

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

The New York Times

LENS

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO AND VISUAL JOURNALISM

The Many Roles of Joel Grey

By RANDY BANNER

July 8, 2010



The sparkling eyes of Joel Grey belie a darkness well known to those acquainted with his haunting portrayal of the Hitler-era master of ceremonies in the musical “Cabaret.”

The aesthetics of dichotomy pervade Mr. Grey’s work as an art photographer as well, a second career that has produced three books and five exhibitions. The most recent, “Joel Grey: 1.3: New Color Images,” is at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Manhattan through July 10.

The photos in the show were taken with a much blunter instrument than a standard professional camera — a 1.3-megapixel Nokia cellphone — yet feature ultra-sharp, highly saturated images in unusual juxtapositions and contexts. They epitomize Mr. Grey’s gift for duality.

“My life is waking up in the morning and picking a coffee cup and making an espresso in a very sort of planned, careful way,” he said in a recent interview. “And I want to see the cup. Which cup? I have to choose the cup each day. It’s ritualistic.”

“I’m crazy about surprises,” he added only moments later. “I love chance.”

“So, it’s all very specific,” he concluded, “except when it’s not.”

Mr. Grey’s second career began by chance seven years ago, over a



STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

casual dinner, as he was showing photographs to Sam Shahid, a fashion advertising executive and designer. Mr. Shahid asked who took the pictures. When Mr. Grey acknowledged authorship, Mr. Shahid asked Mr. Grey to give him *all* of his photographs, most of which were in shoe boxes.



Within five weeks, the photographs had been printed by the master printer Gerhard Steidl. They became part of Mr. Grey's first book, "Pictures I Had to Take" (2003), a collection of landscapes and portraits from around the world. His second book, "Looking Hard at Unexamined Things"

(2006), focused on minute details of common objects such as rock textures, wood grain and metal patterns. It was followed by "1.3: Images From My Phone" (2009), the basis of the current exhibition.

Mr. Grey's newest book is most like his theatrical work in its beautifully eccentric and sometimes freakish perspectives.

Having felt nothing but disdain for those who used cellphones to photograph, Mr. Grey had to resort to his own in 2007 after forgetting to bring his Nikkormat along on a trip to Florida.

"So what happens?" he asked. "It turns out that I have a feeling for it."

He liked the Nokia's lack of sophistication, its iffiness.

"What I shot and what ended up in the camera were slightly different," he said. "The camera made its own adjustment and I kind of liked that. Like the picture of the two boys' backs. [Slide 2.] That is so crisp. You can see the scratches on the light-skinned young man." He also appreciated the pixelation of pictures taken under lower light. "I thought to myself: 'Well, I like that. That's sort of like Pointillism.' And I thought it added to the atmosphere of the photograph."

The cellphone, he said, also allows him to capture images at those many moments when he doesn't have his heavy, 40-year-old Nikkormat along — like the moment he found himself walking behind the two shirtless boys.

Although Joel Grey's name is still better known on marquees and in opening credits, he has forged a solid career as a photographic pro. Not that he's surprised.

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

“A lot of people have problems thinking of you doing more than one thing,” he said. “If you do one thing, then you couldn’t possibly do another thing well.”

“Of course,” Mr. Grey added, as he thumbed through one of his books, “we know that’s not so.”

Randy Banner is an arts writer in New York. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Newsday, High Fidelity Magazine and other national publications. She is also an author of the book “New York: The World’s Financial Capital” (1989). Her husband, James Estrin, is a co-editor of Lens.