

The New York Public Library will be closed on Monday, January 18 in observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.



## INTERVIEWS

# Meet the Artist: David Penner

by Sherri Machlin, Mulberry Street Library

June 15, 2015

On view now through June 29, 2015 in the Community Room of [Mulberry Street Library](#) are the [photographs of David Penner](#). This series he is presenting is called "Manhattan Pairs" and features portraits of pairs of people in various NYC locales. I spoke with David recently about his photography.

### How did you first become interested in photography as a medium?

In my youth, I was a serious oboist, but had to stop due to a hand injury. Photography filled this void left by the absence of music, and allowed me to be an artist again. There are also many photographers in my family. Photography is a good medium for me, because it allows you to teach yourself, and create your own technique. In this way, it is the antithesis of classical music and ballet, where you cannot attain a high level of technical proficiency without having spent many years at a conservatory.

Photography is precisely the opposite: Many great photographers are self taught, and this can allow for greater leeway in regards to one's creativity. Street photography and documentary photography are also a good match for me, because they allow you to merge artistry with an intellectual sensibility.





**Who are some of your favorite photographers, artists, and influences?**

There are many photographers I like, but I'm particularly fond of Sebastião Salgado, Steve McCurry, Nan Goldin, Mary Ellen Mark and Don McCullin. I've also been extremely influenced by classical music, the cinema, literature, as well as the painters Egon Schiele, Otto Dix, Degas, George Grosz and Renoir.

**Your subjects are mostly people—how do you approach your subjects? How do you select story ideas?**

I approach people as respectfully as I can. Story ideas come about by spending many hours reading, people watching, and looking at the work of great photographers and artists.



**How has the digital era affected how you approach photography? What do you think its strengths and weaknesses are compared to shooting film?**

Digital has made making a living in photography extremely difficult, because it has added literally hundreds of millions of additional photographers to the planet. Many people think that simply because they have a camera, they are a photographer, and this is not the case; so there is sometimes a lack of understanding of what quality photography really is. There is also sometimes a lack of understanding of the challenges of shooting digitally, as many people think, "Anybody can do that. You just press a button." Digital has made it easier to edit your own work, as the digital darkroom is infinitely more accessible than the traditional wet darkroom, where if you make a mistake, you can totally destroy a roll of film.

**What made you decide to do portraits in black and white as opposed to color?**

Every photographer tends to gravitate towards one or the other, and neither is superior.

It is simply a matter of personal taste. It would be impossible to imagine [Ansel Adams](#) in color, and it would be impossible to imagine [Steve McCurry](#) or [William Albert Allard](#) in black and white. Regardless of which medium they choose—or in actuality which medium *chooses them*—the black and white or color they shoot in becomes an inextricable part of their artistic voice. I once met with a big shot photography agent, who looked at my black and white prints, and said, "All the people you like are dead." Yet [Salgado](#), [Enri Canaj](#), [Jacob Aue Sobol](#), [Jessica Lehrman](#), [Jeff Gusky](#) and many other fine photographers, are alive and still shoot in black and white. The point is not to try and live in the past, but to embrace black and white when you hear its sacred calling. When I put a portrait in black and white, it allows me in some mysterious and cryptic way, to communicate something I cannot communicate in color. Sometimes I cannot truly see the image until it is in black and white. And with

black and white, I can let the portrait sing, and reveal the person's soul in all its pain and beauty.

### You also shoot food as a subject, can you tell me a little about this interest?

Yes, I've shot hundreds of restaurants around the city. In order to do food photography, you need to have a love of food, and also have a good feel for shooting with a tripod. It's also important to understand that a great chef is an artist.

### What drew you to exhibiting photography in a library space?

The idea of exhibiting in a library appeals to me because it is so accessible and unpretentious.

Join us for a [reception](#) for David Penner's "Manhattan Pairs" on Monday June 15 at 5:15 pm in the Community Room of Mulberry Street Library. Light refreshments will be served.

[View all posts by Sherri Machlin](#)

---

## COMMENTS

*Patron-generated content represents the views and interpretations of the patron, not necessarily those of The New York Public Library. For more information see [NYPL's Website Terms and Conditions](#).*

---

#### **Great photos..**

Submitted by Caroline (not verified) on June 17, 2015 - 5:43pm

Enjoyed the interview too!

REPLY

---

#### **David Penner**

Submitted by Jan Giles (not verified) on June 18, 2015 - 10:35am

I have not yet seen the show, but this interview solidifies my current interpretation of how photography is approached and viewed by the general public today. The digital camera has affected the medium, in both a negative and positive way.. It is refreshing to hear a photographer speak about a mistake in a "wet" darkroom. That type of photography is a true science as well.

REPLY

---

#### **Go see David Penner's photos**

Submitted by [Robert Sebastiano](#) (not verified) on June 23, 2015 - 3:21pm

Take the opportunity to see David Penner's photographs "in real life." David's images take on added impact when viewed in person. Doing so results in a much more immediate and intimate experience than that provided by a computer screen.

REPLY

## **David Penner's Photography**

Submitted by Ralph Price  
(not verified) on June 25,  
2015 - 11:48am

Penner has an eye for what is called "the human condition" and the skill to capture it on film.

[REPLY](#)

---

## **Beautiful photos**

Submitted by Nicholas (not  
verified) on June 25, 2015 -  
3:45pm

I love these engaging images. David's work simultaneously captures the unique feel of New York and speaks to our shared humanity across lines such as class, race, and age.

[REPLY](#)

---

## **David Penner's Photos**

Submitted by Nicholas (not  
verified) on June 25, 2015 -  
8:54pm

These images are so engaging. They capture something unique to New York and at the same time they create a sense of intimacy that transcends particularities of place and time and softens divisions like class and race. Go see them in person!

[REPLY](#)

---

## **David Penner's Photography**

Submitted by Margaret  
Strauss (not verified) on  
June 27, 2015 - 2:26pm

The 'Manhattan Pairs' exhibit is very engaging. David captures the many faces of our city as well as the many relationships as seen in the 'pairs'. A really creative collection.

[REPLY](#)

---

## **Manhattan Pairs**

Submitted by Patrick  
Hughes (not verified) on  
June 27, 2015 - 3:33pm

Penner's photography captures people in a light that is neither flattering nor critical. Instead, each subject is distinguishable and unique, like the city of New York, from which he hails. From just a glance, one gets a sense of the complexity of the world and those live in it. Each of Penner's subjects bathes in a naturalistic environment, where the observer sees real people, not actors staged in poses. With Manhattan Pairs, these are not "typical" couples, but unique people whom you might see every day in Manhattan. The work is inspiring and thoughtful. Not limited to black-and-white shots of real people, Penner's other shows, including Manhattan Mannequins and The Wondrous People of Bryant Park, have proven to be equally provocative and blissfully enjoyable. One gets the impression that Penner is both a pragmatist and an intellectual, who can capture that sense of uniqueness that everyone carries. See Manhattan Pairs and you will feel enlightened. Patrick Hughes, artistic



consultant and arts administrator

REPLY

**David Penner's  
photographs**

Submitted by Jesus Diaz  
(not verified) on June 29,  
2015 - 11:19am

You try and guess what a photographer is searching for in his/her life. These life affirming photographs capture friendship - and they are wonderful.

REPLY

**POST NEW COMMENT****Your name****E-mail**

The content of this field is kept private and will not be shown publicly.

**Homepage****Subject****Comment \***

Patrons who contribute comments are asked to read our [Policy on Patron-Generated Web Content](#).

[View our privacy policy](#)

Save

Preview

DONATE

[About NYPL](#)



[Privacy Policy](#)

[Rules & Regulations](#)

© The New York Public Library, 2016