

Left: performers from the National Circus of Vietnam, 1994. Right: Gloria and Ravi, an animal trainer, with his bear, Great Gemini Circus, India, 1989.

# Mary Ellen Mark

This renowned photographer loves the human animal.

**M**ary Ellen Mark is a rare breed: a documentary photographer with an instantly recognizable style. Whether she is shooting performers in an Indian circus or the down-and-out in America—subjects she has often revisited—her work has a visual consistency that would be the envy of most art-world stylists. (*Amer-*

his face—the cover of her magnificent 1993 book, *Indian Circus* (Chronicle Books)—is a case in point (see page 92). “First I had the trainer behind the elephant’s trunk,” Mark recalls. “It was the trainer’s idea to have the elephant wrap its trunk around his head. It never would have occurred to me to have the elephant do that.” But what

cinched the shot for Mark was another bit of serendipity. “What really made the picture good was the expression in the elephant’s eye,” she says. “It happened in just one frame.”

Mark’s image of a circus clown waiting outside a tent to start his performance is another example. “He was lying across the back of his donkey, and suddenly the donkey yawned,” says Mark. “The picture wouldn’t have been anything without that yawn.” But what’s more striking about the image is its eccentric composition—with the figure at the bottom and the animal’s legs cropped off—and the fact that Mark would risk such composition even when the yawn presented itself. “You always have to think about your framing,” she says. “Sometimes you make the wrong choice, and it doesn’t work.” Mark feels the relationship between foreground and background is key: “If the background doesn’t work together with your main subject, you won’t have a good picture.”

Though she shoots in a variety of formats (see box on page 92), Mark has taken the Hasselblad’s familiar square to an extraordinary level of compositional sophistication. “It’s a beautiful shape,” she says. “But coming from 35mm’s long rectangle, it’s kind of a shock to work with the square. There’s a tendency to keep everything symmetrical in the frame.” Is square shooting more difficult? “You have to work hard to break the format of the

*ican Photo* readers chose Mark as their favorite woman photographer; see page 42.) Yet for Mark, style is not something to be imposed on a subject; she is even reluctant to bring a concept to a portrait. “I find that the *subject* gives you the best idea how to make a photograph,” she says. “So I usually just wait for something to happen.”

Mark’s portrait of an Indian circus animal trainer with an elephant’s trunk encircling



MARY ELLEN MARK (2)





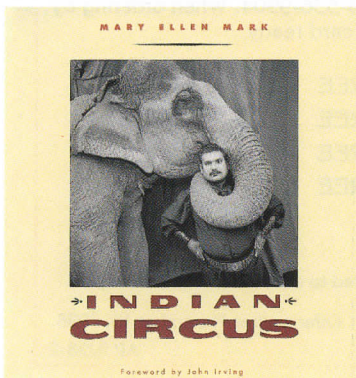
Left: from *A Day in the Life of Ireland*, a scene from a travelers' encampment in Finglas, Ireland, 1991.

square," says Mark, whose dynamic compositions—square and otherwise—push and pull at the edges of the frame. "But each format has its own problems and solutions."

All that said, for Mark, what's inside the frame is still the most important element of photography. "Finding the right subject is the hardest part," she says. Indeed, Mark's ability to penetrate notoriously suspicious subjects—from prostitutes on Bombay's Falkland Road to Irish gypsies—is legendary, and has been recognized with three NEA grants and a Guggenheim fellowship, 11 solo books, dozens of exhibitions, and countless assignments. Mark says she's still learning about both the human dynamic and the craft of photography. "There's only one reason I've stayed a photographer for so many years," she says. "Photography is always challenging." —RUSSELL HART

MARY ELLEN MARK

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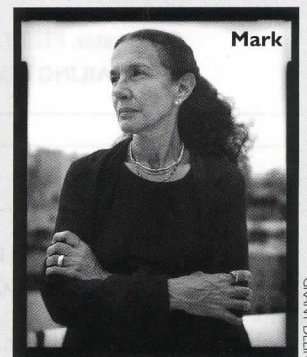
**ON FORMAT** Learning how to use different formats has made me a better photographer. When I started working in medium format, it made me a better 35mm photographer. When I started working in 4x5, it made me a better medium-format photographer.

The situation really dictates what format I use. The choice depends either on whether the subject will be enriched by detail or on how spontaneous I need to be. But even when I shoot 4x5, I try to break the format's formality—to make the pictures looser. I've managed to do that with a few projects; one was photographing ballroom dancers in Miami. It's risky shooting action with a large-format camera. You have to use a pretty narrow f-stop, a fairly wide-angle lens, and more than the usual amount of light—and be sure your shutter speed is high enough to override the ambient light. For the Miami pictures, I would just prelight a certain area with Broncolor strobes and stop my 90mm lens down to f/22. That way, I didn't have to hit my focus exactly, so the dancers could just move in and out of the area.

**ON LIGHTING** I used to use no artificial light at all, and shoot everything in 35mm. That's certainly a wonderful way to work. But when I started doing more portraits, I realized I couldn't always just depend on existing light. Sometimes you have to work in the studio or a dim interior space, and then you have to light it. So I've had to learn about lighting. And you learn by looking at light, and the way others use it. When I used to shoot on movie sets, I learned from lighting directors. I've learned from good assistants. And I've learned from my husband, a filmmaker. I'm not a great lighter; I've just learned what works.

I like lighting to be as inconspicuous as possible. Usually I try to add just enough flash to make the main subject stand out. But the subject and the brightness and distance of the background really determine how much light is needed. It's hard to keep light subtle with dark circus animals, for example—subjects like the standing bear in the dress. You have to put a lot of extra light on them just to create enough sense of texture and detail.

**ON TRUST** Everyone asks me how I get my subjects to open up to me. There's no formula to it. It's just a matter of who you are and how you talk to people—of being yourself. Your subjects will trust you only if you're confident about what you're doing. They can sense that immediately. I'm really bothered by pho-



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tographers who first approach a subject without a camera, try to establish a personal relationship, and only then get out their cameras. It's deceptive. I think you should just show up with a camera, to make your intentions clear. People will either accept you or they won't.