

AMERICAN CONNECTION

susanburnstine.com

Leon Borensztein's heart-wrenching new book is a love story of a parent and child. It weaves a single father's personal journal with pictures of his severely disabled daughter. He talks to Susan Burnstine.

Oakland based photographer Leon Borensztein recently released an intensely personal book entitled *Sharon* (Kehrer Verlag, 2016) that focuses on his relationship with his severely disabled daughter, Sharon. This exceptional book weaves a single father's personal journal entries with heartfelt portraits that resonate long after the page is turned.

In the book, we follow Borensztein's complex relationship with his daughter and his then wife (now ex-wife). Since he was a professional photographer at the time, he explains that creating portraits of his newborn daughter began as, 'a natural reflex'. But as time passed, he admits, 'The heartbreaking reality started to

surface. My direction was slowly shifted. I became more of a documentary photographer.'

One of the book's most notable strengths is Borensztein's unapologetic candour, which allows us to experience his world first-hand through the intimacy of his words and photographs. Perhaps the most moving portion of the book conveys this attribute best when he reveals how his ex-wife's drug and alcohol addiction made it impossible for her to care for her daughter, thus setting him on a path to become Sharon's soul guardian. Each subsequent journal entry and the images that follow resonate in an

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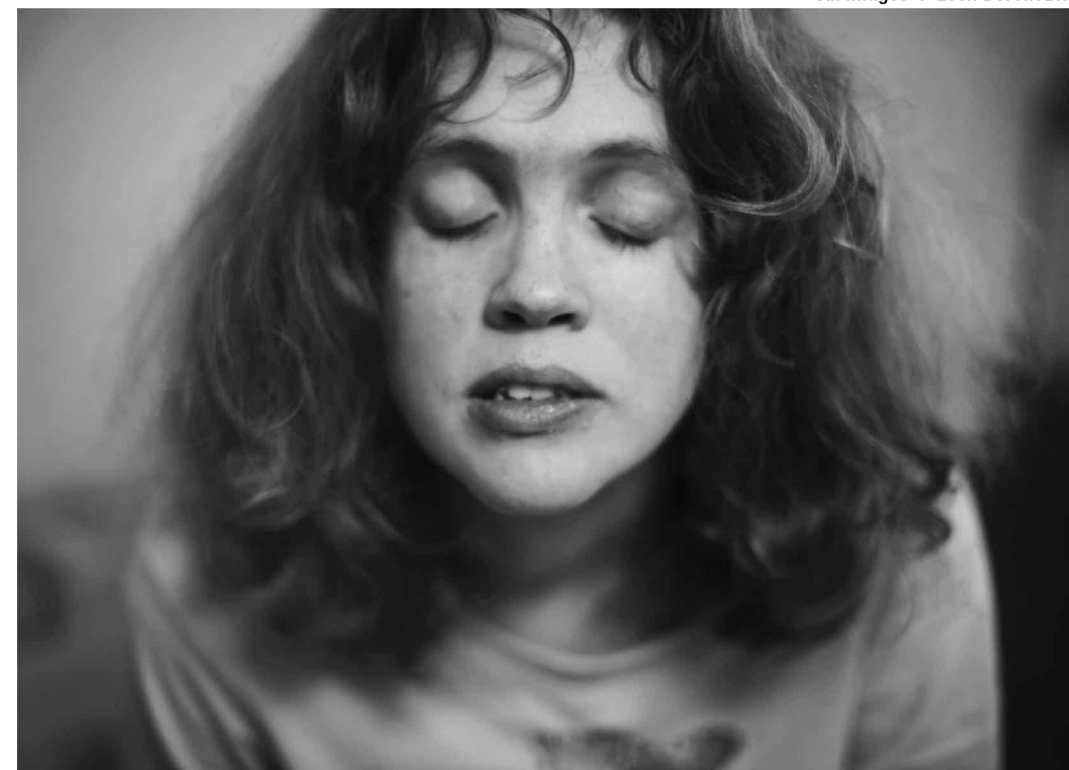
increasingly heart-wrenching, but beautifully inspiring manner.

In 1996, *Life* magazine bought the rights to this story and published a feature. Many additional features in other magazines followed, but despite creating a collection of strong and compelling images, Borensztein felt he didn't have enough for a book at that time. So he continued to document *Sharon* until Kehrer Verlag offered to publish the project.

Over the years, Borensztein emerged as a strong advocate for those with disabilities and he became a board member for several non-profit organisations.

He says, 'Sharon's best interests turned me into an advocate for her rights and the rights of other children with disabilities and their parents as well. There is a silent minority of parents and caregivers who would not or could not express their concerns.'

Borensztein was also motivated to create the series, *One is Adam One is Superman*. When he had a solo exhibition of the series in San Francisco, he became inspired to learn how the show helped to educate many people. 'My portraits weren't any more about some disabled people – they were about talented people with different levels of disability,' he says. 'If I managed to change one person's perception, I felt



that I improved the world.'

In response to his experience with that show, he came to realise how unique his relationship with Sharon was – as it's rare for a father to be the sole carer of a disabled daughter. Plus, being a freelance photographer, teacher and single parent was challenging in that he wasn't able to accept lucrative travel assignments. Additionally, the stress of battling government bureaucracy, the health care system and school system, while caring for Sharon on a daily basis, was immense. Yet in the light of these challenges, it was Borensztein's dedication to overcome these problems, for the sake of his daughter, that made this memorable love story of parent and child so powerful.

Regular readers of this column may recall I first featured Borensztein's work from his playful and witty monograph *American Portraits* in November 2012 (*B+W* 143). While these two bodies of work seemingly have little in common, they in fact share his passion to advocate for individuals who may go otherwise unnoticed or unseen. He explains, 'While editing *Sharon* I came to realise that all my work to some extent gives voice to the invisible and voiceless. I gave a voice to the

artists in *One is Adam One is Superman*; in *American Portraits* I was trying to show the American Dream of the working class; *Sharon* gave voice to a disabled girl, a single parent and to a father of a disabled child.'

Currently, Borensztein is editing two autobiographical series into books. While Sharon, now in her thirties, lives at a facility four miles away from her father's home. leonborensztein.com

EXHIBITIONS
USA

CAMBRIDGE

MIT MUSEUM

Until 10 January, 2017
Images of Discovery: Communicating Science through Photography
Featuring Bernice Abbott and Felice Frankel
web.mit.edu

CHICAGO

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

Until 23 December
Ike Ude: Nollywood Portraits: A Radical Beauty
mocc.org

LOS ANGELES

THE GETTY

Until 27 November
Richard Learoyd: In the Studio
getty.edu

MINNEAPOLIS

MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ART

Until 30 October
Anthony Marchetti: Living Rooms: The American Period Rooms: Inside/Out
new.artsmia.org

NEW YORK CITY

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Until 30 October
Dream States: Contemporary Photographs and Video
metmuseum.org

PORTLAND

BLUE SKY GALLERY

Until 31 October
Rich Rollins: Libra and Birte Kaufmann: The Travellers
blueskygallery.com

ROCHESTER

EASTMAN MUSEUM

Until 8 January, 2017
Catherine Opie: 700 Nimes Road
eastman.org

STANFORD

CANTOR ARTS CENTER

Until 24 October
Soulmaker: The Times of Lewis Hine
museum.stanford.edu