

Facing the Capitol

A Conversation Takes Place, Everything Changes

by Bill Stott

Sybil Miller's "Statesmen: Pictures from the Fifty State Capitols," is a collection of reinterpreted portraits of governors, one from each state. In an email exchange Miller discusses the project with Bill Stott, her former American Studies professor at University of Texas at Austin.

Bill Stott: My central suspicion is that your project surprised you. Your starting-out hypothesis, imported from the American Studies courses you'd taken, was that you were going to find regional differences among the images you gathered: the Utah portrait would be different from the Maine—because, if there's no difference among states and regions, why bother to visit every state?

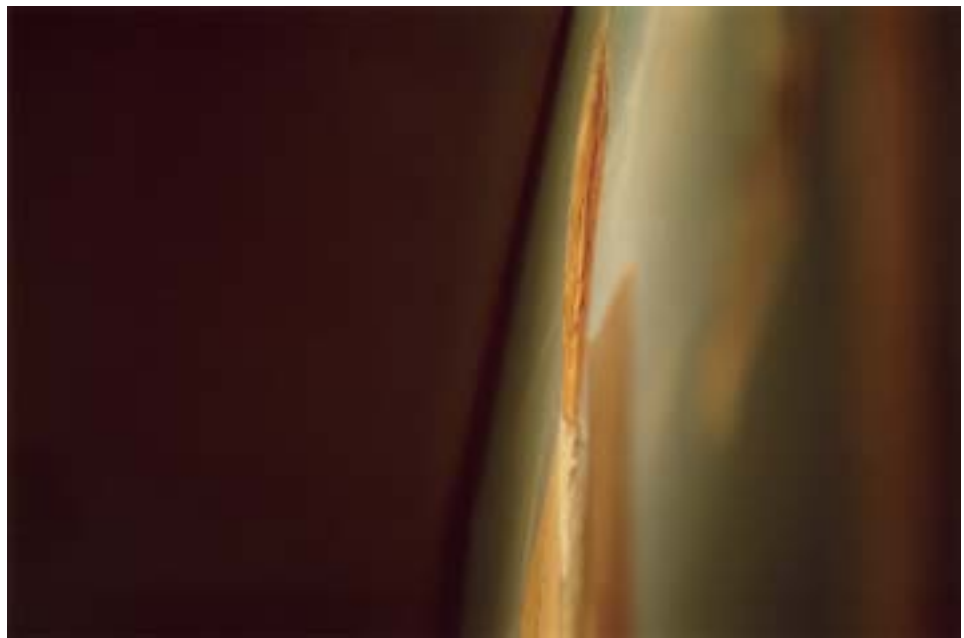
But surprise! There is no difference. The face from Mississippi (page 15) looks as cosmopolitan as the one from Wyoming (page 13). So, first question: did the project persuade you that Americans, at least powerful Americans, are much more similar than they are different?

Sybil Miller: I had few expectations when I started, so nearly everything I found was a surprise. You're right, the portraits are similar but the similarities have a lot to do with time periods—the mid-19th century statesman in

Missouri looks much like his contemporary in Pennsylvania, adopting as they did the conventions of hairstyle and clothing. And of course the overriding common denominator was the pictorial conventions of the time. I did try to find the *one* face that seemed to me to stand for the archetypal Vermonter, Kansan, or Oregonian. Then, after a point, I was also working to avoid repeti-



Maryland



Oregon

tion, so there's the very modern example from Maryland rather than a face from a previous century.

At the beginning, I assumed that all states had nicely painted portraits of their governors, hanging in neat rows in their respective rotundas. Wrong! Many states in the West could not afford to have portraits painted and opted for photographs, some of them taken from early



Nebraska

publications. In New Mexico (page 14, bottom), I found the picture I shot hanging in a dimly lit hallway, a recent black-and-white photo copied from an old photoengraving with the engraver's lines showing through. I also wrongly assumed that the portraits would be easily accessible, on public view, as they are in Austin, the first capitol I worked in. In many places, they are in private areas, such as the governor's office, and I had to get permission to see them. This was easy pre-9/11, a little harder since.

One thing the governors have in common is that the vast majority were ordinary citizens—lots of farmers, businessmen, lawyers—and most dropped back into their previous lives when their terms were up. It's their ultimate anonymity that intrigues me.

BS: If you didn't begin with the idea of demonstrating regional differences, what suggested the project? Did you want a way to justify travel to all fifty states?

SM: Actually, the traveling wasn't that much fun. I only went to most capitols one time but to get the pictures I wanted required two trips to Nebraska, two to North Dakota, and three to Albany. For every day I spent in a place like Honolulu or Juneau, there were 10 days in places I'd rather not go. It was a lot of driving but not much sightseeing.

Really, I was just plain curious as to what I'd find. And

once I went to the first few locations, I had to finish. I hate to be a quitter, though I felt like quitting on my endless trips through the South, still the worst food and hotels of anyplace I went. I also found that I had joined a semi-elite group of tourists who go to every capitol for no real reason, just to go. They rack up the numbers like notches on a gunstock. I guess I did, too.

The project came straight out of the previous one, where I traveled to almost all 50 states over a two year period photographing in local and regional history museums, junk stores, and on the street, making a personal visual history of America. I made a photograph of a "statesman's" portrait in the Mississippi capitol during that project, and started to see potential in the subject. In Austin, the idea took hold.

I nearly always start projects with no clear end in mind; the process of finding out what I don't know is the real project. I know my working philosophy was significantly influenced by my year at Aperion and by the workshop's founder and director, Peter Schlessinger. (Aperion ran from 1971-81). In 1982, Schlessinger wrote: *"The real truth is, we were never primarily interested in photography itself. What we were interested in was life as a shared process and mystery; art as a means to life; and photography as a sub-set of art... We wanted people to get to the point not where 'photography was their life,' but where their life was their life.*

“We developed a method, based mostly on asking workshop participants to produce more images, and look harder at them than they’d previously thought was possible or worthwhile. It was never easy. As painter Agnes Martin said, relevant to Aperion, In reality there are no leaders or followers. Everyone is on his own private line.”

I love the idea that we are each on our own private line. This time, the line led to the fifty state capitols.

BS: So, as an Aperion disciple, you wanted to do something ultimately worth doing and your project, like nearly all photography projects, is about time: the diminishment of greatness, as you suggested earlier. The portraits you picture often show their subjects vibrantly, even shockingly alive—an effect you intensify by getting closer to the image than we common walkers in a statehouse would. The people are alive but they are, almost without exception, pensive, stoic, withdrawn wary, frightened, and sad. This is not a common expression for a politician. Connecticut Governor Rowland just admitted he had accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars of favors, but he didn’t apologize; “Even with the prospect of prison looming,” the *New York Times* wrote (12/24/04), he “remained a politician, emphasizing the positive,” cracking jokes, looking forward. Thus I

have to wonder, were the tragic faces really so predominant among your statesmen or were they the faces you chose as better acknowledging time?

SM: Most of the portraits were ordinary. Some—mostly from New England in the 19th century—had an air of nobility. Some really did look like the famous Charles Wilson Peale portrait of George Washington—our idea of visionary leadership, eyes gazing off to the future. But many others look sad, weak, even foolish. When I saw them, I wondered why the portraitist chose to show that aspect of the sitter’s character when they could have easily Washingtonized them. I think what I did was respond to these odd portraits and look for ways to show other, non-statesman like aspects of the governors. I found that if I moved in close and then moved in closer and used the camera in a certain way, I could take an unremarkable portrayal and find something else there.

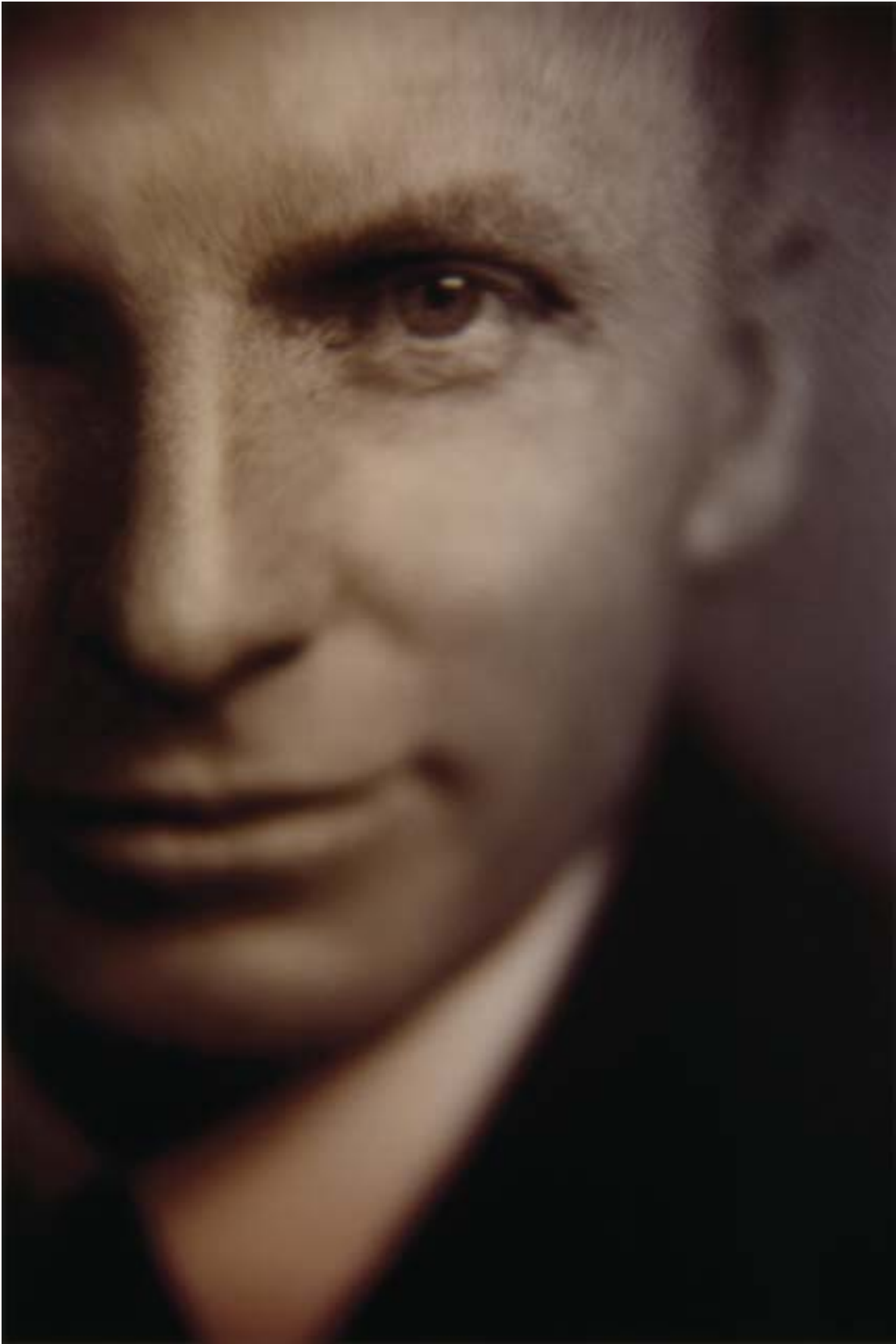
Look at Mr. Oklahoma. Or Mr. Nevada (page 14, top): he already looked a little foolish; I just added the mouse ears from the glare of the lights.

Here’s another way to look at my pictures: they are

text continued on page 15



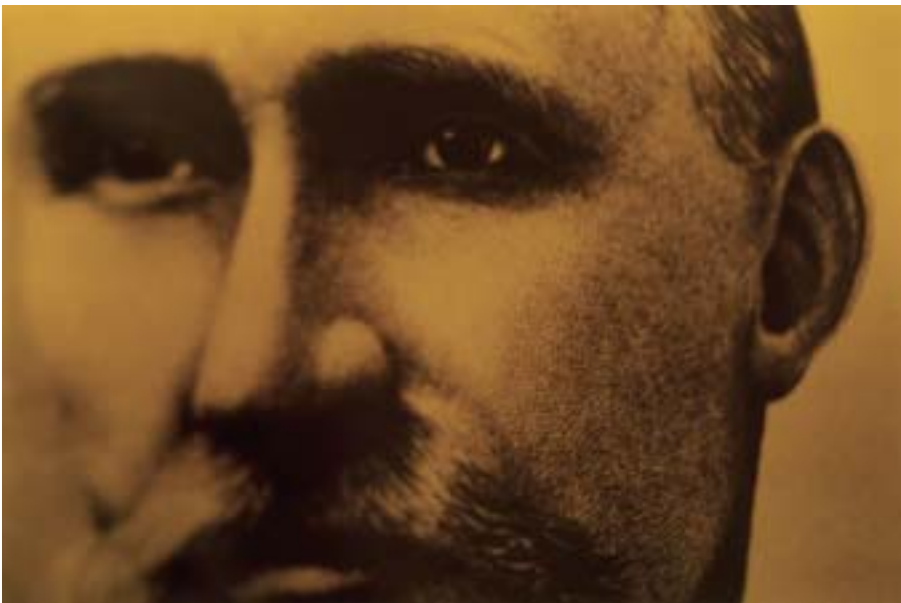
Louisiana



Wyoming



Nevada



New Mexico

Editor's Note: While it was not possible to publish all of the images associated with this article, more images of the Statesmen: Pictures from the Fifty State Capitols, are available on our website: www.cameraarts.com, in the subscribers section.



Mississippi

“anamorphic.” It’s a Greek word that means, “have been reshaped,” sometimes defined as “a controlling distortion.” A picture created with deliberate distortion can be made normal with the right de-anamorphoser. In the case of some of my pictures, the de-anamorphoser is the viewer’s mind. But to me, my distortions show these men as they really were, fragile and precarious, not as they wanted to be seen, powerful and important.

BS: Some images, as I’m sure you’ll admit, can’t easily be de-anamorphized in the viewer’s mind because what you give us is too little or too aberrant. Consider New Jersey: a John Singer Sargent-esque burst of pale orange in a lumpy wash of gray or Michigan, where the face is overridden by a lamp’s reflection. Or Louisiana (page 12), where, as you explained to me earlier, the capitol museum scanned all the governor portraits and displayed them on a large monitor, one image breaking into pixels and dissolving into the next, and you photographed the monitor at the midpoint of an image change.

SM: Some people think I altered the Louisiana picture in Photoshop, but it’s a straight print of the negative, like all the others. And I think viewers can see the two faces; there’s one to the left (you can see the top of the head

and ear) and one to the right, facing us. There’s also a skull-like appearance, though that’s pretty subtle.

BS: Or Oregon (page 10)! Shot so far from the side...

SM: That was one solution to the problem I faced every time I went to a new capitol: “Now what can I do with what I have to work with?” And each location was different. I didn’t want to end up with fifty formulaic pictures to bore the viewer; even more important, I didn’t want to bore myself as I did the work. But I think it’s okay if some or most people don’t decode the pictures. Maybe they will like the colors, or just be confused; that’s really out of my hands. I agree with the musician Jeff Tweedy that at least half of what happens is in the perception of the viewer; the picture is just a starting point. And, really, to have people look at the pictures and make anything of them at all, even if it’s far from what I might have been thinking, is exciting. A conversation takes place, and everything changes. CA

Sybil Miller is the author of Itinerant Photographer: Corpus Christi 1934, and lives in rural Texas.