Seeing Eye to Eye with Howard Schatz

By Robert Ecksel on February 21, 2013

Howard Schatz is not a minimalist. He is a maximalist. He is a modernist. (Howard Schatz)

"I wanted to say boxing. I wanted to say power and force. I wanted to say determination and courage. I wanted to say vulnerability and humanity…"

Boxing has entranced artists from the beginning of recorded time. The sweet science was as rudimentary then as it is now, but it was also evocative, it was essential, it was unforgettable, and what was true in the past is no less true today.

Howard Schatz has been photographing boxers for many years. He has made a name for himself in a sport that sometimes fails to distinguish the compelling from the routine. His accomplishments are a given, and his work speaks for itself, but Schatz was not to the manner born. His was a long and winding road that led, as a result of hard work, kismet, and a daring roll of the dice, to his preeminence. Schatz's photographs, however persuasive, have a specificity that combines personal history, ambition, gravitas and vision in equal measure.

As many schools of photography exist as there are schools of boxing. Although there are tried and true components for establishing a rock solid foundation, there's no right or wrong way to create a memorable photograph, any more than there is a right or wrong way to create a memorable performance in the ring.

Prior to becoming a professional photographer, Howard Schatz was an internationally renowned retina specialist. He did his residency in ophthalmology and spent two years in the military during the Vietnam War as an ophthalmologist at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. He performed surgery and laser treatments. He was Clinical Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of California Medical Center in San Francisco. He also wrote over one hundred peer reviewed papers and seven medical textbooks.

In 1987, when his second child left for college, Howard Schatz decided to devote each Saturday to photography. He told me that "Photography was something I'd always been interested in, something that was a hobby, and something for which I was never able to spend appropriate time to really learn and get better. Working diligently, once a week, I began to get a lot of attention for my work." That attention included editorial and advertising work, gallery and museum shows, in addition to having books of his work published.

To receive that degree of attention for what was in effect still a hobby was no mean feat. Schatz was aware of that, as was his wife, Beverly Ornstein.

"My wife came up with the idea, why don't we take a one-year sabbatical, go to New York City—because we were getting phone calls from New York all the time—and see what we could do, if we could do it full-time."

In October 1995, seventeen years ago, that's exactly what he did.

"We left, under the auspices of a one-year sabbatical, got an okay from my associates, the university, all of my duties. They said, 'How much money do you want?' I said I don't want any money, I just want to be able to return, and they said, 'Have a good year.'"

Youth is the time for reinvention. What follows is a time for consolidation. But Howard Schatz, with a spouse as adventurous as himself, took a detour into the unknown.

"The year was fantastic," he said. "It was interesting, we were busy, it was challenging, it was telling, it was hard—we went to bed giggling every night over the excitement of it. I re-upped the one-year sabbatical, and I kept re-upping, so after five, six, seven years it was clear that I was not going to return."

If his story had ended there, it would be a story with a happy ending. But it didn't end there. More happiness was to come. But before proceeding, I wanted to circle back and asked if he had regrets about the life he left behind.

"No one's asked me that question," Schatz said. "I do miss medicine. There's something about medicine that's really wonderful. I felt that I

was doing something that was very meaningful and important. I enjoyed my patients. I enjoyed helping them. I enjoyed the challenge of figuring out what was wrong. I enjoyed being a scientist and contributing to the world's literature. I enjoyed discovering things. There are many, many things about medicine that were rich and compelling and wonderful and *I do miss them*. On the other hand, medicine has given me many things. It has given me a knowledge of methodology. I could figure things out. As a pre-med I had a lot of physics, so knowing the world for a scientific basis helps me technically as a photographer. I have learned to walk into a room with a new patient that has been referred, worrying that they are going blind, and learned to behave in such a way that they felt relieved, luckily, that they were in the right place. So that helps me as a portrait photographer, it helps me with people. I got a lot from medicine.

"I had a conversation with a very great, famous, Grammy Award winning music producer, and we were comparing our lives and I told him, 'In a way, I used to do meaningful work, and now I just make pictures.' And he said, 'Well, making art that gives thousands of people pleasure is very meaningful. You're probably touching more people, many, many more people than you could have as a physician.' So it made me think that perhaps it's not all meaningless."

Most of us are embarrassingly sodden with our achievements. It is common. It is tiresome. It is narcissistic. And it is often unrealistic. Yet when people of accomplishment, someone like Howard Schatz for instance, questions the value of their work, it gives me pause. Schatz's self-doubt is not false modesty, nor is it a sign of weakness. It is, as the great English critic and philosopher William Hazlitt once said, that "No truly great man ever thought himself so."

Schatz might have embraced photography earlier than he did. Art teachers used to tell his mother, "He has a gift. Take him to the Art Institute. Have him learn design and art history and drawing. She wouldn't hear any of it," Schatz said. "Her son was going to be a physician. She had two sons and she programmed both of them, my brother and me, to become physicians. I wasn't unhappy. From the time I understood language, I was going to be a physician. I never even thought about it in a way. But we learn retina through photographs. We have the ability to photograph what's going on in the retina. With a retinal camera we can go in and photograph the back of this one-inch diameter. One of the textbooks I wrote had 800 pages and 1200 photographs. I have a reasonably fertile visual memory and I remember every one of those photographs. They helped me write the book. So my visual ability has helped me as a photographer. The other thing is my father took pictures, and his brothers, my uncles, took pictures all the time. So I had a camera since I was in medical school. I had a Nikon camera since the '60s and I took pictures all the time.

"The biggest difference is that in medicine it's important to get it right—exactly right. A mistake, with a retinal problem, can result in a blind eye. In photography, in the creative world, it's about making mistakes, about trying things. It's about reaching into the unknown and falling flat on your face but getting up. I call it the creative tree. We climb onto a branch that's promising, and sometimes get out on a branch and it's rotten and it cracks and you fall. But the grass is soft. You can get up, climb up the trunk again. You can find another branch and sometimes you'll find a branch that has decent fruit to pick on every inch of it. That's the creative life versus the scientific/medical life, working with patients, which is very, completely, sincerely perfectionistic and exacting."

Schatz's work can be beautiful, achingly so, an eloquent testimonial to the photographic art. But he has no fear of embracing the ugly. He's not the first photographer to find splendor in the grotesque, the photographs of **Diane Arbus** come to mind, but it runs counter to expectations, which I assume is intentional.

"It's about veracity," said Schatz. "It's about truth. It's about what it is and what meaning it has and what emotion it has. A great photograph has a feeling. You look at it, but you feel something. You don't begin to analyze it intellectually immediately. You look at it and you're either compelled to *really look at it*, or you turn the page. Yes, beautiful is beautiful. A beautiful model is a rare creature and a wonderfully beautiful thing. But it doesn't last too long. It's just beautiful. It has to have some emotional impact. A photograph by its very nature is flat, it's still, doesn't move, and is silent; whereas boxing, or dance or any other sport or human activity, has movement, depth and sound. And my goal was to try to bring movement, depth and sound to my photographs. I did everything I could to make powerful, energetic images that would POP off the page, where you felt the compassion and the pull and the feelings of the subject—the boxers—and you felt the power, you felt the movement, you heard the sound. That was my goal in making these images."

Howard Schatz's *At The Fights* is an extraordinary book. Some of the fighters he photographed include Andre Ward, Manny Pacquiao, Bernard Hopkins, Sergio Martinez, Wladimir Klitschko, Mike Tyson, Abner Mares, Carl Froch, Andre Berto, Timothy Bradley, Amir Khan,

Lucian Bute, Vic Darchinyan, Tomasz Adamek, Zab Judah, and Muhammad Ali. Not every photograph is a masterpiece, but masterpieces, no matter the medium, are few and far between. A book or article or work of art or act of kindness earns my praise the hard way—by either knocking my socks off or taking me to places I've never been. *At The Fights*, in large part because it's about boxing, in large part because it transcends boxing, meets those criteria and then some.

"The reason I did the boxing," continued Schatz, "was because ten years ago I did a book called *Athlete*. I studied and interviewed athletes from every Olympic sport—swimming, track and field, gymnastics, fencing, judo—and all the professional sports—hockey, baseball, basketball, football, soccer. I learned about athletes. I learned about their psyches. I learned about their personalities and how they worked and how they focused and how they could be coached. And boxers were the same, except for one thing. It's not just that it's one-on-one. Tennis is one-on-one. So is badminton and ping pong. But it's *the risk*, and *the courage*. The fact that they have chosen a career where they face opponents whose own careers are advanced by trying to knock them out—that's what really got me interested. I wanted to investigate what this was about. And in my interviews and in my photographs I believe I did that through this book.

"The second thing that I did was research. I knew boxing as a casual fan, not someone like you who writes about it, but somebody who watched occasionally and found it interesting. So, I studied every image of boxing that I could find, whether it was photographs or paintings or photographs of sculpture. With the internet there were hundreds of thousands of images. I bought every book on photography I could find. If it had one photograph in there that was something new or different, I bought the book, because I wanted to find my own way. It's important to be a scholar in your work and I studied them and studied them and studied them. I wanted to say boxing, but I didn't want to do it like anybody else. I wanted to find my own unique way of saying it. So I interviewed everybody who was important to boxing that I could find, that I could get a hold of, and I probably interviewed a hundred, hundred and fifty people who were important to boxing but not boxers: promoters, managers, commissioners, cutmen, trainers, judges, announcers, fans—everybody I could talk to. And my quid pro quo was, they came to my studio for an interview, I would do a portrait of them, I gave them a portrait. It turned out that it was useful to use their interviews and portraits in the book. They taught me about the boxers and the culture of boxing and that gave me an overall feeling of what boxing was."

Critique is not criticism. I admire Schatz's work but believe his portraits of noncombatants are a weak link, insofar as there is a weak link, in *At The Fights*. Those subjects are pieces of the mosaic, perhaps even integral pieces and therefore indispensable, and as formal portraits are exemplary, but they lack the dynamism of his photographs of fighters. It may be that the sitters that provided Schatz with his boxing education were less dynamic, although fighters are temperamentally diverse. It may be that those in the sport but not in the ring failed to inspire Schatz to the same degree as the boxers themselves. Whatever the case may be, he didn't lavish those photos, perhaps for good reason, with an equal amount of time and creative energy.

The best of Schatz's photographs are incredibly detailed. He is not a minimalist, he is a maximalist, and uses the computer as a painter uses a paintbrush. This is not old-school work, no matter how elastic the expression old-school might be. This work is modern in every sense of the word. I wondered how Howard Schatz created his photographs, which are the converse of simply pointing and shooting a camera.

"I realized in the '90s, before I left San Francisco for New York, that I could not make photographs the way I wanted to make photographs if I just shot and processed the film. I had to learn Photoshop and I have and that's a tool I use all the time. By shooting digitally or digitizing film you can do something with a photograph and fulfill your fantasies and dreams. Nowadays we shoot for basic raw material. I shoot everything flat, so there are no blacks, because once you have black you have no detail. There are no burned out whites, because if you have too much white there's no detail. We shoot to get all the information we possibly can. We want a very good fingerprint. And then we can do anything we want to it. We can color it, or discolor it, desaturate it, take all the color out. We can fulfill a feeling. I've heard people say, 'You know, with a computer you have too many choices.' Well, gadzooks, that's the whole idea. I could see a thousand possibilities, literally, within a few minutes. I could fool around and see all sorts of ways of seeing a photograph in a short time. Like you, you write a sentence, you look at your sentence and you can say, 'Well, that's sort of banal. It says what I wanted to say, but how can I make this interesting? Well, I'll put this prepositional phrase here. I'll start with a verb. I'll end with an adjective or adverb'—so it DELIGHTS YOU, and it will delight your readers, and the same thing happens with my images. The boxing images you see in this book are technically really, really complicated, tough to do. Every single detail is worked out, compulsively. There are all kinds of lights and all kinds of timing and all kinds of scientific details involved in making these pictures. But it isn't so much about the technique. The technique allowed me to say what I wanted to say. I wanted to say boxing. I wanted to say power and force. I wanted to say determination and courage. I wanted to say vulnerability and humanity. I wanted to say all these things in these photos, and the technique allowed me to do that."

Everyone I've ever interviewed has had something interesting to say, something interesting from which I could learn. But with Howard Schatz that was magnified tenfold. He is so smart, so articulate and thoughtful that I felt I could go places with him that I might not go with others. Some of us, no matter our fascination, look upon boxing as a guilty pleasure. We know what happens to the young men we revere as time catches up with them and they grow old. We may love boxing, but our love is not unconditional. We are not dogs and boxing's not our master. Many never go there; it's easy to understand why. But for those of us with compassion and concern for humankind, it's a conundrum. Given Schatz's background in medicine, which theoretically, conceptually is a healing art, and his immersion in boxing, which theoretically, conceptually is its antithesis, I asked how he reconciles the contrary objectives between a quintessentially light art and one that's dark as night.

"Well, that was a poignant, perfect way of asking that question," he said. "I'm tremendously ambivalent. I've been programmed to abhor any activity that damages any part of the human body, especially the brain. As somebody who is blessed and fortunate enough to have grown up in a family where the most important thing we could do, other than being a good person, was to become educated, where the intellect is revered, and to have an attraction to a sport where it's damaged, what I've learned is this. Jim Lampley sort of taught me—his introduction to the book is revealing and compelling—that we live our lives, and as we live our lives, we're losing something all the time. Boxing comes from poverty and for many, many involved in boxing, the intellect, the brain, really isn't that important, and to lose some of it, like a football player may lose his knees, a tennis player may lose his shoulder or wrist—it's not so vital and important to them. So I sort of get some sort of understanding that way."

There's nothing glib about Howard Schatz. He's a thinking man, creative, kindhearted, empathetic, and he takes nothing for granted or at face value.

"When I was ten years old my parents sent me to a sports camp, just to play baseball and things, but we tried all the sports at this camp. And one day the counselors, who were ex-professional athletes, put boxing gloves on us. We had big gloves and fought ninety-second rounds and I fought a friend of mine, Earl Arnold. We were just swinging away at each other and during the ninety seconds I got hit once, a swipe at my face, and at the end of the round I took my gloves off. I said, 'Who wants to do this? My parents never even hit me. Who wants to do this? This is crazy.' So I took the gloves off and walked away. Whereas Kassim Ouma, who was kidnapped when he was six years old by the Zambian Liberation Army, the soldiers hit them all the time. He found boxing very easy. So for me, this disconnect, this terrible, ambivalent disconnect is sort of smoothed over, diluted a little bit by the affection, admiration for the boxers. I love these kids that came to my studio. I did these interviews and was really interested in them and was really interested in their lives and of course I asked about getting hit. I also asked them about what they felt in the locker room before a fight when they knew they were going to fight a tremendous opponent and how they felt about getting knocked out, how they felt about losing, what they feared the most. And then we worked together, we worked really hard together. I explained to them that if you leave my studio saying we had fun, we failed. This is hard work. I can make a good picture any time. But to make a fantastic picture, an amazing picture, a picture where people open the page and go OH MY GOD, it's like winning a championship. I would tell the boxers, 'I need every ounce of your power and emotion.' They totally understood. Most champions understand hard work and focus and giving it their all and if they trust you they will. So I fell in love with the boxers. I felt a great connection and affection and a great caring for them, and that's what helped me get through this project."

Those who haven't seen Howard Schatz's work ought to take a moment and have a look. A digital version of At The Fights *can he seen here:* ***http://www.pageturnpro.com/Time-Home-Entertainment/41776-Sports-Illustrated-At-the-Fights/index.html#1***

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