

AMERICAN

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# PHOTO ONCAMPUS

documentary  
special

mary ellen mark  
master of  
compassion



school profile: University of North Carolina • the Brooks Mekong expedition • student portfolios

Mark's 1997 image  
of a performer  
in Mexico's Kimberly  
Crown Circus.

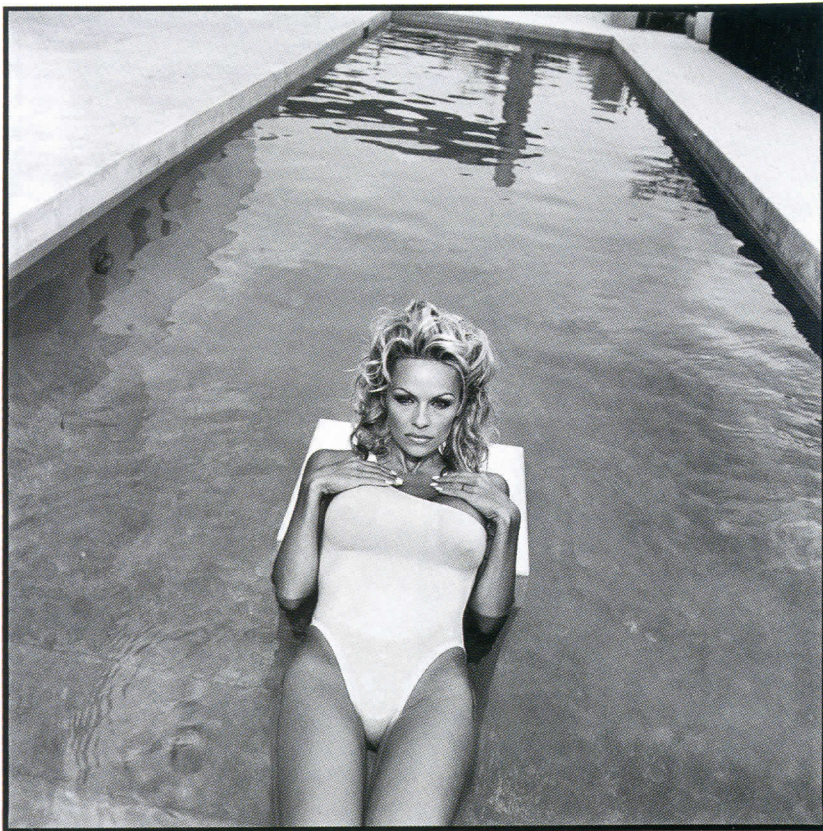
# passion and compassion

When *American Photo*, the parent magazine of *American Photo On Campus*, asked its readers to nominate their favorite woman photographer of all time, the same name came up over and over again: Mary Ellen Mark. In our view, the reason they chose Mark—by any measure one of the great documentary photographers of our time, male or female—is that her pictures work on different levels. In the tradition of photographers W. Eugene Smith and Dorothea Lange, they often focus on the plight of dispossessed and downtrodden people. “She understands them ... so much more than other photographers,” says *The New York Times Magazine* picture editor Kathy Ryan, quoted in Mark’s 1991 retrospective monograph, *Mary Ellen Mark: 25 Years* (Bulfinch Press). “You know she’s going to bring

**Mary Ellen Mark brings both sensitivity and style to the important job of documentary photography.**







**“I find that the subject gives you the best idea how to make a photograph.”**

Above: Mark photographed actress Pamela Anderson Lee for a 1998 *US* magazine story. Right: Performers in Mexico's Vasquez Brothers Circus, 1997, a Canon EOS-1N shot. Opposite: Great Golden Circus, India, 1990.

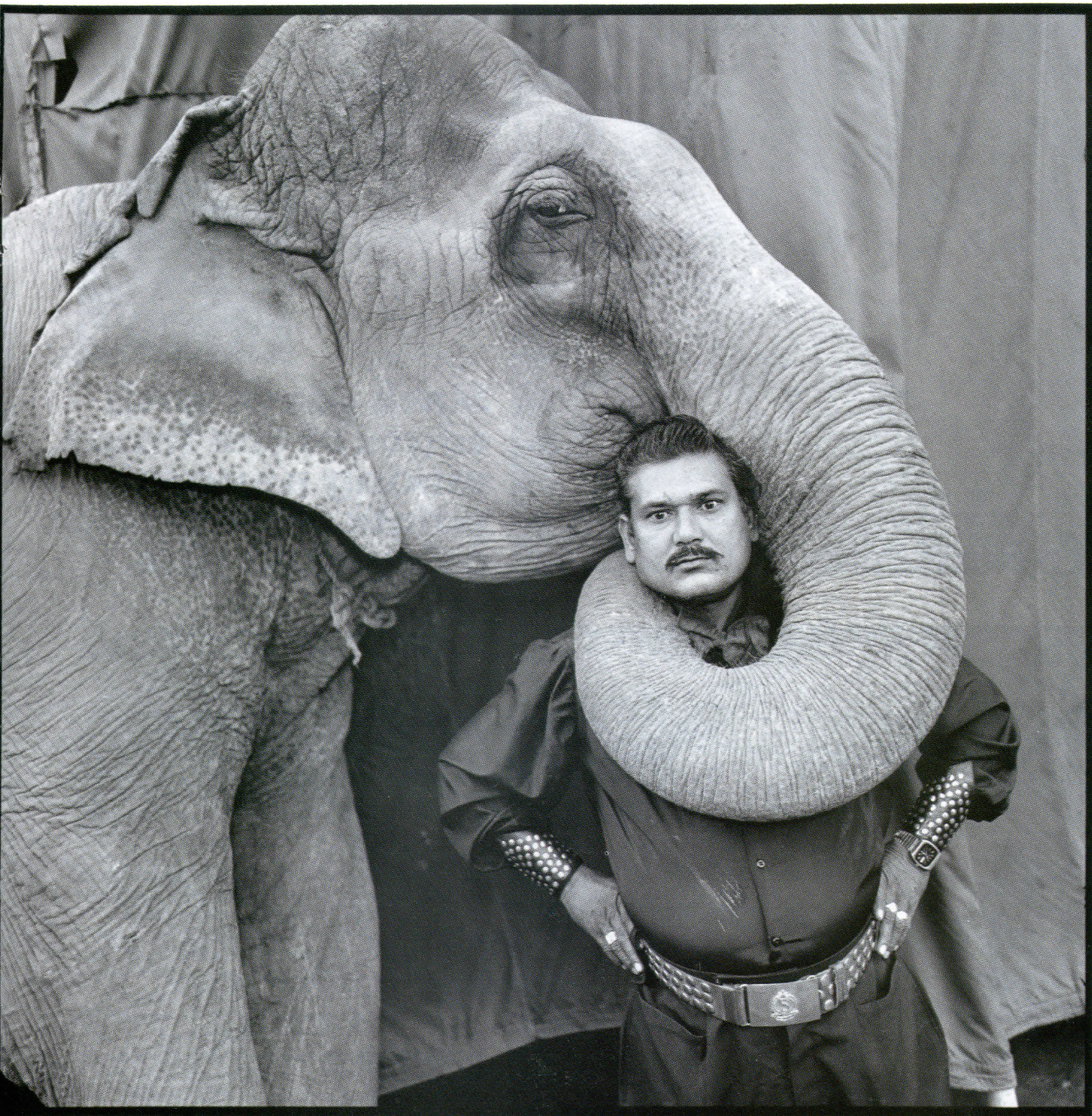
back the heart of the story, not just the facts of it.” Indeed, what distinguishes Mark’s work from much current photo-journalism is that it doesn’t paint a relentlessly bleak picture of its subjects’ lives. It finds hope—and a surprising pride—in their often unusual talents and accomplishments.

**A**ll that said, the content of Mark’s pictures doesn’t overwhelm them. Her images are, if anything, more visually sophisticated than Smith’s or Lange’s, satisfying the most art-minded viewers. With great daring Mark plays with the edges of the frame, often combining unusual points of view with calculated tilts—an effect that especially energizes her square medium-format pictures. “You always have to think about your framing,” says New York-based Mark, whose talents have been recognized with three National Endowment of the Arts grants and a Guggenheim fellowship. “There’s always the risk that you’ll make the wrong decision, and that the picture won’t work. My contact sheets are filled with pictures I don’t consider strong, but they’re like sketchbooks: You’re just working out different ideas as you shoot, and sometimes you don’t realize until the very end what you want to do. Suddenly something works.” Though Mark’s pictures have an instantly recognizable style, she takes her visual cues from content. “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.”

The circus, a favorite subject of Mark’s since she visited one on her first trip to India in 1969, offers an example: her portrait of an animal trainer with an elephant’s trunk encircling his face (opposite page), the cover of her extraordinary 1993 monograph *Indian Circus* (Chronicle Books). “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 animal do that.” But what cinched the shot for Mark, she points out, 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.”



MARY ELLEN MARK (3)

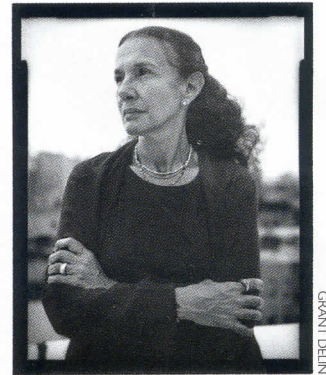


**F**or that sort of interaction to take place, Mark must earn her subjects' trust. In fact, her ability to gain the confidence of suspicious subjects—from prostitutes on Bombay's Falkland Road to Irish gypsies—is legendary. How does she do it? "There's no formula to it," she says. "It's just a matter of who you are and how you talk to people. Your subjects will trust you only if you're confident about what you're doing. It really bothers me when photographers 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."

That honesty is important, given that over the years Mark has moved from shooting strictly 35mm (she now uses the Canon EOS system for her 35mm work) into medium and large formats, with their more conspicuous bulk. How does Mark decide which format to use? "It depends on whether the subject will be enriched by detail or on how spontaneous I need to be," she says. "But even when I shoot 4x5, I try to break the format's formality—to make the pictures looser." Mark did just that with her 1993 essay in *The New York Times Magazine* on Miami ballroom dancers, shooting figures in motion with a 4x5—not an easy task given the need for both reasonable depth of field and action stopping.



Left: Performers at Mexico's Circo Garzetti.  
Bottom: Madonna the Giraffe, a performer in a Mexican circus.  
Right: Mary Ellen Mark.



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## Mark plays with edges of the frame, mixing unusual points of view with calculated tilts.



MARY ELLEN MARK (2)

Mark has also taken the square format to an extraordinary level of compositional sophistication. "It's a beautiful shape," she says. "But coming from 35mm's 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 harder to break the format of the square," says Mark. "But each format has its own problems and solutions." Mark is convinced, in fact, that having to learn the operational details and visual thinking that go with different formats has made her a better photographer.

**T**he photographer has an equally philosophical attitude about the assignment work she must accept to support projects such as the 1997 Mexican circus pictures highlighted here. She does frequent portraits—usually of celebrities, a far cry from the "unfamous," as she calls them, of her fine-art work—for publications as different as *The New York Times Magazine* and *US* magazine (for which she shot the portrait of starlet Pamela Anderson Lee on page 20). "When I was first starting out, most of my assignments were social documentary: to photograph the kinds of subjects I wanted to shoot anyway, for myself," she says. "That happens much less often now. The business has changed; magazines, and the world as a whole, are more commercial. But when I photograph celebrities or fashion, I still work very hard at it. Because I believe that doing all kinds of different shooting makes me a more astute documentary photographer."

Mark has also established a voluminous Website ([www.maryellenmark.com](http://www.maryellenmark.com)) to serve various purposes, including the sale of fine-art prints (she is represented by New York's Howard Greenberg gallery) and making her work available to picture researchers. A passionate documentary photographer with a commercial Website? "Circumstances change, and I think you have to learn from them rather than lament them," says Mark. "Just creating the chance to take the pictures I want to take is what matters most to me." ■