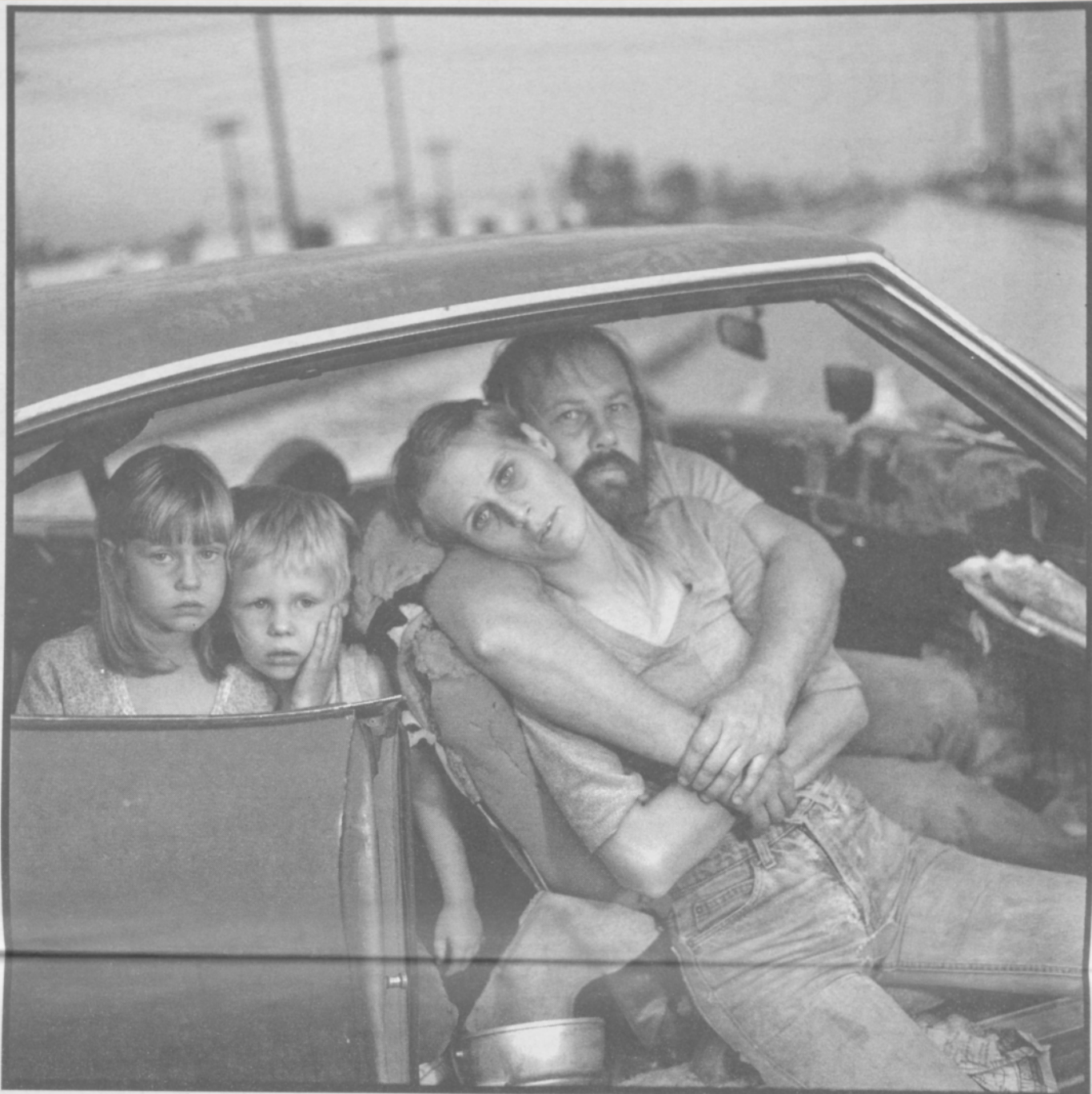




MARY ELLEN MARK

The unfiltered lens of Mary Ellen Mark

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
STAFF WRITER

An elephant trainer with his elephant's trunk gently curled around his neck. Trained street dogs. Homeless people. Disabled children. Prom. Leprosy hospitals. Circuses. Mother Theresa. Oregon State Hospital patients.

Mary Ellen Mark has photographed it all.

Working for 40 years as one of the nation's most prominent and influential documentary photojournalists, Mark has traveled the world photographing people living on the fringes of society—people who are often overlooked, shunned, looked down upon, or simply ignored. By observing their lives for long stretches of time, Mark's images are haunting, intimate portals into the lives of people whose stories often go untold.

Mark, a

Pennsylvania native who studied at the Annenberg School of Communication, also continues to do quite a bit of commercial work, shooting behind the scenes at film sets. Some of the many films she has photographed are "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," "Apocalypse Now," "The Missouri Breaks" and "Sweeney Todd: The

Demon Barber of Fleet Street."

The recipient of multiple grants from the National Endowment of the Arts and numerous other accolades and awards, she also teaches annual workshops in Oaxaca, Mexico. And there's the silver, Mexican jewelry she uses to pin back her long, black braids are beautiful reminders of a country she loves.

If admirers and critics say that Mark's photographs are larger than life, Mark might humbly and quietly retort that they are life itself. If small in stature, Mark, 70, makes up for it with her quiet wisdom and sharp insight. She is soft-spoken but strongly opinionated, and gracious with her time and attention to people's questions and queries.

Mark recently made a whirlwind weekend trip this month to Portland to give a lecture on her work and teach a two-day workshop before heading back to her home in New York City. She sat down with Street Roots for 20 minutes with only one condition—that politics not be discussed. "I'm disillusioned," she said, laughing. There were so many other things to talk about that leaving out that subject worked out just fine.

Amanda Waldroupe: *You've photographed people dying in leprosy hospitals, homeless people, people suffering from mental illness, disabled people, circuses, and street performers. What draws you to those subjects?*

Mary Ellen Mark: What draws me to those subjects is people. People's lives interest me. People who maybe aren't as fortunate as others.

A.W.: *Their stories are often quite different than what people assume about them.*

M.H.M.: When I photographed those children in Iceland, I thought they were really out of it. They were so much more aware than I gave them credit for.

A.W.: *Do you take photographs for the sake of taking photographs, or because you would like the people seeing them to learn something?*

M.H.M.: When I take photographs for myself, I hope I get lucky. I take it for myself. Then I hope I get lucky again to publish it.

A.W.: *What affect do you hope they have?*

M.H.M.: I hope they touch the people viewing them.

A.W.: *How?*

M.H.M.: Emotionally.

A.W.: *What do you mean?*

M.H.M.: That they'll remember them. That it will make them sad or happy, laugh or cry.

A.W.: *You say that street photography is your favorite type of photography. Why?*

M.H.M.: It's the hardest form of photography. I'm more of a portrait or documentary photographer. I really admire

Above, the Damm family lived out of the car in 1987 Los Angeles when Mary Ellen Mark began documenting their lives in film. She returned years later to photograph them in equally squalid conditions while they were homeless.

PHOTO BY MARY ELLEN MARK

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