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Melissa O'Shaughnessy on Capturing New York City Through Street Photography

Street photographer Melissa O'Shaughnessy shares her tips for getting the shot, her love of NYC, and details on her new book "Perfect Strangers."

By [Mariah Tyler](#) | Published on December 11, 2020



Street Photography and [New York City](#) are inseparable; documenting the people of New York and how they live in the city can be traced via a lineage of street photographers throughout the city's history. Every street photographer

the iconic places that celebrated photographers before them made famous. The city is abundant in photographic possibilities, the perfect combination of light and pedestrians play out in an endless tableau vivant.



Melissa O'Shaughnessy's newest book, "Perfect Strangers," encapsulates this magic ingeniously. Similar to Italian Renaissance paintings, the sort of mundane chaos of the streets make you wonder what's going on with each character in the scene. Being a street photographer in New York City is to observe everything at once, sometimes only noticing a detail after the photograph has been captured. While the year has kept many New Yorkers off of the crowded streets, Melissa's photographs of strangers take us into these moments in a way that will make one long for the overcrowded sidewalks full of people to walk alongside and people to watch.



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PHOTO: © MELISSA O'SHAUGHNESSY

Travel + Leisure spoke with O'Shaughnessy about her passion for New York City and how street photography leads you to love people as they are.



PHOTO: © MELISSA O'SHAUGHNESSY

melissa o'shaughnessy. "I started photographing on the streets of New York City seven or eight years ago, shortly after my husband and I bought an apartment near Union Square. I was initially too shy to take pictures of strangers, but I did know that — both photographically and personally — it was people that interested me most. It took a few years for me to overcome this shyness and to start making photographs I found compelling, layered, and personal. But I've always enjoyed long walks around the city, even before I regularly brought my camera with me. New York is never a dull place."



PHOTO: © MELISSA O'SHAUGHNESSY

What do you look for when you're out taking photographs?

"I always try to keep myself open to chance. Whenever possible I head out with a clear head, since I never know what to expect, and looking for something specific never seems to pan out for me. Before the pandemic, Manhattan could be a very generous place on a busy afternoon, full of moments that remind you that truth really is stranger than fiction."



PHOTO: © MELISSA O'SHAUGHNESSY

What initially drew you to this subject of New York?

“New York is one of the most iconic cities in the world, and the history of photography has been partially written on its streets and avenues. The city’s diversity of people and cultures makes it one of the most visually compelling cities on earth, and certainly, for me, the most interesting city in the United States.”



PHOTO: © MELISSA O'SHAUGHNESSY

Are there other places that bring you this same feeling about shooting street photography?

“Every city and town has a different character, but if you’re open and curious you can make street photographs anywhere. Before COVID restrictions, I was usually able to get to London and perhaps another European city or two every year — and I’ve had a many decades-long love affair with Italy. I’d also love the chance to spend some time in Japan and India in the not-too-distant future. But most street photographers will tell you that the best place to photograph is where you live. If you’re going to make a strong body of work, consistent access is essential. Good street photographs are generally few and far between, so your home turf is always going to be the most fruitful territory.”



PHOTO: © MELISSA O'SHAUGHNESSY

What do you believe makes New York City a special place?

“There are so many reasons, not least of which is the historical importance of the city in the history of photography in general, and in the history of street photography in particular. Its streets have been walked by many of photography’s greats, from Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand to Joel Meyerowitz and Helen Levitt. The city’s crowds have an irresistible energy, and at certain times of the year the light can be sensational. Add the backdrop of all the soaring architecture and reflective glass and it cooks up into a tasty stew.”

What do you hope people will take away from “Perfect Strangers” during this period of feeling isolated from other people?

“I hope the book is both a record of what New York’s energy and street life used to look like, and a reminder of what it can be again when the pandemic has passed. When people feel safe gathering again, I think we will see the exuberance of the roaring 20s in cities and towns around the world. And you can bet I’ll be out photographing it.”



PHOTO: © MELISSA O'SHAUGHNESSY

Top advice for anyone who may want to get into street photography?

“Sling a small camera over your shoulder, walk out your front door and start observing the people and environment around you. I am lucky enough to have New York City at my doorstep, but access to a big city is certainly not required. Look at the photographs of Mark Cohen or William Eggleston — both of whom have produced remarkable bodies of work in smaller US towns and cities. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, street life is quiet these days, but it’s not impossible to go out and make interesting photographs that record this time in history and what it looks and feels like, wherever you are.”

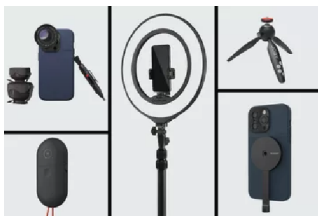


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To buy: "Perfect Strangers" by Melissa O'Shaughnessy, aperture.org \$33

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