

Design Notes Episode 24 - Clinton Cargill

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Liam Spradlin: Design Notes is a show from Google Design about creative work and what it teaches us. I'm your host, Liam.

Each episode, we talk with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice.

Clinton Cargill: You have an empty rectangle, and you can put anything in it. Anything. So every choice you're making has to be measured against the infinite possibilities of what can go in a rectangle, and even the rectangle is sometimes up for debate. You can do anything you can get away with.

Liam: That was Clinton Cargill, visual director at Vanity Fair.

In the interview, Clinton and I unpack the ways intent is central to creative work, and how a spiderweb-thin tether between subjects can connect disparate ideas to tell a rich and compelling story.

Let's get started.

Liam: Clinton, welcome to Design Notes.

Clinton: Thank you.

Liam: I wanna know about your journey up to now. So building up to being a photo editor at the New York Times, photo director at Businessweek, and ultimately the visual director at Vanity Fair.

Clinton: I have a fairly circuitous and unplanned career trajectory. I came to New York to go to NYU and study drama, and, uh, could not pay four years of tuition, so I dropped out and got a job working backstage at an off-Broadway theater company, being, like, a wardrobe supervisor, a dresser.

Clinton:

And I did that for a couple of years, and I felt like I was adjacent to the work that I wanted to be doing, and ... but not really on a track. And it seems cliché to say but, actually, like, right after September 11th, I kind of rethought everything, and I think I was interested in directing and the kind of larger theatrical premise which, in its way, is a visual art form.

But I felt like, at the time, the work that I was involved with, or that I was seeing, wasn't really in dialogue with the world in a big way. And I also felt like I just wasn't helping people, so I decided to go back to school.

My plan was to become a therapist, and at that point I had like 32 college credits accumulated, so it was gonna take me a really long time to go at night, and I had to find a job that I could stand to do while I was going to school, and I ended up, through a temp agency, getting a job at a magazine called Biography, which existed, like, in the late '90s, early 2000s. It was a spinoff of the the A&E television show, which I remember from cable in the '90s.

And I liked being in magazines. I had been the editor of my high school newspaper. It was something that felt, like, familiar and sort of right, but I was working on the business side, and it wasn't really the best match.

So I interviewed at a bunch of places, and ended up getting, like, a clerical job at the New York Times. There's a sort of department of admin assistant types that move all over, and some of them float, and some are more stable positions. And they saw my resume, and they said, "Well, we have a job at the magazine, and you have magazine experience."

I was kind of like: "That doesn't really seem ... Okay, yes." (laughs)

Liam:

(laughs)

Clinton:

"Yes, that's all true." And it ended up being in the photo department. And it was also basically temp-to-hire, and I really felt right away like I ... I liked these people and got them, but that I had really no experience with photography. You know, that I was sort of disadvantaged, because this wasn't really what I had studied or sort of thought of.

And I had the privilege of working for Kathy Ryan, who's the longtime photo director there, who really doesn't place a lot of emphasis on pedigree. She's really just inserted in people who make things happen, and positive energy, and curiosity.

Very shortly in, I realized I had really fallen into, like, an incredible spot, and kind of ... What I think of it, is like apprenticing. I was the assistant for about a year and a half, and then an editor position came open and she moved me into that role. And then I was there for like 10 years.

So I really learned everything I know about photography on the job, which is to say I wouldn't trust me with a ... with a fancy Canon camera.

Liam: (laughs)

Clinton: But I learned a lot about how to look at pictures, and how to sort of read them.

Liam: I wanna get into that. When you say you learned how to look at pictures, what does that mean?

Clinton: We take in imagery everywhere, all the time. And there is intention in every step in the process of making a photograph, or a video or a film, and as casual viewers we're not really burdened with thinking about what those intentions are. Sometimes they're quite obvious. You know, a billboard that's selling you something, you kind of understand.

But the question I learned, actually, in college studying theater, was ... I had a great design teacher. A costume designer named Michael Krass, who ... his whole premise was: "What do you see? And how does it make you feel?" You know, not: "What is the hyper-intellectual meaning of it?" Not: "what's its art-historical significance?" Or anything academic, but: "What are the base elements that you're looking at, and what are the feelings that it conveys?"

And he would send us on trips around New York with a sketch book, and say, "You have to three sketches in all these places." He sort of took it upon himself to indoctrinate us into New York City. So if you go to the Port Authority, like, what do you see, and how does it make you feel? Like, these kind of big, heavy, brick columns in a dark red. The particular fluorescent light. The way the corridors are aligned. All of those things contribute to, like, your experience of what that is.

And that was how he thought we should be thinking about costume design, theatrical design, directing, all of these things. And I sort of start there, with pictures, is: "What am I looking at? And does it generate an emotional response?"

So then I learned ... The way Kathy taught me to think, is like: "When you look at an image, where does your eye go first? Like, how ... what's your point of entry into the story that you're telling?" And, again, I think that's very much about emotional connection.

I know, from years of working with editors, we don't all read images in the same ways, but there are a lot of commonalities, in the way that we ... in the visual lexicon that, like, certainly, we have as a culture in America, and I think, certainly, there are things that resonate across cultures.

Liam: You mentioned photos having, like, an entry point into a story. And I think there's something really fascinating about the work of being an editor or, um, perhaps, a visual director, in maybe crafting a story using these pieces.

In my mind, it seems almost like working with an indirect medium, which is, like, working with the photographer's style, and approach, and, like, method of storytelling, in order to tell a story and, like, create this larger piece.

Clinton: Yeah, that's exactly right.

In thinking about doing my work, as often as possible you're reading a draft of a story, or talking in detail with the writer, or an editor, about: what are the themes, who are the characters, what are we trying to convey?

And then, because I work in media, what's the goal? It's to get you to pay attention and care about whatever the subject is.

So I have to think both about what is reflective of the underlying narrative, but also what's gonna grab your attention and command that you stop and look, in a world where there's just an onslaught of words and images.

I always talk about tone. You know, is this an informative piece? Is it a personal narrative? Is it serious, is it light? And then: you know, should we playing into that, or is there a kind of ... is there a jarring juxtaposition that will actually heighten your experience of what the tone of that piece is?

So my kind of visualization is: you have to have, like, a tether to the subject matter. And it can be, like, spiderweb-thin, and it can float out into something amazing and creative, and totally unimaginable to the person who wrote the piece. And as long as you have that thin, strong connective tissue, you're fine.

But you just can't come in and do anything that makes no sense. You know, you have to throw the viewer a bone.

Liam: Speaking more on what it's like to capture and image, versus planning it, and then actually integrating into the story: you've taught editorial photography as well, and I'm curious how you view the approach of seeing things through an editorial lens-

Clinton: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: ... at different steps during the process? Including planning it, capturing it, and then using it.

Clinton: The way that I talked to my students about it ... And I, I taught a class called Visual Thinking for Magazines at the International Center for Photography for, like, about five years. And the thing I caught onto pretty quickly was: despite being smart, interesting people from a variety of backgrounds, and who taught me a ton, for the most part the notion of what's possible in a kind of editorial picture-making context, was ... They had vastly underestimated what could be.

So I would always say: you know, you have an empty rectangle. And you can put anything in it. Anything. So every choice you're making has to be measured against the infinite possibilities of what can go in a rectangle. And even the rectangle is sometimes up for debate. You can do anything you can get away with.

When I go through process now, there's a question of: what's the story? Again, what's the thesis, or who is the character that we're trying to introduce?

Magazine journalism always has a take. I think that's a real distinction between classically newspaper journalism, and magazines, is that magazines are built on having a point of view. And I ... I would say, over the last 10, 15 years, the internet has sort of magazined all of journalism, in a way that's sometimes great, and sometimes not great.

But working from that vantage point, I always know: we have a take. We have, at least, a question to pose about a subject that we're introducing. So, again, what's the ultimate potential for that empty space, when you're telling a story about X? Or when you're telling a story about this person?

And then you have to be able to articulate your case, or make a visual representation of what you want to do, to get editors to come along with you. To get the subjects to agree or sort of understand the story that you're trying to tell.

So there's negotiation throughout the process, like, it's from the moment of idea generation, to when you actually assign the photographer, to when you choose the pictures and publish. But there's also, like, several sort of mini stations along the way where you have to, sort of, I guess, essentially pitch your notion of what something should be.

And that very often sharpens concept along the way, but you go through this process of iterating and sharpening what your thesis is, so that by the time you get to the point of putting things together, you've made something that hopefully makes the narrative more interesting more intelligent, more lively.

Liam: You mentioned keeping in mind the publication's point of view, or the take, or what ... what they're trying to say. And it seems like the visuals of a publication being probably the most readily-absorbed method of communication the magazine has, would play a big part in that, and also in, like, the identity of the magazine overall. I'm interested in the ways that the visuals contribute to that, how they might even form or evolve it or over time.

Clinton: Sure.

Um ... Yes to all that. At Businessweek, when I started there, they had been through a period of a lot of on-camera flash, really hard light. It was a really unbridled aesthetic, in terms of its design. And I learned so much there, because I think I had spent a decade trying not to mess up the New York Times Magazine, and feeling so privileged to be in that space. And then I got to Businessweek, and, you know, the first rule is "we break all the rules."

So what I saw when I started there, was: you're not really using this medium to its full effect. And there are things like shadows that actually sometimes bring a lot of meaning and texture to a picture, and allow a reader to relate into an image, that just weren't always on display. Despite, like, again, really, really full-throated, interesting photography.

You know, that job was exciting, because business journalism, if you can get through the first day, is a deeply fascinating sort of sub-category of

what we do, and there's a business angle to any story. So I really spent a lot of time, too, thinking about, like: how can we produce photo-essays, publish photographs, that ... that carry the weight of the business narrative, that speak to economies and markets in a way that, again, like, matches the volume of the great journalism that was taking place in the written word?

And then coming to Vanity Fair, that's all kind of out the window. It's a magazine about ... about access, about the kind of intersection of power and personality, about a certain kind of aspiration. And it has this incredible history with Helmut Newton ... Obviously, Annie Leibovitz, Herb Ritts. Um ... These really iconic photographers that were a constant at this place, and who, you know ... They made the brand and the brand made them, in many ways.

So what does aspiration look like in 2018? What is power in 20 ... 19, I guess, we're in 2019. And, you know, working with a new editor there, who's really interested in looking at a more diverse range of subject matter, and who also comes from a strong intellectual background, how do you make glamorous pictures that speak to the world we're living in right now? Which in many ways is different from what our historic sense of Vanity Fair is.

I don't have the answers to that yet, but I feel like we're ... we're working out.

Liam: Do you feel like, in terms of speaking about the rectangle with which you can do anything ... Do you feel that photographers are working with a similar set of tools across these publications? I guess the parameters that you would use to intone an image with a certain mood, or bring forward the focal point, or use light and shadows to-

Clinton: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: ... relate the image.

Clinton: I think the parameters are largely the same. There's ... There are definitely budget questions that inform, you know, to what degree you can really produce a picture. Um, and ... Not gonna lie, budget is an issue at any publication in where we're now.

For example, at Businessweek, we started our production cycle on Thursday, and we would go to press on Wednesday, and sometimes we

wouldn't know what was the cover until Friday or Monday. So we had a little studio. Occasionally we would put together, like, still-life covers, or some simple concept, and shoot it in the studio that had, like, drop ceilings and was just a little tiny room.

So, there's part of the character of the brand that comes through, with the sense that maybe it was put together with duct tape sometimes, and you can't do that with a magazine like Vanity Fair. You would only make a choice like that in the New York Times Magazine to match the kind of ideas of a very specific story.

But that said, the essential tools are the same. And I guess one of the challenges of what we do is that, in a lot of ways, the sort of language of photography is moving fast into whole other realms. The language of, say, photojournalism, we're still working with a lot of the ideas that we got from, you know, Robert Capa and Cartier Bresson.

And I happen to love that kind of photography, but I also think we have to be making imagery that is translatable on Instagram, that can be a story that fits in this vertical frame that isn't exactly a 35 millimeter or medium format proportion.

And I think I'm trying to say that one of the challenges for people who do what I do is to kind of always be thinking about where the medium is going, and how to bring that into the work that we do.

And then some of the other is: how do we bring the kind of enthusiasm and spontaneity, and intimacy of digital mobile photography into the world of highly-produced, curated, edited magazine experience?

Liam: When you talk about the realities of production at Businessweek coming through in the photos, do you think that that happens at other publications as well? Like, at a publication like Vanity Fair, where you have a very high production, do you think that there are still intangible aspects of the magazine's identity, or the realities of how it's made, that are somehow conveyed through the imagery?

Clinton: Well, I think at Businessweek there was a conscious kind of ... I don't have a better word than "postmodern," and I always hate using that word. But there was a real conscious embrace of the sense that you, the reader, know and we, the makers of the magazine, know that this whole thing is a conceit. That there's a cover and a back page, and everything in between is, like, an agreed-upon form. And, since you know that, we can play a lot

with it, and we can wink at making it on a shoestring sometimes.

And I think most magazines do operate within that construct, that we are making a world for you, that you can aspire to, that is making you smarter, that's telling you interesting stories.

And so, I don't think, in that sense, that there's a lot of winking at what the production value is. But there are technical concerns, like: the kind of paper we print on is served well by photography with strong lighting, and there's a kind of mode among contemporary photographers, whose work I love, to be shooting in natural light, and there's this autumn light with tree branches behind, and a dusty road. They're unadorned, right? And that makes them naturally softer.

Those pictures don't always translate well onto that paper, and they don't take you to a place in the same way. It would have to truly be a specific story where that would be the right approach, in this magazine.

And if you think about one of its primary subjects, is Hollywood and celebrity. So it lives in a world that is produced. And I think, in that sense, the answer to your question is: yes, like, that is very much ... The production values of the magazines are an expression of the character of its subject matter.

Liam: In an interview with Photo District News, you said something really interesting to me, which was about capturing subjects, and telling a story in a way that made sure not to glorify them too much, and to challenge the expectations of, like, how we expect to see these things presented, and I'm curious how you find ways to continue to present things in unexpected ways that don't change, or do change, the story.

Clinton: When I started working at Businessweek, it already was this very iconoclastic publication, and that's down to Josh [Teringul 00:19:38], who hired me, and Richard Turley, who was the creative director before I was there.

They were allergic to CEOs in suits. And it was a real response to what the other magazines in their sort of competitive set would be. So it's like: Forbes, and Fortune, and, um, Inc., and Fast Company, and others. But this is a business news magazine, and its role is not to anoint masters of the universe. Its role is to report on, and engage with, people who are news-makers in this space.

So we had to think a lot about who you assign, and how you think about photographing those kinds of characters. How do you get them out of their well-practiced camera face? How do you shake them up a little bit?

And my point of view about it was always that the lights, and the backdrop, and the kind of tight head shots, all those things, they're just a kind of glorifying artifice. And you can totally do it, and it's fine, but in my mind I knew what that picture looked like. And that's a case where I was like: "Let's get some natural light. Let's get this person outside."

Um, we photographed the CEO of Microsoft, you know, in a stairwell in one of the buildings on their campus with great southern light, and it was me and a photographer with one assistant who was maybe holding a reflector, and we were just trying to get: what kind of sweater is he wearing? Who is this man? And really enter the conversation at that place, as opposed to having, like, a real idea about the CEO of a large company.

And, I mean, I would say the same when we photographed President Obama. Like, at that point, it was late in the administration. There had been a lot of pictures of him. Who would bring a kind of intimacy, a kind of eye-level interaction with this person? And that was what was exciting.

Then, if you compare that to where, in the New York Times Magazine ... I think that is a publication that's re... really fundamentally about ideas, and so even when you're meeting a character, when you're meeting a news-maker, there's an underlying narrative about what meaning they have in the culture in a certain moment.

And, this is just me saying this, this is my take on ... on that place, but you always kind of thought about: what's the working headline? Or what narrative are we trying to cut against? Mot for reasons of politics or anything like that but just purely to hit on what's most interesting about the person, and to, you know, really surprise and engage the reader, again, which is always the goal.

But, again, that ... like, being part of the New York Times, you had to always do that in a way that posed the question to the reader, as opposed to giving a very blunt take.

We photographed Glenn Beck, right when he was sort of at the height of his career on Fox News, and it was a very difficult negotiation. And they had basically felt that they had been burned by other publications, like, been told one thing and had something else happen. So on that one, I

spent a lot of time, like, one to one talking with the subject's reps about what we were gonna do, and basically saying: "We just want to give you a fair shake. It's a cover story. Our only intention here is to make a portrait that works for the cover."

And in modern media, a lot of people approach coverage with already so many assumptions about what's gonna happen, that a lot of times you have to really state your case and try to be very thoughtful about not only how what you do will be perceived, but how the perception of what you will do is perceived on the part of the subject, like, before you even enter the conversation.

I mean, like, my name is Clinton, and I'm a gay guy who lives in New York, so I always have felt like whenever I was on the phone with anybody from a Republican point of view, like, that I had so many strikes against me that I just wanted to be really clear that my intentions were just to, like, tell the story. If that makes sense.

Liam: Yeah. It sounds like part of it about undoing some of the ways that we tend to contextualize these people, who really are people.

Clinton: Yeah.

Liam: And then contextualizing them either within the story, or within their own personality, to let the story come forth.

Clinton: Absolutely. And you can have that as your goal, and still make really interesting exciting pictures. And one key job of magazine journalism is to provoke, to ask you questions that challenge your assumptions about things.

And so I don't wanna suggest, in any way, that we weren't out to make strong, pointed photography, but that part of the job of doing that is asking: "What the are the assumptions about this person, and how do we turn them on their head?"

We think a lot about ... Sometimes you'll be in a conversation, and everyone has the same idea, but a lot of times what that means it that if we all thought of it as our first read on a subject, that's exactly the wrong idea. And that you have to do several layers more work to get at something that will feel new, that will surprise the viewer.

Liam: I wanna close by referring back to that same interview that I mentioned earlier, because you said something in there about intent, and asking someone: "Why did you take this picture?"

What is the underlying intent that you're looking for, and how does that reflect in the image?

Clinton: There's, like, a circuit of people who do what I do. We go to places and gather, and do what's called portfolio reviews, where you sit with a photographer and look at their pictures, and ... It's a networking thing, but it's also a moment when you can have an honest conversation with someone about their work, and where they're trying to go, without the explicit request for an assignment or request for work coming through.

So I've done a lot of those over the years, and I find that: "Why did you take this picture?" is a question that, like, puts people back on their heels, and people who can answer that question, are really accessing what their kind of innate curiosities are. The answer can be: "You know, I just really love red, and, like, my pictures are about color, and this is a thing I saw in the world that was red in an interesting way." Like, that's a perfectly reasonable, acceptable answer to me, and it also helps me catalog how this person is gonna approach an assignment.

But I would say, generally speaking, I'm interested in photography because I'm interested in ideas, which is, like ... I became a journalist 'cause I'm interested in ideas. And we photograph a lotta portraits, we photograph, you know, a lotta different kinds of things, that you wouldn't look at necessarily and say: "What's the idea here?"

But, really, the best work, like the work of a true artist, or the work of a master, is: they brought themselves, and their intellectual and emotional drives to the subject, and illuminate it with those things in mind.

So when I think about intent, that's really what I'm asking is, you know: A, do you know what you're bringing to this picture? And, B, how are you harnessing what you're photographing, or the way that you're photographing to sort of get at the ideas that excite you?

Um, it's a hard question, but I feel like it's one that we should always be engaging with, and so I try to.

Liam: Yeah, maybe it relates back to what they wanted you to see, and how they wanted you to feel about it.

Clinton: Exactly. I think that's exactly right.

Liam: Well, thank you, again, Clinton, for joining me.

Clinton: Yeah, thank you. It was a lot of fun.

Liam: Subscribe to Design Notes so you don't miss our next episode, with Rob Giampietro, design director at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In the interview, we discuss the role of design in the production of culture, and the subtle ways MoMA uses design to create memorable experiences of art.

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