INTERVIEW

WITH NATE LARSON

Purdue University alumnus Nate Larson currently works as a full-time faculty member in the photography department at Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore.

NATE LARSON

How did you first get started working in photography? Did you get started while at Purdue?

I took classes in high school, but at Purdue I started out as an English major. Then I took a photography class and realized that I wanted to do that, so I took more and

more classes and found some support. From there, I just followed it to see where it would take me, and I feel lucky that it all worked out so well.

Did you participate in any research or project-based learning while at Purdue?

It's been 16 years now—it wasn't as prevalent as it is these days in academia, and I don't remember a lot of formal project-based learning. Yes, in a sense that I made art projects or photography projects or design projects that connected to the real world, but no, in the terms of group activities or whole classes engaging with communities. I do a lot of that collaborative work with my students now.

Could you elaborate on the sort of work you do with your students now?

We have a lot of encouragement from the institution to take the students out and find community partners to work with. Last year, with the unrest in Baltimore, my students went out and photographed a lot during the uprising and protests. We began there, and then we started to reach out to people in

the epicenter of the unrest. I've also been working, in my practice, with Jubilee Arts, an after-school and weekend arts program for students. Part of it is structured around having classes, and part of it is structured around social support for students from difficult backgrounds. So I have been working with the group to make portraits of their participants over the last year, and I've gotten students involved at various points during that project. In the fall we did a family portrait day where we set up a photo booth in the gallery and invited families to come in and get their portraits taken for free. It was a way to both form human connections and also provide a service to the community.

Where are you from originally, and how did you get started in Baltimore?

I grew up in West Lafayette. I went to West Lafayette Junior Senior High School, and Purdue is a mile from my parents' house. I moved to Baltimore because I got a teaching job at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). I had never thought about living in Baltimore before, and my first time in Maryland was for my job interview. I really liked the people who interviewed me and are now my colleagues. I had a good feeling about them and the students and the school.

Now it's been seven years, and Baltimore has been a great place. I really like the community here, and the art community is doing interesting things. It's relatively affordable to live here, so artists are able to get bigger studio spaces and take risks that they aren't able to do in New York, because everyone in New York is living hand to mouth. I lived in Chicago for a long time, and I loved the city, but

I felt like I was a single entity moving around, whereas in Baltimore I feel more connected to the fabric of the community and the city. My colleagues and students at MICA are all really special, so I love working there.

When you started at MICA, was the project-based learning already there? If so, how did you adjust that to fit your teaching style?

We have an office of community engagement, and they have been really generous with their time in working with me on different projects. To be perfectly honest, I didn't know where to begin, so everything has sort of grown out of an "it would be interesting if" approach—having that open-ended proposition and then talking with people to figure out if it's interesting for other people or the institution. Then I see how it goes. I've also tried to be self-reflexive about the process. If something doesn't work, and not everything does, that becomes a moment to pull back and re-evaluate how to move forward in a way that produces better engagement and results.

What sort of planning goes into developing and conceptualizing the work you do? Is there a lot of planning, or does it just kind of happen as it goes?

It's a combination of the two approaches, because the best-laid plans don't always go as anticipated. Particularly in art, you have to engage emotionally, and sometimes it's hard to step back and engage analytically. It's a continual process of that back and forth, looking at what's working and what's not, and figuring out how to adjust. I'm not in a perfect place right now; I'm in the process of continually re-evaluating. I think that you also have to trust the process. You have to trust that you're doing things for a reason or that they will make sense in the long run. I had a photo mentor as an undergraduate who used to say when she took a picture that she would put it in a box and look at it after ten years and see why she took it. After ten years, things started to make sense to her. All of us artists do the same thing to some degree—where we're compelled to do the things we do, and we have to trust that it will leave us something interesting, or rich, or fruitful.

GEOLOCATION

NATE LARSON'S PROJECT WITH MARNI SHINDELMAN

Geolocation, a photography project wherein Larson and Shindelman trace a tweet to its origins and photograph the site, has spanned seven years and garnered global attention. Larson said of the project: "We always ended up in the weirdest places, like the parking lots and the back alleys—the places we really live our lives, as opposed to the landmarks that are in the city brochures. It became a really interesting portrait of modern life."

Tell me I'm not making a mistake. Tell me you're worth the wait. #fb

These tweets have my location?

Can you talk about the mentors you had at Purdue?

I still see a lot of my mentors, which is really great. The two photo professors who were there were Vernon Cheek and Susan Ressler, and I just saw Susan at a photo conference in Las Vegas three weeks ago. It's nice to stay connected. And Vernon retired and moved to Florida, so I see him once or twice every couple of years. I actually saw him on an airplane randomly—we were both going somewhere else, and there he was. They're wonderful people. The other big influence on me was a visiting professor named Danny Goodwin, who's now at SUNY Albany. I don't think I've seen him in many years, but we keep in touch on social media and over e-mail. Right as I was leaving Purdue, I became close friends with a visiting professor named Julie Jubin. She's at SUNY Oswego in upstate New York now, and I was a visiting artist there two years ago, where I came in and got to meet her students and spend some time with her. It's wonderful to stay connected to people over a long period of time.

Have you kept in touch with any of your graduated students at MICA?

Absolutely, we try to stay in touch with our alumni at MICA. At the photo conference in Las Vegas, I got to see Susan, my undergraduate professor, some of my graduate school professors, and some of my recent alumni, as well as some current students. It was wonderful.

Where did you attend graduate school? What was your experience like there?

I went to Ohio State University, which was a really interesting experience. One of the reasons I went there was because at Purdue we used a textbook called *Criticizing Photographs*, written by Terry Barrett, who teaches at Ohio State. I saw that they had teaching fellowships there, and when I was researching faculty and saw his name, I was like "I want to get to know him." So my experience at Purdue was a big reason for me going there. It was wonderful; I think of it like a two-year residency, because I got to be around people who were excited about making art, and we had studio spaces that were open 24 hours. Literally, any time of the day you could be there working on something and there would be other people around being supportive, interested in what you were doing. I always tell my students that you shouldn't go to graduate school seeking professional success as much as you go for the learning experience and for the immersive quality of being around people who are passionate

Devonn photographed by Nate Larson in Baltimore, as part of Larson's work with Jubilee Arts.

about the same things. It's magical—you never find that community again elsewhere.

Where did the idea for Geolocation come from, and what is it like working on a collaborative project like that?

I've been working with Marni Shindelman for almost nine years now, and we started Geolocation seven years ago. We began working on something else entirely, and as part of the research for that project we came across this tweet on a Yahoo map. We thought it was interesting, so we found the location in Chicago. It was just after the financial meltdown, right around when politicians were arguing about the troubled asset relief program and whether or not the banks should be bailed out. The tweet was about somebody losing their job, and we stood outside that building just trying to figure it out. There was something powerful about being where someone had this extremely personal brush with a national catastrophe.

There was something humanizing about looking at this catastrophe through the eyes of a single person. It was compelling, and we ended up staying

there for three hours, standing on the street corner talking to people. We shot some photographs, we shot some videos, and we shot some time lapses. We were trying to figure out how to communicate the experience of this place to an audience that wasn't there. In the end, we brought it down to a single photograph. It felt right as a single image because a tweet is such a fleeting, individual, brief thing. We kept building from there. Marni was living in Rochester, New York, at the time, and I was just about to move to Baltimore. We both shot respectively and started to look at the photos together. Then we did a residency in Ithaca, New York, and shot some more together. It was at that point that we saw something was there.

We began shooting more, put together a small portfolio set, and started showing it to curators. A curator in England saw it and offered to have us come do the project there. At that point, we hadn't thought of it as a site-specific project. We were thinking of it as a record of our communities instead of a record of someone else's community. However, it became quickly apparent that the project was something that could scale, that we could go to a place and use social media to reveal something about the place that we otherwise wouldn't have seen.

We started to look at patterns. We always ended up in the weirdest places, like the parking lots and the back alleys—the places we really live our lives, as opposed to the landmarks that are in the city brochures. It became a really interesting portrait of modern life. Since then we have continued scaling. We are lucky that it's gotten a lot of traction. We've done fourteen iterations at this point. It becomes this really interesting way of engaging with a community and spending time listening, which I think is something people really want, because there isn't a lot of it at this point in time. We really think of ourselves as coming in and setting up a listening post, spending time trying to figure out what's important to people and where and how that affects the place and identity and community. But we don't just collect data—we share it with the community through gallery exhibitions and public art pieces. The most recent iteration was completed in June 2016 in St. Petersburg and Moscow, Russia. It will be interesting to see how the project translates to a less Western context.

Do you have advice for undergraduate students who are looking to get involved in research?

I think it goes back to that idea of trust. It's easy, particularly in fields like the arts and humanities, for people to tell you "that's not worth it" or "that's silly."

It's not an easy thing to do by any means, but I think you need to trust that our own set of inclinations is leading you somewhere interesting and that you need to stick with it. Particularly in the studio arts, I think you have to learn who to listen to and who not to listen to, because everyone has an opinion and not all of them are equally weighted. I frequently tell students that discernment was the most important thing I learned in graduate school. If someone says something and it's not relevant to you or what you're doing, just let it go and get it out of your head. You have a thousand different voices telling you a thousand different things, and if you listen to all of them you'll never get anywhere. I find that life as an artist is like that too. You have to learn to filter and who to trust. You have to find a few folks who can be your test audience and who can talk to you about your ideas before there is a public audience.

That's actually one of the great things about working with Marni. She talks about collaboration as whispering in someone's ear. When we work together, we're continually sharing bits of information back and forth. A lot of our collaboration is built on that continual exchange. There are a lot of things that don't get traction right away, but a rhythm develops over time. I see that process as strongly related to research. You have to continuously unpack things, and if they don't make sense right away, you have to trust they will make sense eventually. Maybe you just haven't found the right context or venue yet.

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Interviewer

Sunny Asaf is a sophomore in the College of Liberal Arts, where she is studying anthropology with a minor in animal science. She served as the coordinator for this volume of the *Journal of Purdue Undergraduate Research*, in addition

to performing as secretary for the Purdue Anthropology Society and participating in the Wilke internship program, where she worked with Dr. Elizabeth Rowe in evaluating menstrual bleeding in primates and its evolution.