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rthur Meyerson has inspired me for years with his stirring color work. If Japan were not already a place I've yearned to go to, his portrayal of the country and its culture has fueled that desire even further. Not being a working professional photographer, I was not familiar with Arthur's work or even who he was, until about seven years ago when I chanced upon his book, "The Color of Light." His mastery of color and moments immediately induced me, but what also struck me was his strong sense of design and the craft of book making. Ever since, I've been a huge follower of his teachings and work, be it Japan, Spain, China, his native Texas, or his 10-year (and counting) love affair with Cuba.

Arthur and I talked at length recently on the phone about photographing in Cuba, our love for Leica cameras and "Summi" primes, his insights on the philosophy of Wabi-sabi, and his approach to image-making. I couldn't be, personally and on behalf of Jíbaro Photos, more excited and grateful to have him share his reflections on Cuba.

Abrazos Don Arturo!

More info and Arthur's work can be seen at arthurmeyerson.com



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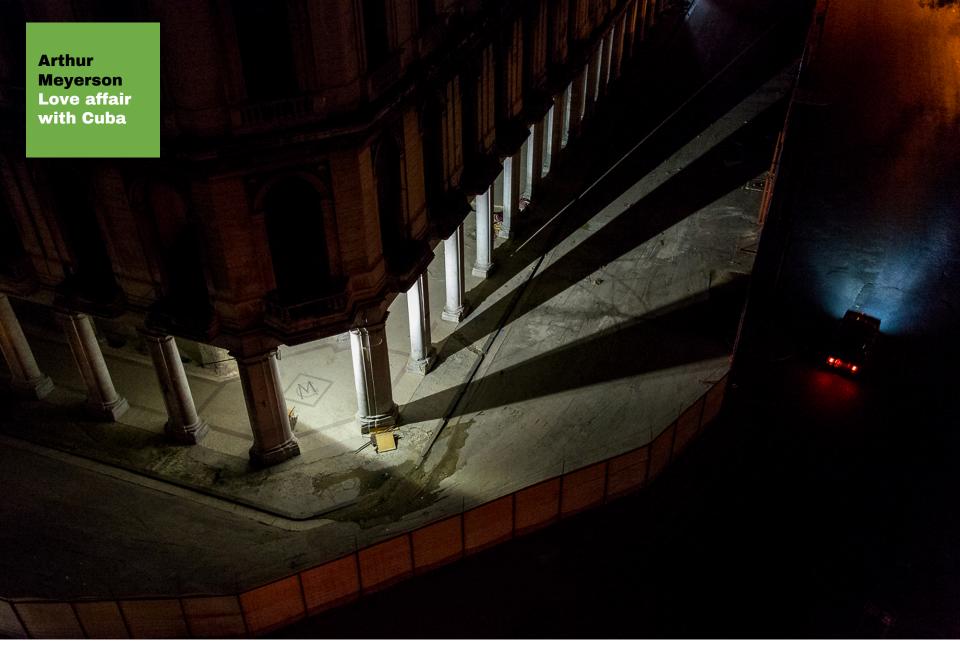
Ayash: What drew you to Cuba? What were your motivations to go there?

Arthur: Having travelled to over 90 countries and all 7 continents, Cuba was high on my radar screen for a place I'd never been to and wanted to go photograph. But politically I never thought that I would get the opportunity to travel there as it was "forbidden fruit." Finally in 2012, I got the chance to go and lead a workshop there for the Santa Fe Workshops. A love affair with that island had begun!

Ayash: What has photographing in Cuba over the years meant to you? Could you talk about the diversity or anything specific to Cuba that has stood out?

Arthur: Ironically, Cuba seemed to offer a sense of freedom to shoot more openly than I ever expected. One could say that the 'mystique' of that place truly resonated with me. It is a country in constant transition, yet, to me, the constant is it's people, their determination and their positivity. While making images in Cuba, I've seen how open, friendly, and welcoming the people are. This in turn has allowed me to work close to my subjects and make new work that hopefully reflects that openness.





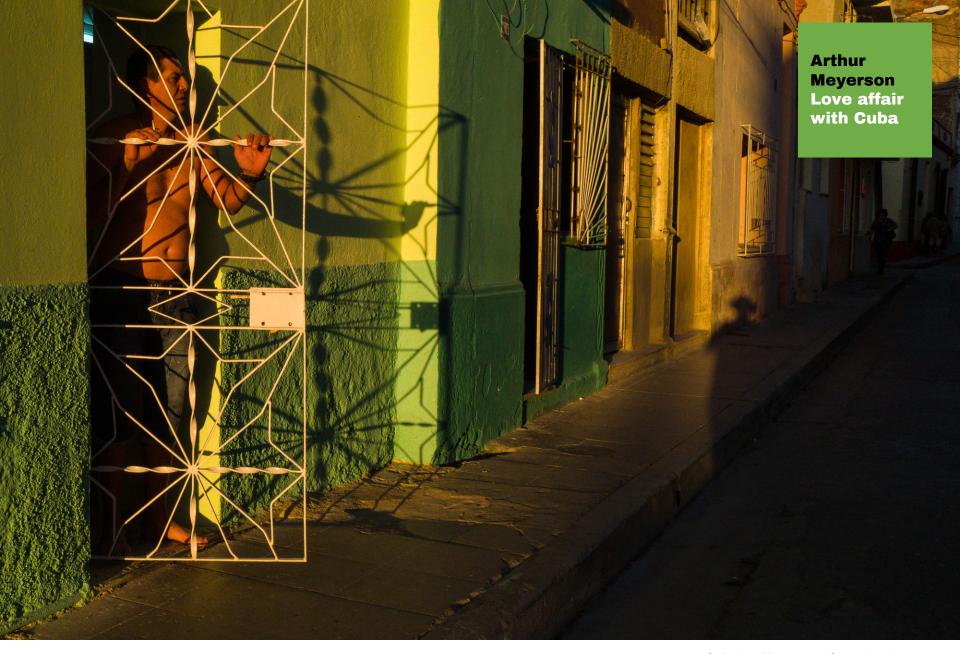
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Ayash: You are so well-known for your work with color and light. In that regard, how is Cuba different, for instance, from your work in Africa and Japan?

Arthur: Cuba has a distinct patina that reflects its true wear and tear, the decay of its crumbling architecture, the suffering of the place, yet there is a colorful spirit of its people. Through my visits to Japan, I have taken to heart the concept of Wabi-sabi, which translates to 'flawed beauty' in broad terms. Wabi-sabi is about appreciating imperfect beauty... impermanent and incomplete. This very much manifests itself in Cuba, which is a story of remarkable survival and of making do with whatever little is available. The aesthetic of Cuba and its colors lies not in its ruins and abandon, but rather in its diversity, richness, and stories. Cuba is the epitome of accepting and embracing the transient and imperfect.

It is also a paradoxical place, full of stories heard and told, yet none of them give the full picture. A big part of Cuba's uniqueness comes from things modest and humble and it offers visitors, especially photographers, the opportunity to truly appreciate and pursue these basics, despite their blemishes. There are cracks and overhauls everywhere you go, but those are all part of the full picture, of Cuba's history, its authenticity, and its "wabi-sabi-ness."





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Ayash: Shifting topics a bit, what do you carry on you as a photographer? What is your go-to equipment as well as your non-photographic gear?

Arthur: As a commercial advertising/editorial photographer, I owned just about everything under the sun from 35mm to 8X10. But after two shoulder surgeries, I decided it was time to work with lighter and smaller gear. Now, I'm a big believer of "less is more." I'm usually, more often than not, a one-camera, one-lens guy. My go-to lenses are the Leica prime 28mm or 35mm and also the 50mm. Fixed lenses force you to move and compose differently. So, the combination of cameras like the Leica Q or the M10 with those lens combinations seems to be all you really need. Early on in my career, I was fortunate enough to have been mentored by Ernst Haas and learned quickly that the best zoom is your feet. Aside from that, it helps to have a sense of curiosity. I stop, look, and wonder. A bit of Spanish and a smile go a long way as well to help gain the confidence of your subjects. I've also had the good fortune of meeting and traveling with many local Cuban photographers — some of them Jibaro members — who are all excellent shooters and help tremendously with access, approach and further explanations of their culture. Finally it is important to understand that Cuba is a place that demands flexibility and adaptability — in short, a very open mind helps, as plans can change anytime.



Arthur Meyerson Love affair with Cuba

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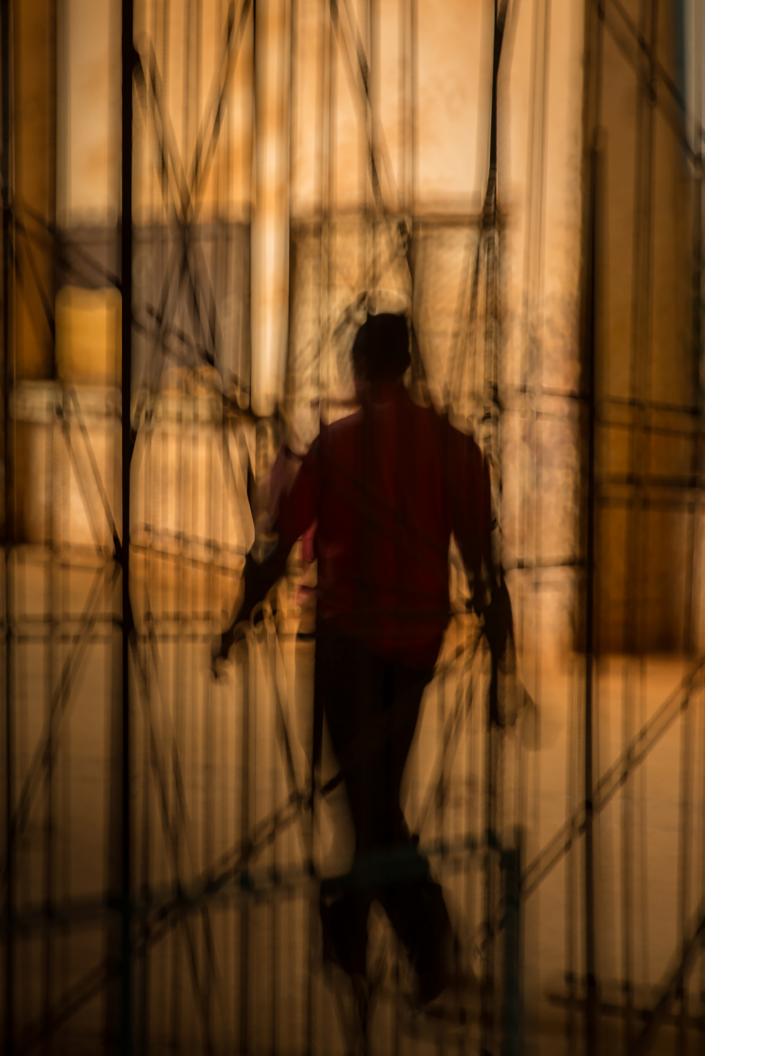
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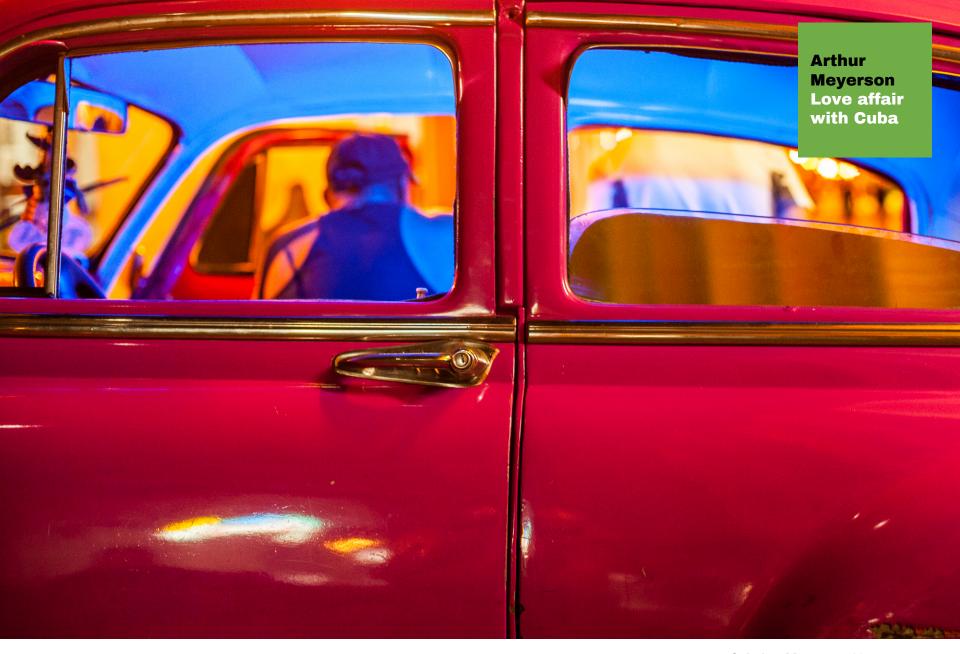
Ayash: Could you talk a bit about your photographic process and approach? What do you tell your workshop participants?

Arthur: My intent or approach, as you may call it, is about discovery... discovering what I am attracted to photographically as well as discovering how best to capture it. That coupled with my desire to remain open and *without* any preconceptions is my mantra. I wander the streets, often with no specific agenda. There, I might find a certain quality of light, a splash of color, a unique moment or combination of these elements. Like the fishermen analogy, somedays I may catch a lot and other days, not too many. Every day is different, each location is unique so you never know what you'll get. And, personally, I *like* the not knowing!

Mostly I'm looking for authentic and candid moments that include layers and multiple dimensions within the frame. Those moments are a combination of things happening in real-time, or me actively identifying a scene, a possible "stage" waiting for the actors to come into play. In any case, there is always a strong element of anticipation.

As for my workshop participants, I don't usually tell people what to shoot. Some of them come with specific ideas and many come with no plans at all. Often, I will see them make a photo that's been





© Arthur Meyerson. Havana, 2012

"done before." I explain to them that it's okay to make that photo *but* now they have the obligation to make it their own — capture it in a way that leaves their "visual fingerprint" on it. I've pretty much committed to memory what I've learned from Ernst Haas, and that is to try and see things "not how they look *but how they could look*." It's one more important lesson I try to pass on to my students.

I've always felt that persistence and patience are virtues needed to make compelling photographs. 99% of the amazing images we see from great photographers probably represent about 1% of what they actually shot. Digital is great tool but it has brought with it a certain degree of lack of discipline... impatience, rush, and laziness or the phrase, "I'll fix it in Photoshop." Typically, some people don't want to spend as much time on a scene as needed. Situations have to be worked. I often tell my students that you can't really put a time allotment on potential shot. It's whatever it takes. Keep working it until something impactful happens, because when it does, it can *make* the image. The bottomline in the creation of a powerful photograph usually happens when combining the photographer's intuition with a bit of luck. I also believe that a picture should connect with people on its own merits... for what it reveals. A title, a backstory can be told at a later time but the photograph must resonate instantly without words.





© Arthur Meyerson. Santiago de Cuba, 2016

Ayash: Tell me about a time or experience that you've had outside the much shot areas of Havana, Trinidad or Viñales, any special memories?

Arthur: During these years of transition, I always had a feeling that if I were lucky, I just might be in Cuba during a historic moment. That happened in 2016. I was leading a workshop and we had flown to Santiago de Cuba. Fidel Castro had passed away earlier that week. As is the case in such situations, all of our reservations and plans for Santiago de Cuba were cancelled and we were given accommodations 3 hours away in Guardalavaca.... hardly ideal, but remember *one must be be flexible and adaptable!* Not to be deterred from this major historic opportunity, I told the group that as planned, we would wake up early the next morning and drive back to Santiago de Cuba to shoot the funeral and the day's events.

It was one of the most gratifying experiences I've ever had, and I'm sure the participants felt that as well. You don't get to be present at an event of such consequence everyday; most people not in their entire lifetime. We spent the day on the streets shooting the freedom caravan along with the Jeep pulling Fidel's casket and into the evening at the soccer stadium where the celebration came to a crescendo. Sometimes the photo gods are with us!





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Ayash: What's next for you and Cuba? Workshops? Books? Projects?

Arthur: I've been very fortunate in that I've been to Cuba 10+ times. And, I look forward to returning as soon as possible to continue leading workshops, teaching and sharing the experience of this magical place. Beyond that, I am working on plans for a personal trip throughout the island. I think along with the body of work that I've created there so far, that could be the basis for a book and exhibition... a way of saying "muchas gracias!" to the people and the country that have given me so much to love.



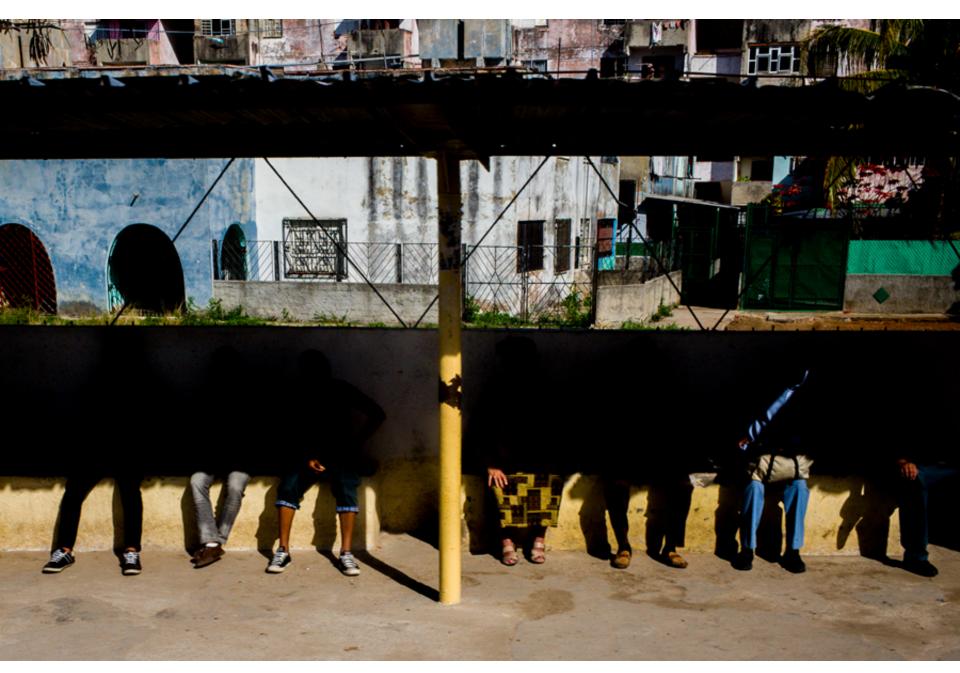
Arthur Meyerson
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Arthur Meyerson Love affair with Cuba



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