

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE F-STOP



JAY MAISEL

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f-Stop* Book Team

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This book is dedicated with love to my wife, L.A., and my daughter, Amanda.



About the Author

Born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1931, photographer Jay Maisel's career spans 61 years. He studied graphic design with Leon Friend at Abraham Lincoln High School, and painting with Joseph Hirsch in 1949 and Josef Albers in 1953. He informally studied with photographer and graphic designer Herbert Matter in 1952, and had a class with photographer and designer Alexey Brodovitch in 1955. He began working as a freelance photographer in 1954.

Jay's name has become synonymous with vibrant color photography that uses light and gesture to create countless unforgettable images for advertising, editorial, and corporate communications. In addition, his pictures appear in books and private, corporate, and museum collections. Some of his commercial accomplishments include five *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue covers, the first two covers of *New York* magazine, and the cover of Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*. Included among his many awards for excellence are the Art Directors Club Hall of Fame, American Society of Media Photographers' Photographer of the Year Award, and the International Center of Photography's Infinity Award.

Since he stopped taking on commercial work in the late 1990s, Jay has continued to focus on his personal work. A graduate of Cooper Union and Yale University, he continues his education by teaching younger photographers at workshops, seminars, and lectures around the world, and has developed a reputation as a giving and inspiring teacher.

Jay married his wife, Linda Adam, in 1989. Their daughter, Amanda, was born in 1993.

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Lastly, but most valuable, is the help, handholding, and advice that Matt Dean has contributed. Without his patience and administration, this book would still be random images and notes strewn all over The Bank and me screaming, "Where the hell did I put everything?"

Introduction

Most instructive photographic books tend to dwell a great deal on technique and equipment. This one doesn't.

One of my best friends, Sam Garcia, and I argue endlessly over our differing perceptions of photography. Recently, he said to me, "Photography is not about photography, it is about everything else."

I asked, "Did you make that up?"

He said, "Yeah."

I said, "I think that is the best thing I have ever heard."

In this book, I tried to talk about "everything else."

Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid

Arthur Meyerson, a very good Houston, Texas, photographer, is a buddy of mine. At one point he offered me his studio for an exhibit of my images for FotoFest in Houston. This was an exhibit of 85 images. Another friend of mine, Gary Winter, was doing a video on me. He's one of these guys who doesn't intrude when he's shooting—a real “fly on the wall” type—so when he asks a question, it's a rare occurrence.

“So, Jay,” he said, “What's the reason you picked these particular 85 pictures for this show?”

“They're my favorites.”

“I was hoping for something a little more insightful and articulate,” he replied.

I thought about it and realized after looking at one particular image what was behind my choices. I explained that when I shot “Man with Headband,” I was anxious, even terrified, because I knew all the things that could go wrong. It was

like a litany: “Please don't let the light change,” Please don't let somebody walk in front of him,” “Please don't let him turn around.” I realized at that point that each and every picture in the show was a variation of this. A moment charged with all the things that move me, and the fear of losing it. The apprehension, the near certainty that something or someone, if not myself, was going to compromise the image.

There is an emotional seesaw on perceiving what you think is a great image. It moves between glee and trepidation. The more excited I am, the better the image, the more naked emotion I feel, the more exhilaration there is, the more it is counterbalanced by the certainty that something is going to f*ck% this up.

This anxiety never happens with pictures that are less compelling or less emotional. It never happens with pictures that are intellectually motivated or studies, or with pictures that are about information, history, or pure documentation.



“You’re Not Alone”

This picture was taken on my first assignment for a national magazine.

I want to set the scene: It was 1954 and I was 23 years old. Marilyn Monroe was at the zenith of her career. Sammy Davis Jr. had come back from having lost an eye and was dancing, singing, and acting his way across the color line and into America’s heart.

My assignment was a simple one: go to an after-party. The event was the premiere of *East of Eden* with James Dean. Cover the party; come back with pictures of people at the festivities. Make ’em look good, and kid...don’t f*ck% up.

When I got there, the first thing I was aware of was I was the only photographer there! The second thing was Sammy Davis Jr. playing the piano with Marilyn Monroe sitting next to him.

They were delighted with each other. He was trying to get her to sing with him, she was all little girlish in her refusal, both flirting obviously and happily with each other. And me? I was so excited, I was amazed I didn’t wet my pants.

There were no motors back then so it was shoot, wind, shoot, wind, and all the time I’m thinking, “Oh my God, this is the best.” I shot over 100 frames and the small, still voice (that overrides your lack of intelligence) said to me, “There aren’t 100 frames on that roll of film.”

Oh s#[†! I knew what that meant. I checked the take-up spool (for those of you under 40, that was the gizmo that took up the slack when you wound the film—you do remember *film*, don’t you?) and it wound freely. Of course that meant I was shooting with no film going through the camera. I was suicidal. I reloaded the camera, but by then Marilyn and Sammy were gone.

I tell this story to all my classes because it’s important for them to know they are not alone. Everybody screws up; it ain’t just you, and any photographer who says he hasn’t is either a liar or a guy with a bad memory.

Oh, the picture of Marilyn. I took it earlier or later that night—I have no recollection of shooting it at all. Trust your intuition. It will take you places you haven’t thought of.

This picture is an example of what I have written about elsewhere in this book. You have two chances: (1) get it in the shooting, or (2) catch it in the editing.

Though I don’t remember shooting it, I found it in the edit. I had rejected it because of the focus, but then decided I loved it.

That’s my second chance. Yours, too.



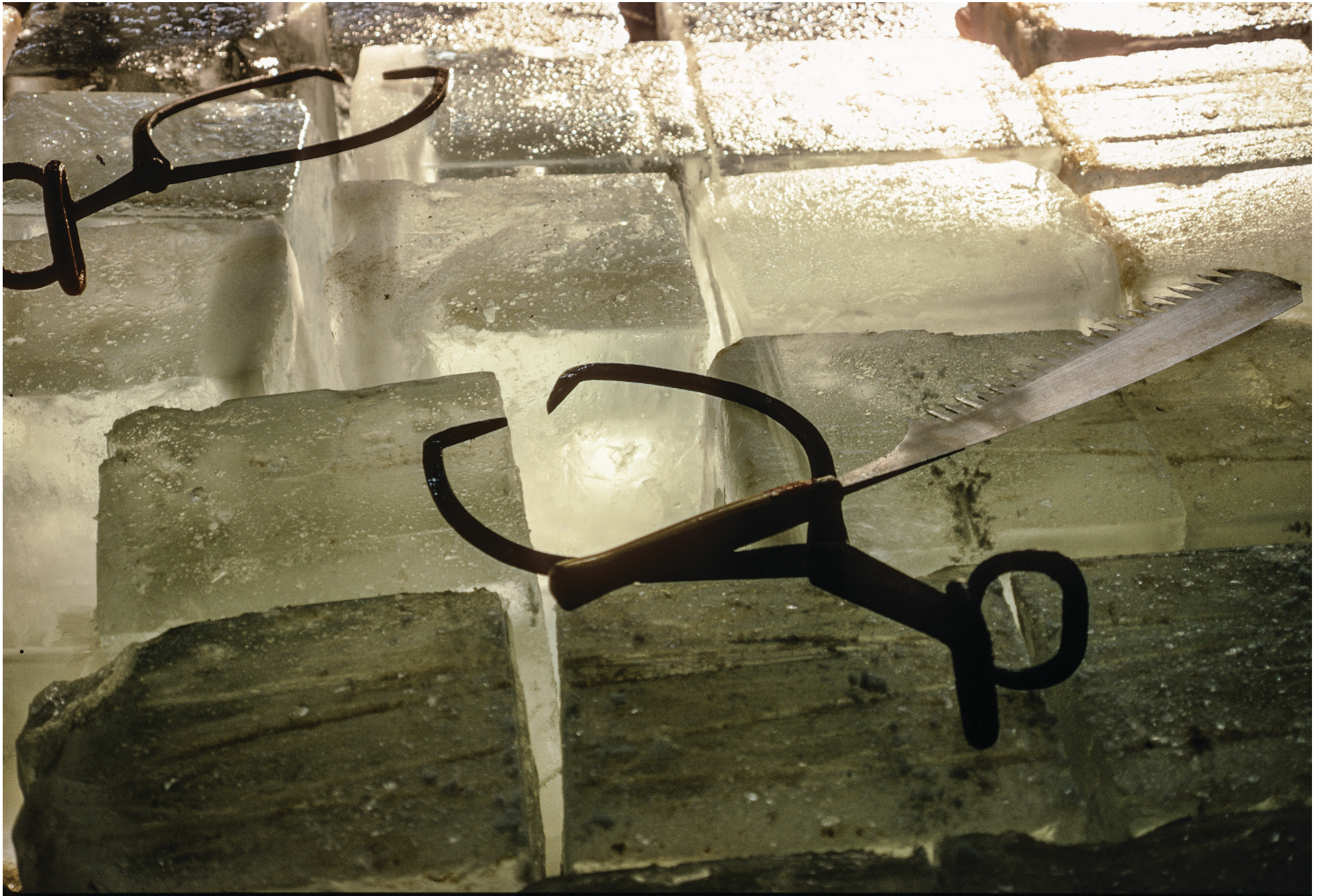
Shoot It Now

I'm having a ball shooting at the Tokyo Fish Market, in a room full of tuna with fog rising off them—what David Doubilet labeled “Tuna Hell.”

I find a room with cakes of ice, light coming from below, cutting knives on top. This is great. I take a few shots, but I'm really supposed to shoot something else, so I figure I'll go back there later and really work it.

I get back a few years later. I'm looking forward to working on it, but it's not there anymore. It's been replaced with air conditioning.

Never go back. Shoot it now. When you come back, it will always be different.



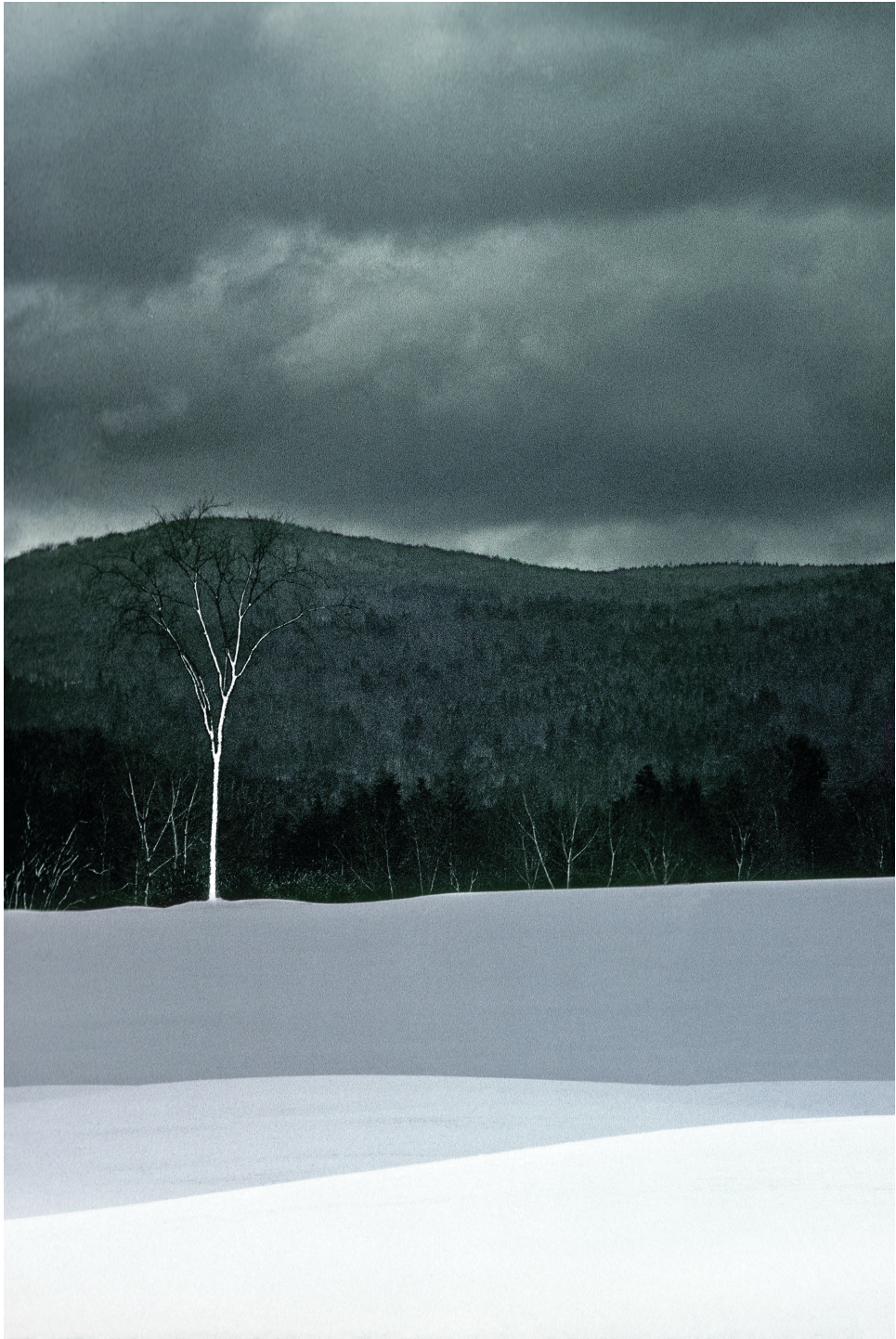
Never Go Back

I was in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, working on a piece on Herman Melville for the now-defunct *Show* magazine. I had an appointment at the local library to photograph the original logbook he had signed.

I left my hotel and started driving. There had been snow and the drive was beautiful. I saw this scene and said to myself, “That’s great, but I have an appointment. I’ll come back later and shoot it.”

The small voice that takes over in my head said, “Do it now,” so I stopped, got out of the car, and shot this image. When I was finished at the library, I drove immediately back to the snow location. There was no snow anywhere, at all. Zip. Nada. There was no longer any photo.

I’m reminded of the quote, “You can’t step in the same river twice,” and ever since then I have been telling students, “Never go back.” They are confused, so I explain that I mean you have to shoot it now. If you go back, it will never be the same. It may be better, it may be worse, but never the same. It can be extremely valuable to return to something again and again to try different light, different viewpoints, and different attitudes, but always shoot first, then think about the future.



There's Nothing to Shoot

If you're a native New Yorker, you understand that if there is a parking space open in midtown Manhattan, it's illegal to park there.

So having a car in Manhattan is fine...if you keep driving.

Or you can always put it in a parking garage. That virtually defeats the point of taking the car out, because it's a half an hour to get it in and another hour to get it out. Plus, they bang up the car, charge prices that make your eyes bulge, and act as if they're doing you a favor.

My solution? I would have an assistant sit in the car while I ran my errands—seeing art directors, delivering jobs, picking up stuff, film runs, whatever was necessary.

After a while, my assistant started to complain to me, “It's boring sitting in the car waiting for you.”

“Really? You want to be a photographer, why don't you shoot while you're waiting for me?”

Then, IT comes out of his mouth: “But there's nothing to shoot!”

“Bulls#[†, there is always something to shoot, you just have to be open to it. It's always there.”

I told him: “The next place we're going to, I don't have to see the guy, I'm just picking up something. You go pick it up, I'll wait in the car, and we'll see what happens.”

This photograph came while I was sitting in the car, anxiously hoping to make a photograph to make my point. When I showed it to him, he grinned and said, “Boy, I hate your guts, but aside from that, did you get anything else?”

