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Jake Rajs Personally speaking, by Mala Hoffman

Though he had toyed with other media, such as painting and sculpture, and even identified himself as a poet for a while, there was another form of creative expression out there for Jake Rajs. "I saw a book of poems and photographs, and thought 'what a great idea,'" he recalls. "So I got myself a camera. The poetry wasn't as good as the photography. I found I could say it better without words. Every artist uses a different vehicle to express themselves. For me, it's the camera."

Once he found his tool, he then worked on building his experience, first by assisting other photographers in New York City ("By washing floors and toilets," he says) and then by pounding on pavement and doors. "Then people just started buying my work," Rajs adds.

Since those humble beginnings, Rajs has published seven books, from one focusing on New York City that came out in 1985 to *These United States*, an enormous limited edition coffee table book with an introduction by Walter Cronkite. In fact, it was in part because of that collection, published by Rizzoli in 2003, that Rajs was selected as "Best Observer" in this month's *Reader's Digest* special issue featuring America's 100 Best. "Art has a life of its own," Rajs shrugs. "Actually, I'm more thrilled that my 14-year-old daughter took my portrait for that article." Both daughters Chloe and Olivia attend New Paltz Middle School.

Rajs was born in Poland and moved to Israel before coming to Brooklyn at age eight. "My father came first, while we were in Israel," Rajs explains. "Maybe it's my childhood memory talking, but we came on a ship. It took two weeks, and then we arrived in New York harbor. We were all on deck, it was night time, and we see the Statue of Liberty and everyone's crying, I'm crying. Then, early in the morning, we were watching the sun hit the skyline, and everything turns golden. People came for their dreams."

After graduating from high school in New Jersey, where his family had moved, Rajs went to Rutgers University and majored in fine arts. He first came to New Paltz with a girlfriend who was a rock climber, and he says it was that experience that helped build his appreciation of the outdoors. Then, about five years ago, he was living in Colorado with his former wife and daughters when they decided to come back east. "I was looking closer to New York City, Putnam County and areas like that," he recalls. "I started getting a headache and I went up to Mohonk and just relaxed. I thought, why am I not looking for a house here?"

Now he divides his time between New Paltz and New York City while trying to decide which of the many projects in his head will be the one he'll settle on next. "I always pick a story and try to tell it," he says of his artistic process. "Every morning I get a reason to get up, I'm building a story. Then, when I have enough of it, I take it to my publisher and say, this is what I have, do you want to publish it?" Though he has had success with his work, he acknowledges that "you take a chance, take a risk" when art is produced. "It never changes," Rajs says. "You do a piece of art, put it out there and hope somebody wants to buy it."

Over the years, Rajs has focused on New York City and the United States, clocking by his own estimation a million miles criss-crossing the nation. “I have a funny notion that when you shoot overseas and make money doing it, it’s a form of artistic colonization,” he explains. “You should focus on something you know and you care about.”

For his part, Rajs feels his work serves a greater purpose. “I like it because I hope I help humanity,” he says. “By showing beauty or giving another perspective on whatever subject I choose. It’s not whatever you see on T.V. That’s not what New York City is, or what the country is. Then I get to express myself and I get to have fun along the way.”

--Mala Hoffman