

Interview: Ben Eden

DOCUMENTARY WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHY



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Ben, to get us started: You're a sought-after photojournalist. Your photographs are well used to hanging on museum walls. What brought you to wedding photography?

Friends of mine were getting married and asked me to photograph their wedding. In one breath, I answered that I was an artist, not a, quote unquote, wedding photographer. "That's just why we want you to do it," they countered. After they assured me that I could shoot my way, "whatever and however I liked" and offered to hire me at the going rate for upscale wedding photography - I surrendered. The rest is history: The photos yielded accolades and further commissions. I realized that weddings can be legitimate and worthy pictorial assignments:

I now in fact feel it's a privilege to take part in the culmination of two people's lives: Interpreting and arresting the ebbing flow of feelings and emotions, expressions and situations is indeed a very creative and rewarding experience - professionally and personally.



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Something Different's editor Sonia Pawley chats with London-based photographer Ben Eden about his work and about what documentary wedding photography is and isn't:

Still, isn't it an effort to reconcile your artistic image with wedding photography?

I was concerned about this at first, loath to become too commercial or tatter my reputation in the art circles. My solution is quite simple: I limit myself to a maximum of 12 weddings per year. And I only accept commissions where I know that I will be able to - in fact will be encouraged to - treat them as a documentary photography assignment.

How would you describe your style, then?

Take your pick: Documentary wedding photography - my favorite -, wedding photojournalism or reportage wedding photography. Sometimes you can also hear the term candid photography. It is quite confusing, even from within the profession. Fortunately, all these mean pretty much the same thing: A flight away from the set-up and posed shots as we know them from high-street window displays or our parent's wedding albums. (I must admit I have a liking for vintage wedding photographs, though.) True, I have seen offers of "reportage style coverage" meaning portraits and situations set up the way to look natural. But in general, documentary photography really is almost a self-explaining term: The aim is to be everywhere at once, a welcome yet unnoticed observer at the same time: Capturing - documenting - all the beauty and emotions as they occur naturally.



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And how about the traditional family portraits?

Good point. Yes, they are what most clients "also want," albeit often less of it than would traditionally be required. Most documentary wedding photographers - including myself - accommodate such wishes. Still, even then the photographer will apply himself to create livelier, more revealing images. Finally, it's up to the client to decide how much of their and the photographers time they want to invest into portraits. When traditional studio-style portraits are expected, hiring a specialized portrait photographer for the job is a good idea.



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How should one choose a documentary wedding photographer?

Just as with all visual artists, it's exceedingly simple: Have a look at his or her work. The web makes it very easy to "go through" dozens of photographers before making a decision. In my opinion, it's far more informative to review 20 photographs from a single wedding than 20 best shots selected from 20 different ones. Personality matters, too: You'll get some idea from the design and text on the website. Then, if at all possible, arrange to meet in person. A conference phone call no matter what: This is what I do with my international clients. It's very important that the photographer and the couple "click" together in terms of personality. After all, you'll be granting this stranger quite liberal access to your intimate life - you want to feel comfortable, in fact enjoy the photographer's company. The photos will reflect this - and more fun will be had by all. Trust your instincts here. Finally, there are thousands of details that benefit from being discussed in person. You can also profit from the photographer's experience as far as planning your wedding is concerned.

What final wedding tip would you share with Something Different's readers?

I will give you two that I can think of right now: First, let there be light! By planning the ceremony during daylight hours and making sure that the reception venue's illumination isn't completely dimmed you will give your photographer what he needs to avoid using flash. Not only will available light photographs turn out less usual and more attractive - your event will benefit from no blinding flashes as well.

Second, try to limit guest photography: The atmosphere of your ceremony suffers enough from the presence of your hired photographer, try as hard as he or she might. Imagine just one collateral guest emerging from the rear rows armed with his proudly flashing and beeping camcorder.. I suggest putting a kindly worded note on your invitations.