



Harrison Branch Oral History Interview, February 23, 2015

Title

“Memories of a 'Darkroom Dinosaur’”

Date

February 23, 2015

Location

Valley Library, Oregon State University.

Summary

The Harrison Branch interview focuses principally on Branch's evolving interests and methodology as a photographer, and his association with OSU as a teacher and as an artist.

Over the course of the session, Branch discusses his earliest exposure to photography, his schooling at the San Francisco Art Institute and Yale University, and his arrival at Oregon State University. He likewise recalls specific interests that he has pursued as a photographer including platinum-palladium printmaking, Platinotypes, and the use of bellows cameras for use in large format photography. The interview also touches upon the satisfaction that Branch has taken out of teaching at OSU, his hesitations concerning digital photography, and his continuing interests in retirement.

Interviewee

Harrison Branch

Interviewer

Mike Dicianna

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/branch/>

Transcript

Mike Dicianna: Today is Monday, February 23rd 2015 and we're at the OSU Valley Library to capture the life story and life history of Harrison Branch, professor emeritus of the OSU art department. Harrison taught photography here for almost forty years. My name is Mike Dicianna. I'm the oral historian for the OSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project and Harrison, we really appreciate you sharing your story with the Beaver Nation.

Harrison Branch: My pleasure.

MD: One of the things we always like to start out with is kind of a brief biographical sketch of your early years, where were you born, early childhood, all those educational experiences.

HB: I was born in New York City, public school education in New York, P.S. 184, James Fenimore Cooper Junior High School and the High School of Commerce for high school and I graduated from the High School of Commerce in 1965.

MD: Any other memories of growing up the big, was that inner-city?

HB: Manhattan, yes. I grew up in Manhattan. It was exciting and different and fun; New York is New York. Once a New Yorker, always a New Yorker. So I still consider myself a New Yorker.

MD: Now so as a lifelong professor and artist of photography, how early did you become interested in the medium?

HB: Well like most people I became real interested when I was at quite a young age so I have somewhere old photographs of me with a box Brownie photographing at my grandmother's house in Virginia. And then I sort of lost interest and I picked it up again in high school via an algebra tutor. And he took me to Columbia University darkroom and I started back into photography via him.

MD: So, how about your high school? What was your high school experience like during the early '60s?

HB: Well, commerce was in what we called an academic high school so I had a traditional academic training. Regular classes: languages, math, history, etc. Also took a few cooking classes, a few sewing classes as well.

MD: So it was opposed to the technical schools?

HB: Yeah.

MD: Well your higher education is rather impressive. You traveled across the nation for your undergraduate studies at San Francisco Art Studio or Art Institute. Tell us about your experiences as an undergrad there.

HB: Well that was again quite interesting. I was in San Francisco in the '60s. So, if anyone else was in San Francisco in the '60s that should tell you quite a bit. So, I graduated from the Art Institute in 1970 with a B.F.A. and then I was accepted into the master's program also at the Art Institute. And then one day a catalog came from Yale University so I started flipping through it and I was always curious to see what other people thought of my work and I noticed that they had two of my favorite photographers teaching there so I thought I would apply and see what someone three thousand miles away thought of my work. And lo and behold I was one of four people that Yale accepted in 1970 to major in photography at Yale University School of Art and Architecture.

MD: So you were basically in the, right in the middle of it during the turbulent late 1960's. Now did your college, being in close proximity to Berkeley, get involved with some of the anti-war protests and some of the other—

HB: Yeah, everyone was involved with that aspect of just living in San Francisco so you couldn't help but be involved and I was involved in quite a few activities back then.

MD: Activities? Or?

HB: Activities, yes.

MD: So, you were basically a part of that counterculture in San Francisco as a young child. I mean what was there to do, Haight-Ashbury?

HB: I lived in Haight-Ashbury, yes. I guess I could be called, I was a hippie for a while, yes. And then I became involved with other activities after that as well.

MD: And so that was at the height of the culture there?

HB: Right. So it was very, very interesting. It was fun. It was a learning experience because I was eighteen when I went to San Francisco.

[0:05:05]

MD: The Summer of Love.

HB: Yes.

MD: So tell us a little bit more about your final project and your thesis. Why Yale? I'm interested in that.

HB: That's quite a ways back. Everyone had the choice; my portfolio was shrunk from a very ambitious forty print portfolio down to about fifteen print portfolio. It had to be completed in a span of six weeks and it all had to be brand new work, so it couldn't be anything I had done previously. And then it became quite an endeavor because six weeks went very, very quickly. And so I was concerned with, and still do, photograph traditionally. I don't do any digital photography; it was all darkroom work. I was all large format, eight by ten view camera negatives. I go out today still and I'm lugging forty, fifty pounds worth of equipment around. I'm not a fan of the digital world.

MD: We'll get to that later, I'm quite interested in that, what a photographer chooses. Well you came to the university here, OSU, just right after your training, so you began your career here. What brought you to Oregon State?

HB: Oregon State was one of the five places where I was offered a position. And I had never been to Oregon before so I thought it would be interesting. Buffalo was a little cold. Chicago offered me a position, Goddard College in Vermont and Southern Illinois in Carbondale. And I said, "Okay, Oregon," looked at a map, saw Oregon and California, and said okay. So I came.

MD: What were some of your original classes that you taught and how did you develop them?

HB: Well the program was very much in its infancy when I started so I taught beginning, intermediate, and advanced photography. One term was devoted solely to the view camera and I'll always remember that first year when I taught that class, every student had a view camera. So they must have heard that I was into the view camera and it was one of the better years of teaching photography here. There were many, many great years though, but the first one, well you always remember the first one.

MD: Oh yeah. So now, you have a very specific philosophy about photography and how did you impart that to your students over the years?

HB: Just through hard work, dedication, and allowing them to sometimes watch me actually work in the darkroom and saw that I spent hours on a print, just to get it the way I thought it should be, and that I didn't believe in shortcuts. I taught all my classes as though everyone in the class was a major in photography, that was the only way I knew how to teach it so whether you were a philosophy major or a history major or a chemistry major, when you took my class, you were a photography major and I taught it as though you were a major in photography. I gave you everything that I had and everything that I knew.

MD: Now, you were in Fairbanks all that time?

HB: No, I had an office in Fairbanks. I taught my classes in what at that time was called the Industrial Building, now called Cascade Hall.

MD: Oh okay, is that where the darkrooms were?

HB: That's where the darkrooms were. And so that's basically where I lived from 1972 to 2013.

MD: Now, during the 1980's, the early '80s, you investigated one of the early techniques of photography print making, the platinum-palladium process.

HB: Yes.

MD: And the Platinotype?

HB: The Platinotype, yes.

MD: Tell us about that research and the experience.

HB: I first became interested in that via friends in California and Boston. At Yale, a fellow student, Bill Crawford, wrote the book *Keepers of the Light*, which is considered to be a classic on silver processes. Started everyone's interests in that process and I sort of became interested, but not really serious about it 'til the '80s, just intrigued with the possibilities that a platinum-palladium print has over a silver print, i.e. the tonality is almost continuous in a platinum print, it's almost, in some respects, almost three-dimensional. So, it's a very, very time-consuming process in that platinum-palladium paper is no longer made commercially so in order to make a platinum-palladium print, the paper must be hand-coated with the emulsion. The emulsion then is dried and the emulsion is only sensitive to ultraviolet light, such as the sun or a very, very strong ultraviolet light source. It's then cleared; it's then developed and then cleared.

[0:10:49]

MD: So what do you—

HB: A platinum-palladium print, will, if processed properly and correctly, will last as long as the paper base on which it rests.

MD: What era is that? Is that pre-the silver gelatin?

HB: Yes. Quite early. Weston did a lot of early platinum prints, speedlets [?].

MD: 'Cause I also see that you have worked with the big eight by ten bellows camera. We have wonderful, wonderful images. Now was that a vintage camera or was it something else?

HB: No, I mean view cameras are still being made today. This was a camera called a Deardorff, it was made in Chicago. The company's still in business today, surprisingly.

MD: And it's a whole different type of photography.

HB: A whole different type of photography, yes.

MD: Did you end up having to spend more time with each image?

HB: Correct. You have to think about it a little more. You can't, I was fond of saying in class, you can't machine gun everything that comes in front of you in hopes of hitting something. You have to think about the world before you come into it.

MD: Well, the digitals today, you know spray and pray and then you delete stuff. Whereas with this type of photography, it's....

HB: You're limited to the number of film holders that you have with you. And film holders are quite heavy.

MD: Now, what are the lenses in that type, is it just a fixed focal length?

HB: No, lenses vary in size, in length, so a standard lens on an eight by ten could be a 300 millimeter, wide angle lens could be a 90 millimeter. So the view camera size varies from four by five and sometimes smaller, all the way up to 20 by 24 inch negatives.

MD: Now, during your career you taught and mentored countless photography students, including one Roger Werth, who has, class of 1980, won the Pulitzer Prize for his work during Mount St. Helens. He speaks highly of you. Do you remember him as a student?

HB: Yes, I remember Roger quite well. I remember most of my students, surprisingly. They were all great, if I start mentioning names I'm going to forget someone so I won't. I had a lot of great students. And those students were the reason I stayed at Oregon State.

MD: Now do you maintain contact with them?

HB: With some of them yes, 'til today. We still keep in touch.

MD: While you were here in the Art department, did you have any contact and did you know Dr. Gilkey at all?

HB: Yes. And after he retired as a dean we shared an office in Fairbanks. So that was really fun.

MD: What were some of your impressions of him?

HB: He was just a great man. When I first accepted a position we were talking about our cameras and he was just a person – he was the dean, but you could talk to him just as a person. He was Gordon. He wasn't Dean Gilkey, he was Gordon.

MD: Some of his collection of prints in the Portland Art Museum?

HB: Correct.

MD: So what do you consider to be some of your major accomplishments when you were here as a professor in Art?

HB: Just the establishment of a degree-granting program with a major in Photography. Watching the program grow, having students come through who were dedicated and committed to becoming photographers and a large majority of them are still working today as photographers, and so that's what I consider my best accomplishment. I hopefully excited about the medium of photography.

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MD: Now, you have a lifetime of involvement with photography and have seen the changing technologies. What's your opinion of how photography, technology has changed? Maybe not the art.

HB: I try not to become too involved in the changes of photography. As a very close friend described himself and I sort of adopted that too, I'm a darkroom dinosaur. And I will always be one. I have very, very little working knowledge of the digital world, how it works and I know that might be unnerving to some people, but it just holds no interest. It makes photography, for me, too easy. And I think it should still be a–

MD: Hands on?

HB: Hands on. With digital I find it's – and I might upset some people – you're almost like a Rambo with a camera and you're just machine gunning down everything that comes in front of you in the hopes of hitting something instead of thinking about it before you commit to it.

MD: Those are wise words.

HB: Thank you.

MD: See, that's one thing I was thinking. Do you think the new digital age, do you think it's changed the art? Or is the art still there?

HB: I think it's still there, but it's changed as well. Now everybody has a camera because everybody has a cellphone. And everybody photographs everything. And you can do that and there's nothing wrong with that, but think about it before you do it. Ask yourself, why are you doing it. And exactly what do you expect from that photograph when it's seen by others.

MD: Yeah, because the difference between hands on and darkroom and sitting at a computer in front of Photoshop. You can manipulate a photo, but...

HB: Why are you doing it?

MD: Yes! Now, how can you manipulate prints in the darkroom?

HB: By burning and dodging you can change tonality in a print. You can physically move the image. You can change the way a print looks through burning and dodging. A classic example would be if you ever had the opportunity to see one of Ansel Adams' best known photographs, "Moonrise over Hernandez." Very early printings of that are quite different from latter printings and you can see how the feel of the photograph changed with Ansel's interpretation of it over the years.

MD: Now, did you teach, besides the mechanics of photography, did you teach history?

HB: A little bit of photo history, yeah.

MD: And the actual art of it?

HB: A little photochemistry. Sometimes a little mad scientist in the darkroom.

MD: Well you know, I was going to ask you whether you're a Canon or a Nikon person, but that's a moot point!

HB: I haven't used a 35 since my freshman year in college. You know, I have a point and shoot, but I haven't seriously done any serious work with a 35 since my freshman year. And that was due to a fellow student who came up to me one day and was looking at my work and goes, "Harrison, the way you're seeing things now lends itself more to a larger format camera." And so the subject matter I was looking at and thinking about was not really lending itself to a 35 mm.

MD: What kind of subject matter –

HB: Right now it's a little bit of everything, whatever spikes my fancy but I just feel that the larger negative gives me a more realistic feel.

MD: And your bulk of your portfolio, your lifetime portfolio, where's that gone? Has it evolved as far as the type of subjects?

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HB: No, it's pretty much stayed the same. My work is very quiet, it's not like it's going to jump off the paper to you and hit you over the head but it's work that hopefully the longer you look at it, the more you little things you will discover in it, like what I used to call little visual surprises. So it's work that does require you to spend some time looking at it. Very quiet, very peaceful work.

MD: Now you have exhibited many, many times across the... So what are some of your big exhibits?

HB: Probably quite a few in San Francisco and at the Oakland Museum in Oakland, California. Probably, a highlight would be works in the permanent collection in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the George Eastman House in Rochester, and in the permanent collection of the Oakland Museum, and numerous other private and public collections.

MD: So you're what could be considered a well-known photographer?

HB: I still consider myself an up and coming photographer. Still have a lot to learn.

MD: So after spending forty years affecting people's eye, do you have any reflections about such a long career associated with Oregon State University? What do you take from it?

HB: It was fun. It's interesting. When I'm out walking, I will still walk through campus on occasion just to see what changes have happened and what's going on in the Art department. I still have an interest in how the Art department's progressing and growing. And visiting with my students. Those were the ones who gave me the most joy and I looked forward to going to class every day. It was fun and we talked. We talked about life and we talked about photography, because photography is life. They always knew that they could talk to me basically about anything. And I tried to show them that photography is important and for a number of years we did a joint critique session with the University of Oregon. They would come up here and we would go down there and have joint critique sessions. And that was a highlight, a fun way for them to see how other people responded to their work and for the U of O students to see how other people responded to their works. That was quite a few years ago though.

MD: Yeah, now they just email them back and forth.

HB: We'd talk and then we'd go out and have pizza or we'd go out and have something.

MD: You've seen a lot of changes here on campus then between 1972 and when you retired. How do you feel about the buildings now? Are the people the same?

HB: People are the same. Students are younger.

MD: One of the things that we always like to hear about, tell us about your family, because you drug everybody here out to Oregon.

HB: I'm married. I have three kids and three grandchildren.

MD: Are they local?

HB: Yes.

MD: And you settled here in Corvallis.

HB: And I'm still in Corvallis.

MD: Close to campus or...?

HB: Close to campus. I walked to work every day, rain or shine or snow, I would walk. Because walking was important because that way you could see things. And you were always looking for something to photograph.

MD: That's one of the things that strikes me about this campus. It's one image after another. Did you, looking at, say, the Women's Building and the rhododendrons out in front of it as you head down to Fairbanks to your office, did the change of the seasons and the blooms and things like, how did that affect you on a daily basis? Did you see that whereas people just walked by that and "that's pretty"?

HB: I didn't really, to be honest, I didn't really look at the changes. I was more looking down. What I am walking over that I could possibly photograph? I tried to approach photography not to look at things that everyone else would look at to photograph but to find something out of the ordinary that might be an exciting photograph.

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MD: Patterns. Now your format, does that lend itself well to close-up, macro photography?

HB: No, there's no macro in that sense of the word, but you can get quite close to things. The bellows is going to be what we call racked out quite long and so you have to figure out a longer exposure, but you can photograph pretty much everything with a view camera.

MD: So, what are the things, you know other than photography, what other activities... How do you spend your retirement days?

HB: I do quite a bit of volunteer work. I'm a member of the Corvallis Police Auxiliary so that keeps me quite busy. I enjoy that. I have quite a few friends who are very much into wine and we appreciate good wine and good food, and so we spend time together drinking good wine and eating good food and talking about the same. Doing a little bit of traveling, to Europe, hope to go back. I want to go to Asia as well. Traveling's in the plans.

MD: Do you travel with a bellows camera?

HB: No, not any more. We, I've talked to friends on how to do that and it is possible but it would be... I would need to know where I'm going to stay and ship everything ahead of me and then when I'm there, photograph and then when I'm done, ship everything back home, because it would be impossible to get it through security.

MD: Oh yeah, and so a photography trip is a little bit more involved.

HB: A little more involved than it used to be. Years ago I could just pack my camera up and go through security or even ship it. Put it in a good case and just ship it. But today that would be...

MD: Do you go out at all and do nature photography much?

HB: Not as much as I should. Not as much of that word, nature photography. I go out and photograph but not as much as I should.

MD: Do you have a personal darkroom?

HB: Yeah, I have a darkroom at home.

MD: Now, where I see you all the time is one of the campus staples on Monroe Street, Clodfelter's. Are you involved with that?

HB: I helped them out at Clodfelter's. Years ago I had a fleeting interest in the restaurant business and so I wanted to see how the restaurant business worked and a number of friends told me no, you don't want to do that. I helped out at Clodfelter's quite a bit. Now I know I don't want a restaurant.

MD: You've become quite a fixture on this campus and the Corvallis area. And you know, that's one of the things that I run into quite often with these interviews is these people who, they're entrenched in the culture, the Beaver culture. Any thoughts about that? How much of a Beaver are you?

HB: I don't know if I could... I enjoy Oregon State and I enjoy, I haven't been to a football game or a basketball game in years. I first came here and I remember I was taken to, I think the Civil War game, and it was pouring down raining. It was a colleague, Nelson Sandgren, took me to the game and I was drenching wet when I got home. I enjoy football and I'm a football fan.

MD: But you're a Beaver?

HB: Yeah. But I'm also a Yale Bulldog too.

MD: Now, do you have family still back in New York.

HB: No, I don't. I have a few cousins in the Savannah/Atlanta area. I was an only child.

MD: So when you travel to New York, it's just more –

HB: I have friends and it's just to go home and to visit.

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MD: Now what part, is that Manhattan, say your old haunts, the buildings and things...?

HB: They're pretty much all gone. The High School of Commerce, that spot now is occupied by Lincoln Center.

MD: Well, one of the things that I always like to, when you have this long of a career and involvement with the college, who were some of the key people that strike out in your memory whether it be presidents or deans or some of the big names, basically?

HB: Am I supposed to start naming people I forget? John Byrne, who would be there, the first one to come to mind. When I accepted the position, Dr. MacVicar was president. Gordon Gilkey, obviously. Those would be the... Dean King also comes to mind.

MD: Do you still maintain an emeritus office here on campus?

HB: No, I don't have an office. My office was the darkroom. My students always knew that was where I would be and I just enjoyed being down there because that's where the students were. They could always find me there.

MD: Now, your involvement with photography, how did that bleed over into student media like the Barometer. Did you –

HB: I didn't do anything, no. I had no association with the Barometer other than that I had a number of students who were photographers for the Barometer. But that was my extent.

MD: Did they develop Barometer photographs?

HB: No, the Barometer had its own, and I assume still has its own, facility, separate from ours.

MD: Is there any other reflections that you have?

HB: No. I mean they were great years teaching, but you get to a point and almost forty years, maybe a little longer, and that's a long time, and they were all taught in the same room. Every day in the same room. I would walk in and I'd think about the students and I'd look at the darkroom sink and I'd think we need to fix these, we need to repair these, there's a leak here. What are you guys working on today, maybe you shouldn't be doing that one today. Or let's go out and just have lunch. Let's go out on a field trip and photograph or let's just go out and talk about photography.

MD: And so you impart your philosophies on a whole new generation of...

HB: There are great kids and there are great photographers out there today working and a lot of them graduated here from Oregon State.

MD: Where has the program gone today?

HB: It's still growing. They have new faculty, three new faculty members. I've met one, I haven't met the other two yet.

MD: Is it still a degree program?

HB: Yes, it's still a degree program, as far as I know it's still a degree program. And it seems to be growing.

MD: And so it's not just spray and pray.

HB: No, no. But it's quite different from the way I taught it. But that's the way I was trained. I was classically trained. When I taught photography I taught it in a classical, traditional way.

MD: Well Harrison you are a definite fixture on this campus and you've had a long career and affected thousands and thousands of OSU Beavers and so in that, you sharing your story here is very important to our project and on behalf of the

OSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project, we really appreciate your time and we'll continue to have you as one of our key people here.

HB: Thanks again. It was fun and I enjoyed it.

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