




elipsis magic...



Timothy Archibald lets go

By Eric Minton



he reason this career is interesting to people,” Timothy Archibald says, “is because there is no ...”—the phone connection is a bit fuzzy, and it sounds like he says “math.” Asked to repeat, Archibald says, “There is no map, no trajectory you can copy.” Oh, map. When he’s told that it sounded like he’d said a photography career has no math, he pauses, weighing the veracity in that word, and makes a statement no interviewer has ever heard: “Use whichever is most intriguing.”

That reflects Archibald’s approach to his work and his unmapped career. His path to success as a commercial, corporate, and editorial photographer was, by his intent, the non-path to success. To this day, the 48-year-old father of two who works out of his garage in El Sobrante, California, thinks he’s faking it. “I always feel like I’m backing into a project.” Art directors like him, but getting clients on board is a hurdle, he says, perhaps because his work is best summed up in one photo editor’s description: “It kind of looks like you’re telling a story and you left the last sentence out.”

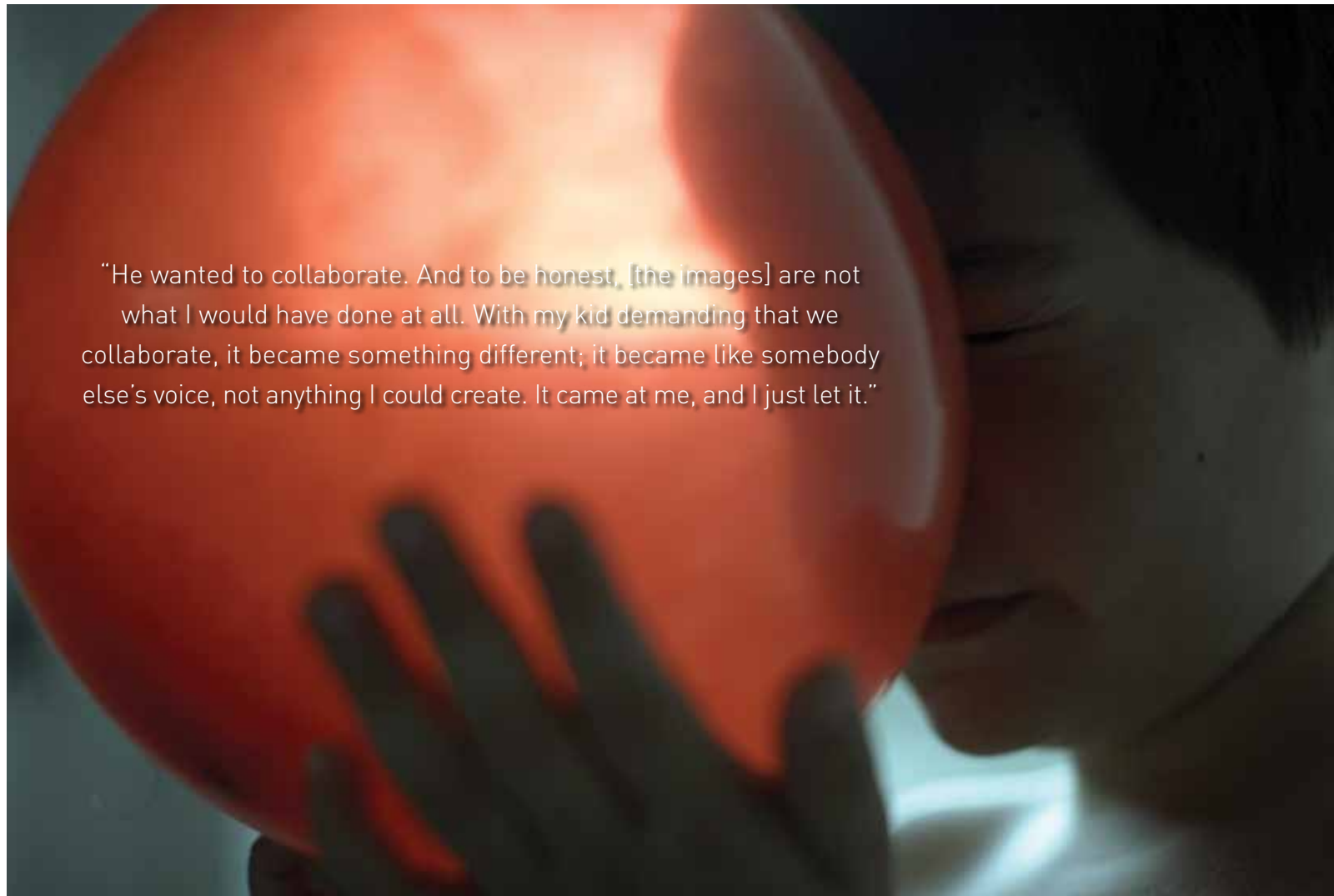
On his website, Archibald proudly proclaims himself a photography nerd, but his nerdism has nothing to do with technical matter. It’s all about his attention for a singular interest. “Photography gave me the thing to be nerdy about,” he says, a means for viewing all the

world has to offer, from the mundane to the exotic, from the ordinary to the quirky—often all that in the same image.

He discovered photography at age 14 when his brother took a class at Union College in Schenectady, New York, where they grew up. Martin Benjamin was the teacher. “He was always into seeing what would happen if you taught photography to someone you might not expect: people with mental disabilities or Down syndrome or senior citizens—putting photography in the hands of everyone.” Archibald grew interested in what his brother was doing, and when his brother shared the news with his teacher, Benjamin put photography into the hands of the 14-year-old, enrolling him in his classes all through high school. Archibald learned technique and history, but most of all he learned self-expression. “And to learn self-expression as a teenager was a powerful thing.”

This played into his selection of Penn State for his art degree. “It wasn’t an intense art school program; it was a state university. If I was in an intense art school, I would have been eaten alive.” His most important education at the university came from working on the student newspaper, which was run like a business. “I immediately got attracted to that. I think that’s where I learned to take my





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esoteric art interest and learn how to use it in an applied way. I learned how to do an assignment.” He also learned what kind of assignments he liked; while most of the paper’s photographers clamored to shoot the football games, Archibald grabbed the student protest and sorority rush assignments.

After college Archibald eschewed working as an assistant, choosing to take assignments for \$15 and do his own thing rather than make \$200 a day assisting an established pro. “I always wanted to be the decision maker,” he says. “The way I could get the skills to do the photos I wanted to do was get more at-bats.” He started freelancing for alternative newspapers, a growing industry at the time he graduated in 1989. He moved to Tucson, Arizona, because it was cheap and two-and-a-half years later landed at the *Phoenix New Times* as the staff photographer, the slingshot gig of his career trajectory. As sole photographer for the paper, he worked two feature stories a week as well as shooting concerts and restaurant reviews. “They encouraged my photographs to have attitude and to do stories that were just photographs,” he says. “Photos I did there don’t look like what I do now, but it was the big growth period.” He also learned much about storytelling from the writers he accompanied on assignments.

But by his own admission he stayed a year too long and grew complacent. When he moved with his then-wife to Davis, California, as she entered the University of California, his career stalled. “You think



everyone is waiting for you. These are the things you tell yourself because if you don’t tell yourself these things, there is no way you could ever do this career.” Nevertheless, he says, there’s nothing like hitting the bottom to get you motivated.

It was nearly a year before Archibald felt his career was back on track. The gateway was editorial assignments riding the wave of interest in the region’s blooming tech industry. He specialized in portraits—or, rather, portraits with his singular perspective. His photographs were “kindly,” he says, but they “still had cynicism, or objectivity, or that we were all in on the joke. They weren’t mean, but they weren’t kissing up, either.”

Out of his style of portraiture came commercial assignments and corporate assignments, too. These days his income is split evenly across all three types, but about 10 percent comes from personal projects, such as his most recent, “The Sun Sets Early,” featuring his current hometown, El Sobrante, at Halloween. The city’s name translates as “the leftovers,” and through his spare, black-and-white, eerily off-kilter photos he portrays the town itself. “Halloween is a kind of exotic homemade theatricality, but it was a way that allowed me to focus on the more subtle qualities of the town: these humble homes, long, unpaved alleyways, and nooks and crannies.”

Ironically, his personal projects are an exercise in structure, creating a regimen for photographing images, which is a break from the curve-



balls Archibald gets in his commercial work. One such curveball turned into a home run when *Smithsonian Magazine* tapped him to photo-illustrate the article “How the Chicken Conquered the World.” After brainstorming, Archibald proposed doing portraits of various rare and unusual chickens. The photo editor endorsed the idea, but the editor trumped it, asking instead for raw chickens dressed as characters in history: Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Napoleon, Confucius, Abraham Lincoln. Both Archibald and the photo editor thought it was a terrible idea, but when Archibald called his stylist and told her the assignment, “It was like asking her where do you get lollipops,”

he said. “No visual person would think we should dress up chickens as characters. If I had to push myself like that, it never would have happened. I don’t know how to give myself a curveball.”

And yet his most successful personal project came off another curveball, this one thrown by his own son, then 5 years old and later diagnosed with autism. At the time, they just knew his behavior was dominating the house and school. Archibald decided to observe him through photography, but “He wanted to collaborate. And to be honest, [the images] are not what I would have done at all. With my kid demanding that we collaborate, it became something different; it be-

came like somebody else's voice, not anything I could create. It came at me, and I just let it." The resulting book, "Echolilia," published in 2010 and selling for \$130 per copy, continues to be Archibald's best-seller and the project that got him national attention.

"The things that have rewarded me was when I let go of what I thought the photo was supposed to look like or the assignment was supposed to be or even the project I thought I was doing and used only what I had," Archibald says. He's not talking technically, as in lights, lenses, and filters, but psychologically. "If I only had my viewpoint or my personality or my strong opinion on the subject, that's the thing that fueled the images that were most rewarding." Self-expression remains his most important tool.

In fact, his Canon is supplemented increasingly by his iPhone, which he uses for more things than people would ever guess, he says. He retraces the history of the Leica. "When it came out, people said that's not real photography. We're seeing the same thing with the iPhone. One thing in photography is there's always going to be people who tell you what's not photography. You needed the gear. But now every-

body has the gear with iPhones. It has made the other things more important, like connection with the subject and use of imagination and storytelling and the other intangibles."

For Archibald, it's those intangibles—the missing sentence in the story—that intrigue. •

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