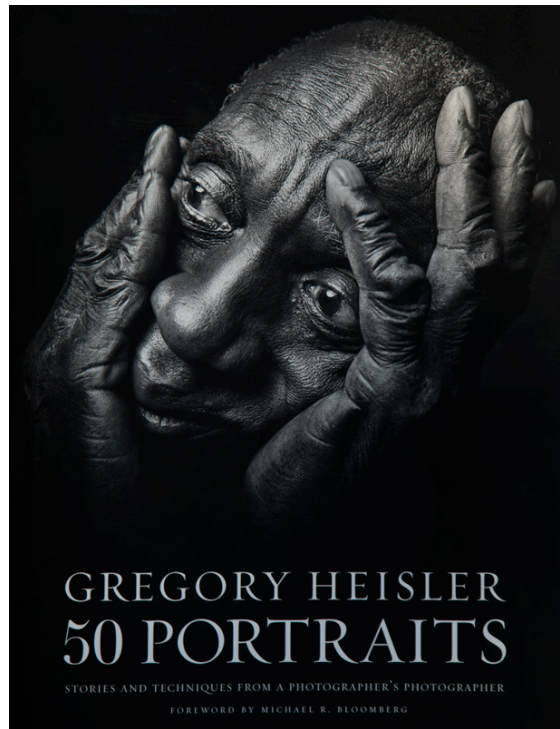


Greg Heisler is one of the most accomplished portrait photographers living today, and one of the most published. He has I don't know how many Time covers to his name and has photographed some of the highest-profile people on the planet, with a life list that includes Muhammad Ali, Mikhail Gorbachov, Bruce Springsteen, Tiger Woods, Mick Jagger, Tina Turner, Michael Bloomberg, and on and on. You get the idea.

And, of course, Luís Sarría. You can see Sarría's haunting face, full of life, full of past and presence, on the cover of Greg's new book, *50 Portraits*, a survey of the best of Greg's work.



So why isn't Bill Clinton on the cover, or Springsteen or Julia Roberts? Why not have gorgeous Liv Tyler looking out from bookstore shelves at customers? Surely the marketing department would love that. And if the cover were a great something-or-other, wouldn't that say that Greg was a great photographer?

So why Luís Sarría? And who was he anyway?

Sarría was a part of Ali's coterie, his masseur, trainer, and corner man throughout the great boxer's fighting life. He was one of any number of people who would accompany Ali to the ring or sit at his training table. He was completely and closely involved in the fighter's efforts, but if you saw him he'd be a figure in the background.

And yet here he is on the cover of the book, while Ali and other world figures are tucked inside. Why is that?

Here's my guess: he is transparently human all the way through to his soul, and he let's you see that. Lots of the other portraits in the book approach this kind of clarity, but almost all of the subjects are public figures—actors, politicians, music stars, sports stars—and they project some fairly known quality that identifies them at once. And even though Greg may be trying to slip behind the façade to find what is human in them, we know it's

still Liam Neeson or Hugh Grant lost in thought. And you know that they're probably not all that lost. Even if they're not pushing out persona, we viewers push it for them.

There are a few other anonymous people in the book but the Saria photo is different. Greg tells the story of making it. He was on assignment, went to the man's house, and was greeted by his wife, who had bad news. The man had some kind of infection on his lip and was too embarrassed to come out, let alone be photographed.

After a hushed conversation the woman went inside to tell her husband that Greg was the most caring of souls, and that he would never, ever embarrass a subject.

This time Saria came out, and sure enough his lip was distended on the right. He only spoke Spanish, so there was no way to chat him up and change his mind. But slowly and unthreateningly Greg set up a light and moved in with a camera. Instinctively the man covered his bulging lip with his beautiful hand and cradled his head with the other.

Greg shot a close-in Polaroid and showed it to him. Greg's heart must have been pounding—mine would have been—because he could see on that Polaroid that something amazing could possibly happen, if only the man would say yes.

And he did. Greg made a few more exposures...and done.

So there it was, the photograph that Greg would use to speak for his life's work. Of a man who was in discomfort. Of a man with whom Greg couldn't speak. And the elegant hand gesture came about, not because he was posing or because Greg was directing him, but because he was trying to conceal something, his distended lip.

But I think that one of the main things about the picture is that the man projected for professional or ego reasons. He was just there, no persona out front. Greg saw this and left it as it was.

And things came gloriously together.

So if you think you have to have everything under control to make a good photograph, well, it helps. But when your plans fall apart things that are uncontrollable and complex and unpredictable, wonderful stuff can start to happen. And the very unpredictability can bring us to a state of hyperawareness (at the same time that we might be wanting to bang our head against the wall). And in this state we can do work that better than anything we had in mind. It's something to pray for.