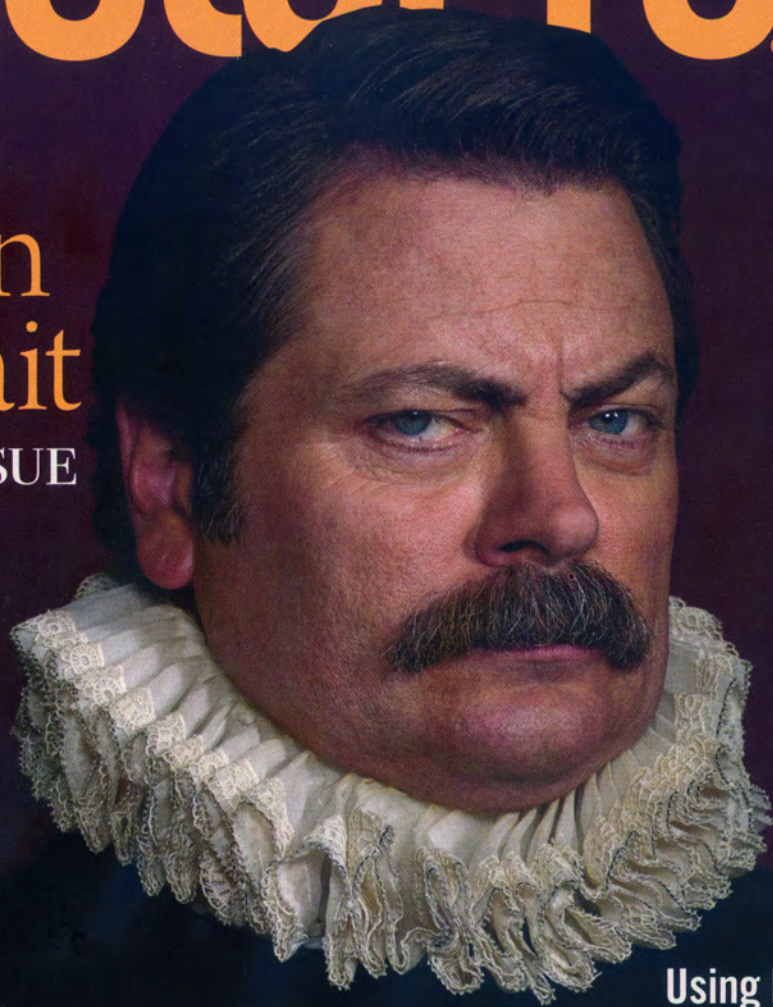


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OCTOBER 2019

# Amy Touchette

CAPTURES the VISUAL PERSONALITY  
*of the Street*

"Us, No. 14" from Us. "It's a gift when subjects on the street tell you about their relationship without saying a word," says Touchette.



## Shooting street photos lets this photographer go out into the world and live a more authentic and meaningful life

by Jill Waterman | Photography By Amy Touchette

**As any New Yorker** will tell you, the events of September 11, 2001, cast an indelible shadow over their life experiences. But for one New Yorker, in particular, street portrait photographer Amy Touchette, it was this very tragic experience that led her to find a calling in photography.

### Capturing Memories

Growing up in a suburb of Syracuse, New York, Touchette gravitated to the arts at an early age. "I always had cameras, I just didn't think of photography as an artistic thing," she says. "I thought of it as memories, just typical photo album stuff."

During the school year, she spent a lot of time in the art room. "I was really into figure drawing," she explains. "I liked the challenge of drawing faces because I felt like if something was wrong, it was obvious."

Touchette minored in studio art in college, earning bachelor's and master's degrees in literature, before gravitating to New York City to enter the publishing world. She moved up through the ranks from writer to editor to managing editor, when she suddenly realized that she just didn't enjoy the corporate life. During the summer of 2001, she forbade herself from working overtime, going home to work on a series of large-scale black-and-white oil portraits of jazz musicians instead.

"And then September 11th happened a few months later," she says. "We were living in the West Village, and it was just an extremely intense experience."

Fearful and confused about what to do with her life, Touchette "decided to figure out what I would want to do in an ideal world." This meant turning her back on almost everything: Her past resume, her university degrees and any practical thoughts and feelings of intimidation that could interrupt potential options being carried out. "I needed to live a life that felt more authentic," she says. "There seemed no time to waste."

She had a few photographer friends and was fascinated by their adventures. "Photography lets you go out into the world. It's so different than writing and painting, which are so introverted and lonely," she says.

Additionally, she had long been fascinated with the people of New York, explaining, "Truth is stranger than fiction, and that's never more evident than in New York City."

Realizing that photography would allow her to explore this fascination with the characters around her, she decided to take a photo class at the International Center of Photography (ICP).

After learning to develop film and print in the dark-room during her first class, she worked her way through the other introductory courses, moving on to classes of all sorts. Says Touchette, "If a photographer I admired offered a class, I would take that. Then I started working as a teacher's assistant."

Her earliest camera was the Canon AE-1. "That's what I used to capture memories," she says. By the time she arrived at ICP, digital had started, but "it wasn't on the radar at school." Given her love of New York's social fabric, she was always very street-focused, so to fit with that aesthetic, she purchased a Leica M7 rangefinder as soon as she could.

### Shoot The Arrow

During the time Touchette was taking a Photo II course at ICP, she happened to catch a performance of the neo-burlesque icon the World Famous \*BOB\*. "The first time I saw her perform, I was captivated," she recalls. "I had a vision of a documentary series that would contrast her public life with private, intimate moments."

After seeking out a second performance with her camera in tow, Touchette made prints and met up with the dancer to present the images, and pitch the idea of a fly-on-the-wall documentary project. "I was always really interested in how you gain someone's trust so they'll allow you to make



"5th Ave, Union Square, Manhattan" from *Street Dailies*. "Some of my favorite subjects in NYC are the everyday people who keep it running," says Touchette.

a picture," Touchette explains. "I was super interested in her, but I also felt, 'Now, here's the ultimate challenge. She doesn't know me from anyone.'"

For the next four years, the World Famous \*BOB\* became Touchette's muse, initially during three-hour sessions and then for 24-hour periods. "That's when some magical stuff started to happen," she says. "I would eat what she ate, sleep in her bed, do whatever she had scheduled for those 24 hours. And it was great because for 24 hours all I thought about was photography."

Touchette was still new to

photography and was navigating the technical aspects and aesthetic options. "So there were lots of unsuccessful pictures," she admits. To help her make sense of everything, she turned to Karen Marshall, one of her teachers at ICP.

"Karen always talks about photography as a conversation," says Touchette. "You start with this intention to make a certain photograph, and then you look at your film, and that's when your photos talk back. They respond to your intention. You listen to what they say, and you

photograph some more. And that conversation plays out on a continuous loop until your project is done.

After four years of listening to and working with her pictures, Touchette published *Shoot the Arrow: A Portrait of the World Famous \*BOB\** with Un-Gye Press in 2013.

### Portrait Profiles

While working on *Shoot the Arrow*, Touchette was also photographing on the street with her rangefinder. "In doing that, I started to see different patterns of people," she explains, "and



**"Us, No. 25" from Us.** "Photographing on the street is an antidepressant for many reasons," says Touchette. "In this image, seeing how deeply humans can connect is heartening and reassuring."

I just felt the compulsion to photograph the patterns, and then put them together to see what they looked like."

Taking what she had learned about gaining trust from her first project, she applied it to photographing strangers on the street "to see how you do it in super short term." This was also accompanied by a change in camera format. "The square seemed like where I should head," Touchette explains, "being that it's a pretty conventional portrait format." She bought a Yashica-Mat to test it out and eventually purchased the

Rolleiflex 3.5 F Planar she uses today.

Collectively, she refers to this work as Portrait Profiles, yet there are multiple series of Rolleiflex pictures with underlying themes, including The Insiders, portraits that explore the individual; The Young Series, portraits that make connections between teenagers in New York, O'ahu and Tokyo; and Us, portraits that revere pairs who have uncanny similarities in dress and pose.

### Visual Personalities

Touchette has a penchant for

organization—a compulsion that extends to her pictures and is also evident in the habits she adopts in the image-making process.

"I usually photograph all summer," she says, "and don't develop my film until fall. And then, in the wintertime, I make contact sheets and work prints. It's really enjoyable not to multi-task and stay really focused."

When she's in shooting mode, her plan is to "photograph every day from 4 p.m. to sundown." She particularly likes weekends, when potential

subjects are more plentiful and people tend to be in a better mood. Keeping to the shady side of the street as a lighting preference, she casts a wide net, looking for willing subjects and details that the camera can pick up.

She uses the term “visual personality” to describe what she looks for. “Some people don’t wear themselves on their sleeves visually, and others do,” she says, “whether it’s eccentric clothing, or a certain detail on their face, or a style

that allows your imagination to take over.”

Her Rolleiflex portraits are collaborative endeavors. She approaches a potential subject, asks if she can make a portrait and engages them in a short conversation while taking a meter reading and framing the shot. The encounter is amicable and brief, usually exposing only two frames.

### Street Dailies

In 2012, Touchette began making

“Flushing Ave Station, Bushwick, Brooklyn” from Street Dailies. “Each night, I look at the images I made on my cameraphone, select the best one, push it through an Instagram filter, and share it,” says Touchette. “It’s so fulfilling to experience the gamut of the process everyday and liberating to not be so precious about image making.”

### Street Dailies Playing Cards

In December 2019, Touchette is releasing a deck of playing cards based on her Street Dailies in New York. “Each card has a unique portrait of a New Yorker on it, and the suits comprise various groups,” she explains. “The spades are grannies. Workers are diamonds. Twins and sets are clubs, and beloved characters are hearts. I’m very inspired in New York City, so this is a way for me to create an homage to the city and present a lot of photos in a concise little object that’s relatively inexpensive that people can actually play with.”

For further details about the cards and to learn more about Amy Touchette, visit her website at [amytouchette.com](http://amytouchette.com).



street portraits with her iPhone, her first digital camera.

The creative freedom this afforded her was a revelation. Harkening back to her school years, she remarks, "It's like sketching in an art class on newspaper, throw-away paper."

Contrary to her Rolleiflex portraits, Touchette's iPhone pictures are candid and prolific. In a nod to their spontaneous nature, she calls them Street Dailies. "I can shoot really cavalierly with an iPhone," she explains, "and with the Rolleiflex, I don't feel cavalier at all. It's concentrated and deliberate."

Yet there are similarities between her two portrait styles: The color palette, the square format and, most significantly, the eye contact with her subjects.

"I really like eye contact, so when I photograph, I wait for the person I'm interested in to look at me or look my way," she says. "A lot of times I'll have to anticipate that moment happening so that I'm there and ready. To a certain degree, Street Dailies have an aspect of living in the future that feels a lot different than making collaborative portraits."

Although technology has evolved since Touchette first got her phone, she prefers her iPhone 6 SE over newer, larger models, saying, "It was the last phone with the best camera at the smallest size. The cameraphone is the most stealth camera that's ever existed, and obviously the smaller, the more stealth," she adds. "But it's also covert in that people don't necessarily know why you're using it. Maybe they see it, but they don't know if I'm taking a selfie or looking at a map. So there are all kinds of great opportunities."

### Candid Camera Technique

Always armed with her phone, Touchette makes Street Dailies as she goes about her daily life. Due to the phone's small size, she's able to photograph with one hand. "I tell it where to focus, which is also where it exposes. And then maybe I adjust



"Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd, Harlem, Manhattan" from Street Dailies. Touchette feels that reflections on the street are a serendipitous way to make a photograph more complex. "Drawing a relationship between two worlds," she says, "gives the viewer that much more to be engaged with."

the exposure," she notes. "At that point, they usually see me, but it all unfolds quickly."

She shoots with the phone's native camera app, and then uses Instagram filters before posting the image. "It's totally mobile," says Touchette. "I don't take them into Photoshop or any other post-processing programs."

While she admits that photographing people on the fly, without interaction, can get a little empty, combining the discipline of her Rolleiflex pictures with the unfettered nature of her iPhone work is particularly satisfying. Yet for Touchette, Street Dailies have an even more essential purpose. "Candid photographs have an important role in our culture," she says. "They tell us where we came from without the heavy hand of the photographer."

### Permission to Create

Touchette often lectures and teaches workshops about the art of photographing strangers. In her experience,

the first challenge to overcome is this: "Even though students are interested in photographing people on the street, a lot of them think it's a little bit wrong, especially without permission."

According to Touchette, "If you have that thought in your head, and you're trying to make candid photographs, picture-making is going to be pretty difficult. People will pick up on your insecurities and therefore also believe that making portraits without permission is wrong."

To overcome this hurdle, she advises students to look up all the iconic street photographs that have made a valuable contribution to our history. Rip them out of magazines and put them up on your wall. By living with these images and walking past them every day, they'll seep into your subconscious so that not only will you know they're important but you'll also come to feel it. "If you don't believe in what you're doing, you have no foundation to grow from," she asserts.