

Shot through a Jazz Lens:

An interview with Charles Klein

by Richard Russo

Charles Klein's photographs have appeared on the covers of over 70 books published throughout the world for amongst others Knopf, Random House, Harper Collins, Faber and Faber, Penguin, Simon and Schuster – for authors including E.L. Doctorow, Ivan Klima, Sena Jeter Naslund, Charles Baxter, Richard North Paterson, Melinda Haynes, John Bemrose, Paul Auster et al. He is represented by Millennium Images as well as by Getty and Upper Cut Images.

RICHARD RUSSO: What were some of your early visual experiences? Were you exposed to visual art as a child?

CHARLES KLEIN: From an early age my strongest visual experiences were dreams, where everything was richer in the sensory and emotional realms than in daily life. As a child the story of Joseph in the Bible, who was imprisoned and recognized amongst the other prisoners as able to interpret dreams, made a significant impression upon me because I dreamt richly and here was a timeless reference that dreams had a significant place in the basic question of what it means being alive ... a very daytime question!

My dreams never had voice in my dialogue with my family, and in art it wasn't until (still a child) I saw Chagall's flying figures that I felt any visual art connection to dreams. I often flew in my dreams and my earliest hero was Superman, who of course flew but also was a decent fellow who cared about his fellow man. All my drawings until third grade were of him.

I also had some vivid perceptual experiences. One was when I pushed my palms against my eyes and saw extraordinary

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colors and patterns instantly. The other was when I lay across the swing in my backyard, head thrown back, looking up at the sky upside down, which I took to be a blue ocean, and blanket-like, so if I were to fall into it I would be welcomed. This gave me enormous comfort. I sensed the earth and specifically human social reality was a lie and the sky was the truth.

RR: When we first met, you were writing poetry and songs. How did you come to photography?

CK: I had an uncle who wrote for TV. He created the "One Step Beyond" show that was on in the early '60s. That one could be a writer was obviously important. Much earlier, in third grade, I wrote a play about Robin Hood that was put on in class. My writing didn't really re-emerge until I was about 16, when I found words suddenly bursting out of me. I wrote a short story in my English class that got the attention of my teacher and led to a discussion of books I might like. Later, when I saw Fellini's *8½* and was awestruck, that teacher was the person I went to to discuss this pre-acid experience. *8½* was probably my first link to the visual since so much of it was dreamlike.