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Harley Cowan Interview Transcription

Bailie Jansons

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INTERVIEW WITH HARLEY COWAN

Recorded: March 30, 2024

Interviewer: Bailie Jansons

Bailie Jansons: I think it can hear us...

Harley Cowan: Do you need to test it? No, it looks like it's picking us up.

Jansons: There we go. Well, thank you for meeting today.

Cowan: Well, thanks for having me.

Jansons: So, you were recruited by the Atomic Photographer's Guild, is that right?

Cowan: I'd heard about them, I discovered them through one of their members—it was a Nat Geo photographer who'd done a bunch of work around Ukraine and Pripyat, outside of where Chernobyl is, and I'd seen his work, I found them from that. I realized that the guy who started the Guild was Robert Del Tredici, and he had a book out called "In the Fields of the Atomic Bomb". I realized I'd read that book and so I reached out to them, and they asked to see some of my work, so I sent them the work, and they decided to offer me a spot in their group. I think there's probably about 40 photographers in that group. In fact, just a couple months ago, there was a thing called the Uranium international film festival, and one of the other atomic photographers decided to set up an exhibition at a gallery in Vancouver, so in a couple of weeks I'll have a few photographs that they're going to set up next to the movie theater. It's the first time I've done anything with that group since I joined in 2019.

Jansons: So, you grew up in Richland, and I think I read on your website that you worked in the Nuclear Industry, is that correct?

Cowan: Richland High had a program called 'Inquiry to Science and Engineering'. I got into that program when I was a senior, and the way it worked was they'd take the last two hours of your school day, and you got credit for that. You went out—you had to interview to get the job, too—you went out and worked for four hours at the end of the school day, and you got paid for working out there. At the end of the school year, most kids got to keep their job, so I ended up working at Advanced Nuclear Fuels. I think it's got a new name now. So, I worked in a research lab where they were mainly studying the properties of the metal that they used for fuel rods. A friend of mine worked in another lab and he decided he didn't want to keep doing his job, and my job was coming to a close, so I moved to this other lab, which was a quality control lab. They were always so busy that I got to come back every summer after that, and so over the course of my entire time in college, I worked in this lab every summer, and it ended up spanning over 6 years.

Jansons: Did your background in the nuclear industry shape the photographs you took in any way when you went out there?

Cowan: You bet. When I decided to get into this kind of photography, I had learned about the Historic American Building Survey. That's a program that's been around since the 1930s; it was part of the New Deal. It's similar to Farm Security Administration, the Works Progress Administration, this came out of that same time period, but it's the only program that's still active today. And so, in the '60s they added the Historic American Engineering Record, where they started looking at more than just buildings—infrastructure, bridges, factories, that sort of thing. When I started getting serious about doing photography professionally, it seemed to me like getting into this area of photography was a way that used my expertise from- I'm an architect. And the science background stuff just played right into that, and as an architect I do laboratory planning, mostly. And then growing up here, having had that background working with uranium, and working with nuclear energy at least informed it a little bit, so I could go in and it made sense and that was something I could do with an educated eye.

Jansons: What was that program called again?

Cowan: Historic American Buildings Survey, and for short it's called HABS. And then the other one is Historic American Engineering Record, and if you look up HABS/HAER, you'll find the information about that. So the idea was, there were a lot of historic buildings being torn down after the Great Depression, and there was a group of people who realized that we have no record of any of these and said, 'at a minimum let's make it that buildings owned by the federal or state government have to go through this requirement of being photographed and have written reports and find drawings'. But they create this document that covers the building, and if it's more historically significant then there's a bigger requirement, and if it's less historic then it might just be a couple of photos and a quick written history, but then that way all that stuff goes to the Library of Congress as part of an archive there. It's public information so you can go—and a lot of it's digitized now—you can go in and look at this photograph and these drawings and stuff. It's a neat program. So, when I did the Hanford thing, I was just trying to learn how to do this type of photography. The University of Oregon has a program called the 'Pacific Northwest Preservation Field School' and anybody can sign up to do it. You have to apply, but most anybody can get into it. It usually happens each summer, and moves between Oregon and Washington and Idaho every summer, the location that they work at. But they pick a project, people go there, and it's usually a weeklong program over the course of 2 or 4 weeks. You pick a week you want to go to. When I went, we were at Mt. Rainier, at their Longmire headquarters, and we worked on an old CCC Cabin. We redid some rotting boards in the cabin and redid some windows. We learned how to do all that and it was a total kick. And then later on I brought my camera with me and I took some photos of stuff while I was there. I met a park service architect and told him what I was trying to do, that I was trying to get out to Hanford, because I grew up there, was interested in Hanford, was interested in the B Reactor. It turned out that the request that I had put into the Department of Energy that I put in a few months earlier had been kicked

over to this guy's desk, and he said, 'let's talk tomorrow, I want to hear more about what you're trying to do'. So, the next day we talked about it and he said, 'I think we can make something work', and he left and went back to Seattle, and I went back to Portland. Months went by, and I hadn't heard anything. Four months later, I got a call from somebody at DOE and they said, 'your request has been approved, we need you out here the week of ____.' They gave me four days. I had a pass to go out and spend four days out at B Reactor. It was in the spring, about this time of year, would have been 2017, and they had some people out there, so I wasn't totally on my own. But they let me run around most of the public access spaces in and around B Reactor. And then we got to go to Bruggeman Ranch, the White Bluffs Bank, the old Hanford High School, and the Allard Pumphouse. Those were kind of before—old sites from the pre-Manhattan Project that all got abandoned when they took over the site. And then on the last day we got to go put on booties and gloves and stuff, and got to go up on top of the reactor and take some pictures of the vertical safety rods, the safety system that's up on top. That's one where the health physics guy had to come and do Geiger counter checks on everything and put tape on the feet of my tripod. We climbed a set of stairs up on top of the reactor and there's a catwalk. There are some radiological zones up there, this is where it helped to have worked in this stuff. None of it was all that unfamiliar so I kind of understood what they- how to be safe and how to work with these guys. We found a spot on the catwalk and I set up the tripod and got some pictures. We had limited time up there. But we got the pictures done, packed up and left and went back down the stairs and had the Geiger counter check everything again. Everything was clear. They're like 'we don't expect anything. The biggest thing that happens here in the spring is that we get some radon gas in the building and once we open the building up, it airs out and it's fine.' They said, 'we saved that until the end of your trip because in case you did get something on your tripod you weren't going to get it back'.

The photographs were all taken over a period of four days, and it's all done with sheet film, so 4x5 sheet film about the size of a postcard, and you have a film holder that you have to load by hand in the dark. You get two sheets of film. One on each side. And so I only had, I think, thirty film holders. I had enough to last for a day, so I could shoot pretty much a whole day's worth of stuff and I'd come back to my folks' house who live here and spend all night pulling film out and putting it in light-tight boxes and reloading new film so I could be ready the next morning. It was just a lot of work; it was a busy four days.

Jansons: So, what were you hoping to highlight when you were taking these pictures?

Cowan: I think generally when you're doing a historic documentation project, you're really just trying to do some interpretation. You're trying to take a picture that shows what's significant or what's important and has all that information in the frame because you don't really know what a historian or somebody a hundred years down the road from now might be looking for. You want to make sure you have some understanding of what you're looking at and capture that in the image and you're trying to give enough coverage of everything that's there. When I went in the

first day, the very first picture I took was the one of the face of the reactor and it's probably the best photograph of the whole group. Have you ever been out there?

Jansons: No, but my Dad works out there, so he shows me pictures sometimes.

Cowan: Well, if you can get on a tour out there it's really worth going. But when you stand in front of it- the loading face of the reactor is kind of a big room because they had to load all this uranium fuel in the front of the reactor. When you walk in you come through a really low corridor. You turn a corner, you come into some double doors, you walk into this space and it really opens up. It was never designed that way as an aesthetic choice but it's really interesting as a space. You walk in, and it's quite dramatic and the face of the reactor is lit up because they had to have all this lighting on the face because of the workers. And you walk in, and the way the space opens up vertically and you've got this thing that's all lit up. It was pretty dramatic, and so I hardly can even remember taking the first photo. I just remember we got in there, there were a bunch of chairs set up and I didn't want the chairs in the picture, so a couple of guys who worked there started stacking chairs and moving them out of the way while I set up the shot. A lot of times I'll do a really technical photo that's straight on. And I didn't for this. I kind of stepped to the side and got a photographic perspective that seemed to be more interesting because you could see how the space went back up above the reactor. And it turned out- and maybe that's a lesson: don't think too hard when trying to take a photograph, just try to react to what's there. But after that, we went into the control room and there were- it's kind of cool because they've got the Reactor Operator's Station with the dials, and I knew what most of this stuff was. Nine dials for the control rods for the reactor and a bunch of other stuff. I had actually met Dee McCullough years earlier on a tour and he was the original reactor operator when it went live the first time. I was in there taking a picture of his work space, and years ago when I'd been there, there was a wooden swivel chair in front of his station and they had a little rope like a dog leash latch over the arms. And we were talking with him and he was explaining everything. The group moved on, my brother and I were standing there and talking with him—he was a funny guy—and then he kind of looked at me and he goes 'you want to sit in it?' and I kind of laughed and said 'Well, I don't know, is that allowed?', and he unlatched the rope and said 'Well, it's my chair, I should decide who gets to sit in it.' And so I sat down in the chair and my brother took a picture of me. And so this was ten years earlier, twelve years earlier. So when I was back for this photo, there was a wooden swivel chair sitting there but it was all black. I was looking at it and I thought, 'That's funny. This looks like the chair, but did somebody paint it?' So I asked one of the people there, 'What's going on with the chair? Did you refurbish it or repaint it?' And he goes, 'Oh, you want the real chair? We just put this in here because everybody wants to sit in it, so we took the historic chair and we put it in a closet down the hallway'. So they moved the black chair out of the way and they brought the real chair, and it's all worn and stuff. So when I took the picture of the Reactor Operators Station, had I not had that interaction with Dee McCullough 10 years earlier, I wouldn't have known any different. We got the original chair in the picture, which to me was important, that's a good detail to have in a historical photograph of the space. I wouldn't

have known anything otherwise. Just cracks me up. So the more time you can spend, and the more... the other one that happened, was the same guy that pulled the chair out for me, I said to him, "What is in this room that I'm not seeing that I should see? What's important in here that I don't know about?" And he's like, 'Oh yeah, come over here,' and there's these big metal panels with all these dials and all sorts of equipment, and he popped open one of these panels. On the outside, it's just a dial, it's essentially a thermometer, and it's just measuring the temperature of the exterior of the reactor core. It's a bunch of thermometers that come together to make one big master thermometer. He opens this thing up and on the inside is this crazy wiring harness. So all these wires come together and they're all tied together by wax string. And it's beautiful craftsmanship, so I got a picture of that, which is in the collection. And I never would have known to take that picture, never would have even known that this was something we could do, had I not said, 'What am I not seeing?' and this guy opens this thing up. What's so great about that picture is you can zoom in and you can see every little screw, you can see the pencil marks that the original engineers put when they were building this thing. The original contractors had written what all the circuits were. And that's the other neat thing about doing the large sheet film. It has so much resolution that if you take a clear picture, you can zoom in, and so there's a D Cell battery inside that cabinet and you can see the fine print at the bottom of the D Cell battery if you zoom into it where it says "trademark". So that's also why you do this kind of a system, these kinds of photographs, because, again, you don't know what someone is going to need down the road, but if you take a decent enough picture with a high enough resolution, you can find out all kinds of things in there that you might not have known or might not have known you needed later on.

Jansons: That's incredible!

Cowan: It really is amazing, I've done this in a presentation before where I've taken that photograph and had a zoomed-in crop and you can read it perfectly clearly, this little, tiny 4-pt font.

Jansons: My next question is, 'Are there any notable or any fun stories that happened while taking these?' but it sounds like you already have quite a few!

Cowan: Well, I had a pickup that I drove, and every day at the end of the day I would load my camera equipment back in. I'd usually park the pickup and I'd pull it back up by the door into the reactor side and load stuff in. And one day, for some reason, the truck is on, I put all my gear in, and I hit the lock before I close the door. And I did not have a spare key, and it's running! And we're already after hours. The guy that was closing up was probably supposed to be gone already. And I'm like, 'You've got to be kidding me. The truck is running with the lights on, and I can't get into it'. So we had to call the Hanford patrol and they're laughing at us and fortunately this guy stayed with me. We had to call a locksmith. We were- B Reactor's up at the north end of the site. It's actually up closer to Yakima than it is to Richland. So we had to call a locksmith from Yakima who came out, got to the gate, and then the Hanford patrol had to go out and escort

him to my car. It took a couple hours for him to get there. The car was running the whole time. I had to sign some papers and of course it took him only 10 seconds to open my car. I had to pay him a bunch of money, a couple of hundred dollars for the visit. He took off, and the Hanford patrol kind of scrutinized me, and we finally all got out of there. Fortunately, I had enough gas in the car to get back home, but it was absolutely embarrassing.

So the next morning to make up for it, I went to the Spudnut Shop¹ and got a whole thing of spudnuts that I took to the guys to thank them for helping me out.

Jansons: What day was that?

Cowan: I can't remember if that was the first or the second day, probably the second day.

Jansons: Well, it makes for a good story.

Cowan: So embarrassing...

Jansons: Ok, so one of the things that when we're putting the photos up that we want to pay attention to is that this was a thing that helped to create a weapon that killed lots of people.

Cowan: It's terrible.

Jansons: It is terrible. So how did you make sense of or wrestle or reckon with this while taking the photos and is that displayed in your photos at all?

Cowan: Well, it's interesting, because it's what I find really fascinating about the Manhattan Project, and B Reactor in particular. For one, I mean, it's from our hometown, so the fact that something as historically important, and morally and ethically and culturally important as this happened in our own backyard? I think that's remarkable. And it's the complete spectrum of awful and evil to incredible and innovative. Everything good and bad that could possibly have come out of that has come out of that. So, I think the best way to look at that is to- I try to not put any... I tried to put as little bias into that point of view as possible, and it's a little easy to do when you're doing "document photography". I tried to be straight and objective of what I was taking pictures of and tried not to do anything that would color the information, the final photographs, with any bias one way or the other. Because those points of view are all valid and all correct, and I think it's not my job particularly as a documentarian to try to direct that. I think that if there's anything I'm trying to get in the photograph, it is to be complete and to try to take those photos with clarity and provide some material that other people can use for whatever their point of view is to tell more stories about what this is really all about. I normally don't title photographs- well, I title them, but they're pretty bland descriptions of what it is. However, that first photograph that is of the face of the reactor, that one I called "A Cathedral of Science". Because, one, I feel it deserved a little bit of a title, and it felt that way walking into it, and to me

¹ The Spudnut Shop is a doughnut and coffee shop unique to Richland, WA. It is known for its potato-flour doughnuts and has been an iconic part of the city since 1948.

it seemed very Promethean, you know? Like, this is the discovery of fire all over again. And I think I've heard other people use that term since. But we learned how to split an atom, and so everything that has come out of that is in some ways we wouldn't be- you know, it's created these incredible scientific advances and allowed us to do all these amazing things, but it's also allowed us to wipe out whole populations with hardly a- it's just remarkable, it's terrible, and I'm kind of rambling, but I think there's no shortage of discussion for that. So, the best thing that I could do is try to approach with some clarity and with an educated eye in terms of what this thing is, and kind of stick to the facts, and maybe let others deal with the truth.

I don't know if that's a very good answer or not. I also felt like I think a lot of people do try to tell these stories and I felt like as somebody growing up here in Richland, with the background that I've got, I felt like I could do this job better than a lot of people could. Having some understanding of what the industry is about, having some understanding of how the engineering works, I could come in and try to do that job in a way that was objective and clear and complete. I don't know if it got there or not, but I feel pretty good about the work. I feel like there's a lot more that could be done. In fact, in May, I'm supposed to go back out there and photograph T Plant, which is the 200 Area, the chemical separations plant from the original Manhattan Project. And I don't know if I'll get the opportunity to go out and re-photograph any of the other sites, but I also think that there's an awful lot left to photograph, and hopefully there's some places like T Plant- because they're dirty facilities that are all part of the cleanup that could end up being demolished and taken away and might not be treated with the same considerations that B Reactor got as the first reactor. That might be the appropriate thing, I don't think they're ever going to do public tours of T Plant, but at least at a minimum, they probably need to do a pretty complete job of photographing and documenting that building before they tear it down. I think that there are some other sites out there that have been destroyed or cleaned up as part of that effort without necessarily doing everything they can to make a record of it before that happened, so we'll see.

Jansons: It's interesting to me because when I was at Richland High School, they were saying all that 'proud of the cloud' stuff.

Cowan: When I was there, it was "nuke 'em 'til they glow". But you're right. It's interesting coming from this community and living through that. Whatever your opinion is about that and I think at least being here and being a part of the firsthand gives you a different perspective than most outsiders would have. I think the other thing is you have to try to have a little grace for other people both inside and outside of this community. There's a lot of baggage that goes along with everything around this stuff, a lot of information, a lot of opinions. I know there's been a number of articles and documentaries done on Hanford and the Manhattan Project before, and I feel like there are a lot of people in the community who feel like they have been taken advantage of in some of the interviews or the photographs they've allowed, that kind of thing. But then you also don't want to be this super one-sided, pro-local community point of view because that's also not a broad perspective. And where does the truth lie? Probably somewhere in between.

Jansons: No easy answers.

Cowan: Yes, there's no easy answers, which is why there's an interpretive center out there. And it's good that it's all been saved, and all been preserved, and we've got to thank people like B Reactor Museum Association, and all the people involved in that, and the original historians who work for DOE. There's Michele Gerber, Del Ballard, and Dee McCullough and his brother. All these people that were associated with Manhattan Project or just after that who've made a point of trying to keep this stuff around and not just let it disappear. I think that's positive for everybody. And so that's one place where I felt like getting to come in and do some of this work was like getting a little bit of responsibility, and not just responsibility here locally, not just a responsibility for people other places, it's somewhere in between. I don't mean to aggrandize any of it. I don't feel like it's... I'm a kid who has a camera—an old kid with a white beard—but I finally got to run out and play around in the local nuclear reactor. And what a great thing to get to do, because that's where my fascination started. If it helps other people to tell that story, then that feels pretty good.

So, you grew up around “proud of the cloud”, mushroom cloud, and it's funny when you talk to someone outside of this community because they're shocked, and maybe rightly so, and you got a lot of people in this community—It's a complex issue to say the least.

Jansons: Exactly... Is there any other significance that we haven't covered that these photos hold for you?

Cowan: Like I said, I think for me the biggest thing was being able to have the opportunity to go in and do that kind of work as someone who grew up here, and to be able to be one of the representatives. And we've got lots of those people. It was just nice to have the opportunity to go out and try to do that myself and hopefully it's something that will have some significance down the road after I'm gone. I mean if that happened, that'd be a really good thing. I'd feel really good about that. So hopefully I did right by the people that came before and hopefully it's useful to somebody down the road. At some point, everybody hopes for a little bit of immortality, and if this is the little bit that I get, that would be kind of cool- not bad.

Jansons: Cool. Those are all the questions I have, but I am interested-- how did you get started in photography?

Cowan: Years ago, when I was a little kid, I did all kinds of art stuff. I went to an elementary school down here, Badger Mountain Elementary.

Jansons: That's where I went!

Cowan: That's where you went? Go Bobcats! Did you go to the building over here, before they shut it down? With the art studio? Was Mr. Hay still teaching art or was he long gone?

Jansons: No, I had Mr. Bell.

Cowan: Well, prior to him it was Ron Hay, and he lives just up here, he's still around. And I started there when the building opened, and I was there in first grade. For kindergarten and the first part of first grade we were out at Hanford High School because they were still getting the building built. We moved in and they had that art studio, and that's a nice art studio, and Mr. Hay let us do as like 2nd, 3rd, 4th graders some of the craziest stuff. We were cutting stained glass and wrapping it in copper and soldering it. He had a sand blaster out in the courtyard. We did all the usual stuff. We glazed clay because he had a full kiln. He had copper-stamped shapes that we'd put glass beads on and glaze in the kiln. It was the craziest art studio. So, he was, I mean, that influenced me more than anything else in my life. I always wanted to do something that gave me a lot of confidence to do artwork. At some point my mom had a 35 mm camera and I loved to play around with that, and I loved anything mechanical anyway. I was always shooting a camera, and I'd never done any darkroom stuff. It wasn't until I had gotten out of college that I finally decided- I hadn't been shooting film in forever, and I was given a medium format camera and some film and told, 'Why don't you go out and shoot this? See what you think.' And I shot a couple rolls, and, it's funny, I remember that about on the second roll of film I was snapping a picture of somebody, and right as I clicked the shutter I noticed that they blinked. I had been shooting digital cameras for so long that I was constantly looking at the back of the camera to see if the picture was any good, and I'd forgotten about knowing in the moment whether you'd got the shot or not even though you can't see it. And that kind of got me into shooting film again. And I thought, 'you know what, maybe I need to finally go and learn how to make a print- how to develop the film and make the print'. So, I took a darkroom class and had a blast, just absolutely loved it. I think if I'd done it in high school or college, I would have been like 'been there, done that', but I got into that and started shooting film, and then I learned about large format cameras. And Portland, Oregon is a great town for film. There's a whole film community, there's lots of great camera support, and it's... yeah, so I took a workshop with a guy named Ray Bidegain to learn how to do large format photography. Right around that time I started reading about this Historic American Building Survey and thought, 'maybe I should go out and try to do that.' And I'd taken a photograph of a historic house out on Sauvie Island out in Portland. I wrote into National Park Service in Washington DC and said I'd looked the building up first in the record and they'd had a picture of it from 1937 or something like that, and I said, 'Hey, look, I just took this other picture,' and I sent them a scan of it and, 'I developed it according to your guidelines, would you be interested in adding this to the collection?' and they did. They scrutinized me a little bit, though. They have some real strict rules about how things have to be developed, but they ended up adding that to the historic record. I thought that was pretty cool, and I wanted to do more and more of that. Right now, I'm just finishing up a big project with the Army Corps of Engineers, documenting the Willamette Falls Locks in Oregon City. It's the biggest project I've ever done for historic preservation, over 100 photographs. It's kind of crazy. I just decided that this would be really interesting to do and it turns out there's a need for it. So yeah, then the fine arts side has been kind of fun because when you've got good negatives, you can make prints. I got into doing printing, I love printing, printing is fantastic. And then a couple

years after I took the Hanford photos, I had an exhibition here at Allied Arts, the Gallery in the Park. That was the first time I'd ever had an art exhibition, and it was great, especially coming back to Richland and doing it here. In fact, Ron Hay, my old elementary school art teacher, showed up, and a couple of my other teachers from here and there around town did too.

Two years ago I took the large format camera- it's like what Ansel Adams shot with. It's got a lens and an accordion bellows and the glass on the back. The one I've got was probably made in the '90s—it's a Swiss camera, its aluminum, its technical, but they're all kind of the same thing—and you use that because you can do things with that camera that you can't do with a regular camera. So, if you think about taking a picture of a tall building, you look up and you snap the photo, and the perspective lines converge. With a large format camera, you can just take the lens and raise it up, and as long as the lens and the film stay parallel to the face of the building, the vertical lines will never converge. They'll be parallel. So, what it means is that the lens of the camera casts a much bigger image than the sheet of film. And basically, you can move the sheet of film around inside that image circle. If you ever look in an architectural magazine you can see all the lines are vertical, they never converge. That's why for the Historic American Building Survey you're required to do that, because somebody might measure off of those images. If you have it in perspective, it's a lot harder to figure out what the size of something is and what the size of something in the distance is. But if you've got it adjusted, it's a technical document and you can kind of measure off it easier.

Jansons: Is that why you chose to use this camera?

Cowan: Well, if I wanted to do this historic preservation work, then you kind of have to. It's prescriptive. Also, it's just a really interesting way to take photographs. My daughter's getting ready to graduate from high school, so I did her senior pictures with these old cameras. And just two years ago, I went on a trip, I had an artist residency in the Arctic, so I went to Svalbard, which is a group of islands up north of Norway, about halfway between the top of Norway and the North Pole. We spent three weeks sailing on a tall ship. Old traditional sails and stuff. I brought a large format camera and we were in the zodiacs and—we'd land on shores. We never saw another person the whole time we were up there. And so I developed the film on the ship while we were sailing around. I don't know if you've seen my website, but there's a section on there that's about the Arctic. So all those were developed up there, and it just has a different look and feel than a lot of other photographs. Now that I have been doing this long enough, it's fairly easy to set up and take these kinds of photographs, when you first start out... there's just a lot of little things you can get wrong. But yeah, it's been great and so I've been able to do it as work, but also kind of as more of an artistic hobby.

Jansons What kind of things do you look for when taking photos?

Cowan: When I did the Arctic trip, I didn't know what we were going to encounter. Historically, like 100 years ago or more, there were polar photographers that were doing work with these kind of cameras. Frank Hurley traveled with Shackleton, and Herbert Ponting and others were travelling on these ships and photographing everything. So, that whole trip I was just kind of acting like an expedition photographer, and a documentary photographer, just trying to take pictures of things as we traveled. It's not very spontaneous. It takes some time to set the camera up, you've got to compose the image on the glass... you can't just snap off a photo, so it's definitely more deliberative. Aside from that, there is mostly nature photography up there, landscapes, and a little bit of wildlife. Wildlife is hard, but we had a walrus colony, so that was kind of cool. They move around a lot, but they sit in one spot. I also, when we were up there, asked people to sit for portraits, and so that was kind of fun to do because it's real deliberative portraiture, because you know, it's not candid. I still have- like this week we were out on a fishing trip, so I have a little Rolleiflex, a medium format camera and was taking some pictures—that's a little more candid. I was taking pictures of my son and my dad holding their fish up. And I do photograph architecture and engineering, so like the Willamette Falls project, the locks, that was kind of cool because we got to try to figure out how to photograph lock doors and the river going through and the mechanics of all that kind of stuff and the construction. One thing that was cool was that, at one point, they de-watered one of the locks, so I got to go down in there and take photographs of these old basalt foundations that were put down in the 1870s. And they've been underwater. I think they de-water these locks periodically to do maintenance, but most of the time they are under two and a half stories of water and they're beautiful. And so, it was kind of a... That's one of the neat things—occasionally you get access to these things that you would have no reason to ever go see in your life. That's kind of fun. Yeah, the portraiture thing I've been wanting to do more of. I've been trying to focus on doing more of that kind of work. After having done the historic survey stuff, one of the things that occurred to me is there were these other New Deal programs like Farm Security or Works Progress that did a much better job of documenting the experience people were having at that time after the Great Depression. And the Building Survey is very dry by comparison because it's all about space, and there's really nothing with people in any of that body of work. And so, to me it kind of felt like it would be interesting to, along the way, try to do some more work to photograph people that are living and working in places like that. In the Arctic it made sense. We were traveling around and we've got an international crew that we were with, and some of them were guides, some of them were sailors. It was nice to try to make a portrait of them in the environment that they're working in. So, we'll see, I don't know if that'll... when you get hired to do a job to go and document a place you're not looking for pictures of people anyway, and usually the period of significance of the place you're photographing, none of those people are around anymore anyway. But there's so much. It's a big world, it's kind of fun to take these older cameras that are slower and deliberate and try to figure out how to represent what you're seeing.

Jansons: That's really cool. My grandpa likes photography and so he has a bunch of old cameras, and I've kind of heard him say the same thing, where he likes older cameras because you're more thoughtful, more deliberate... it's just cool.

Cowan: Yeah, you take fewer pictures, but you take a picture like it matters, is the way somebody told me once. And I've got nothing against digital photography, or anything like that. I do it, and I think having a phone in your pocket is a big deal because it also shapes the way that you see things. You think about things in a different way, how you visually interpret stuff. But then, yeah. If your grandfather has a camera, you might want to have him show you how to do that. Shoot a few rolls of film and it will change your perspective. And it will improve your digital photography. It's all different perspectives and ways of approaching. It's good to flex different thought muscles about what you're composing or what you're trying to interpret.

Jansons: Well, I'm about out of time, but thank you so much for meeting! This has been so great to hear your stories and perspective.

Cowan: My pleasure, this has been fun!

(end of interview)