't have to abandon any of the fields that were important to me; I could approach all these subjects in a creative and visual way. The decision to pursue photography happened during my sophomore year, 1993, and I was standing alone in the middle of the living room of my godfather's apartment in Woodside – Queens, NY.

“ When a student asks me about advice on grad school, I always ask why is he or she considering it. If the reason is to teach at college level, my answer comes with a warning: Teaching might be a welcome side effect of an MFA, not a given.

**LBTL: You eventually went on to obtain your MFA. I have spoken to Dee Campos and Don Gregorio Antón at length about the MFA. They explain that it's a very personal decision – which has various implications to a career in photography. What are your thoughts on pursuing an MFA? Is it a prerequisite for teaching photography?**



**AM:** I would also agree that it is a very personal decision, or it should be. At the same time, there seems to be increasing social pressure at pursuing graduate programs in all fields, and the visual arts are not exempt.

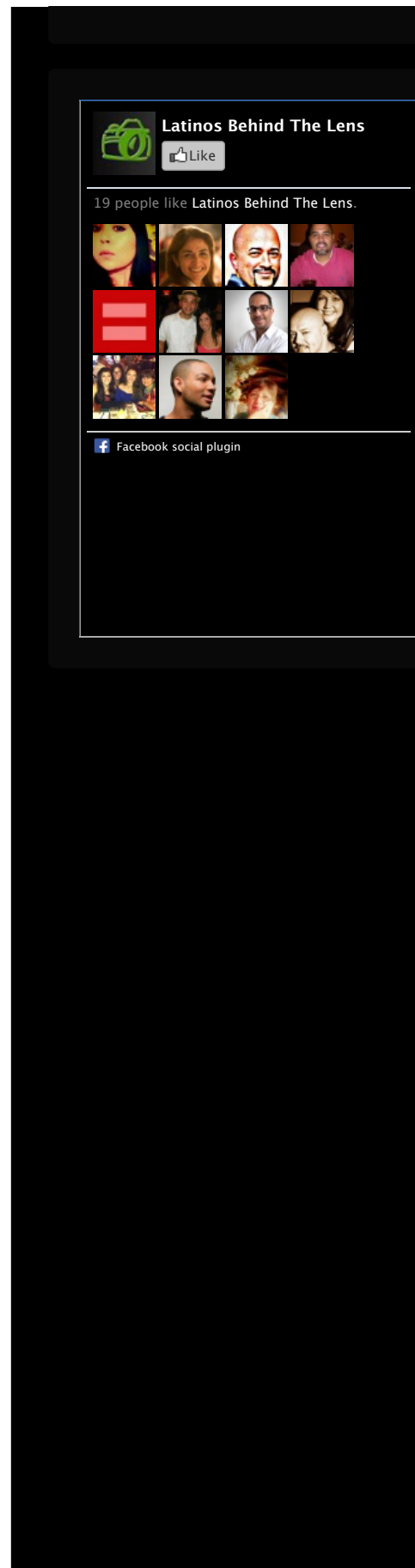
Do you need an MFA to be a good photographer? No. Do you need an MFA to be a good teacher? No.

The MFA is just another way to seriously pursue what you want do. It demands an almost exclusive commitment and dedication in a highly structured setting where, hopefully, you will create and engage in a more complex cultural dialogue, and these circumstances might be more difficult to bring together otherwise. Having said that, to teach at university level, it is required to have a terminal degree, and for photography and other visual arts this is the MFA.

My own reasons for pursuing such degree were: First, to give myself the opportunity to grow within my field and push my work while being part of a challenging community of artist and thinkers. Second, it was an obvious roadmap for me. Learning, research, exchange of ideas, the academic environment in general was one I always found stimulating. Then there are the more specific reasons for choosing one program over another, and this should be considered carefully.

Faculty, institutional prestige, location, program structure, size, cost, etc. all are important and might carry different weight for different people. I attended Rutgers University, and my reasons were very clear.

First, Rutgers' MFA is on Visual Arts and not divided by medium. This meant that my classmates and faculty all came from different practices and their points of view were equally diverse; in contrast with the intense photographic experience I previously had at the International Center of Photography full time program. Last, I wanted to work with artists like



Allen Frame, Martha Rosler, Geoffrey Hendricks, and other progressive (or subversive) faculty teaching there.

During my first year there I was given a Teaching Assistantship where I had full responsibility for undergraduate photography classes. This was my first teaching experience. Teaching was something I knew I wanted to do, perhaps as a way of saying thanks to some amazing people who have guided me to this point. However, I never thought this would happen before my 50's or 60's after gathering a minimum of wisdom to pass on. Some people thought otherwise.



When a student asks me about advice on grad school, I always ask why is he or she considering it. If the reason is to teach at college level, my answer comes with a warning: Teaching might be a welcome side effect of an MFA, not a given. It demands a disciplined and difficult balance between your personal work and your academic life. It could strip you from the selfishness sometimes needed to focus on your work.

And unfortunately, there are very few teaching positions open out there at any given time, especially full time.

**LBTL: In your personal work you have photographed, beautifully – family, friends, strangers and places. As a viewer I felt part of the experience, an active participant, how do you teach “that magic sauce” to your students?**



**AM:** Photography is an excuse for the experience, a way to connect and understand. Hopefully, it could also result in a message or sensation that could reach someone else. I don't try to impose what I do on my students. Instead, I feel more like a detective trying to figure out and helping them connect those elements that are defining to them. To do this, I feel students need to address what they consider most important, engage their surroundings, and

actively provoke their experiences.

Again, photography becomes a medium of interaction with the world.

**LBTL: What is the single most important concept that your students must walk away with in order to grow as a storyteller?**

**AM:** Well, there are several single most important concepts out there. To start, I feel we must learn how to listen.

As a child, I painted the most vivid images in my mind while listening to the fairy-tales my grandmother use to tell me. Similarly, in order to tell someone else's story we must listen (to hear and pay attention simultaneously) to them first. Just as important, we must learn how to tell our own story.

It is only by doing this that we can understand how complex other people's lives can be.

**LBTL: Tell me about the inspiration behind your current work in Haiti? And what does the work mean to you?**



**AM:** Haiti has been the subject of so many incredible works that one might ask, "why Haiti again?" But those who have worked there know that Haiti always has an important story to tell.

In my case, Haiti was the first home for my wife and I after we got married. We lived there for four years until 2004. We met some of our best friends in Haiti, and had some amazing and unique experiences there.

The earthquake of 2010 brought me back.

I immediately felt compelled to return and be of assistance in any possible way, so a few weeks later I arrived with a group of relief workers and doctors to help and document their efforts. Afterwards, I decided to stay longer and work on a more formal record of the devastation, but with this decision came the realization that I couldn't photograph the way I usually did, spontaneously reacting to my surroundings. I was too emotionally close and shocked, and the situation was too chaotic to easily make sense of it.

So, I adopted a very direct and methodical approach that helped me survey the destruction, resulting in highly detailed landscapes of the city of Port Au Prince for the most part. Parallel to these, I also focused on formal portraits of the people affected. Friends and strangers had an uncontrollable need to tell their stories, and seemed to understand the importance of keeping a visual record.

Now this work in Haiti has become a long-term documentation of a period that expands from the last days of J.B. Aristide's presidency to the post-earthquake redevelopment.

In essence, I could say there are two parts to my work. On the one hand, it's about a personal journey and the understanding of human relationships. On the other side, there is my belief in photography as a tool for social change. There is always a pull between these two concepts, whether I'm photographing at home or other situation.



## Call To Action

“ In essence, I could say there are two parts to my work. On the one hand, it's about a personal journey and the understanding of human relationships. On the other side, there is my belief in photography as a tool for social change.

Photography calls upon us to be an agent for various assignments. For some of us — like Alex — it's about documenting a personal journey or recording a social change. And yet for others it's about travel, portrait or landscape photography. But guess what — it does not matter one single bit.

It does not matter what photographic journey you travel. Just take the trip.

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**Joe Machado** · 1 day ago +1

I was moved by the message and insight Morel shared, thanks very much. It is a relief to consider that the MFA is not a requirement for being an artist, yet it does 'allow for a more strenuous dialogue with the instructors' during its pursuit. It would be fantastic if any of my work would be a catalyst for social change, so I hear the call and the message - photography is a means of interaction with the world, and I will try to improve the quality of my work. Thanks very much for the inspiration.

Joe  
 joemachadophotography.com

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**Ramon B. Nuez Jr.** 12p · 1 day ago +1

Joe I am very happy that Alex's message had a positive impact on your photographic perspective. And yes - my thoughts were the same -- "thank god!" That I don't need an MFA to be taken seriously as an artist.

And I find that photographers looking to use photography for social change. Are really no different than the artist to the left or right of them. These artists simple -- choose -- to make a difference. To enact change. To document with images instead of a pen. And that was their core belief not the accolades. Which are nice in and of themselves :-)

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"Right now, somewhere, there are pictures of us in old boxes or upon the pages of cherished memories. They exist out of love, out of the tender and merciful instant when someone thought enough of us to capture our essence."

-- Don Gregorio Antón

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