

Places with faces: Okemos portrait maker shows another side

By LAWRENCE COSENTINO

When he was 12 years old, Doug Elbinger began to collect human faces by shooting his sister with a Kodak Brownie camera. A few hundred writers, presidents, rock stars and, yes, wedding parties later, he's gone through plenty of upgrades, and now has all the latest digital stuff. "I carry a lot of gear," he admits.

But if Okemos-based Elbinger's latest exhibit is any indication, there is one piece of hardware he can't get rid of: the human-centered eye of the portraitist.

"Favorite Places," at the Hannah Center through Feb. 16, is a real departure for Elbinger. The show is nearly portrait-free, at least in theory. "I wanted to show my friends, clients and public that I don't just do people," he says. "I do all kinds of stuff. I've done fine food for cookbooks. I've done product shoots for automobile parts."

But the exhibit only proves that all Elbinger's subjects, be they automobile, vegetable or mineral, can't help oozing personality.

An erect palm tree struts like a green-vested pimp in front of a Nicaraguan hotel. The Great Pyramid of Cheops stares blankly from broad shoulders of rubble. Twisting trees surreptitiously tryst on a secluded river in Belize.

Elbinger has a ready explanation for the palpable human element in his non-portrait photographs. "Somebody once asked Ansel Adams [the American black-and-white landscape photographer known for primordial textures and epic vistas] why there were no people in his pictures, and he said, 'But there are — you, the viewer, and me, the creator.'"

"Before I was a photographer, I was a painter," Elbinger says, "and this is a way of getting back to some abstract impressionism, doing a different style of photography influenced by painting."

Elbinger bares a toothy, tight grin reminiscent of Theodore Roosevelt's, and he does seem to approach his work like a big-game hunter. Despite the "Favorite Places" detour, he still enjoys setting up his concep-



Courtesy Elbinger Studios

Doug Elbinger in the field.

tual blind and waiting for good face to show up.

Musicians are a recurring fascination; both the Beatles and Rolling Stones are enshrined on his office walls. MSU's Kellogg Center is lined with majestic Elbinger portraits of every important

writer of the last century, from John Updike to Kurt Vonnegut to Maya Angelou.

Recently, Elbinger unearthed an old campaign photo of Ronald Reagan, former Michigan Governor Bill Milliken and some locals sucking up hot dogs and beer in a Detroit backyard. The picture is taped to his work station, along with a candid snapshot of a smiling Christopher Reeve. "When Reagan died, I pulled up my Reagan pictures," he says. "He knew exactly what he was doing in front of the camera, whereas Nixon and Bush were kind of bumbling about it." Clinton made it easy too, says Elbinger. "He loved to hear those shutters

'Favorite Places' by Doug Elbinger

On display through Feb. 16 at the East Lansing Public Art Gallery in the Hannah Center, 819 Abbott Road. Admission is free. Gallery hours are from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. Mon.-Fri.; 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sat.; and noon to 8 p.m. Sun. For more information call (517) 333-2580.

See Elbinger, Page 9

Elbinger

from page 8
click."

Still, it must be a nice break to photograph subjects that don't require Secret Service clearance, fret about their bad side or sprout acne between sessions. "I go through phases where I just like to do sides of barns, interesting doors and windows," he says.

Elbinger shrugs off the notion that pictures like the big green palm tree are portraits in disguise. "It's just a photograph," he

shrugs. "I saw it outside my hotel window, and it looked like it belonged in a frame. I've been told it makes great wall decor."

He doesn't seem to be joking, although that tight T.R. grin is sometimes hard to read.

"I try not to work too hard at this," he laughs. "A lot of these pictures were taken with a pocket camera, through the windshield of my car. I'm not gonna tell you which ones."

"I hate it when I don't have a camera with me," he laughs. "You can have an adventure right in your backyard. Just this morning, the beauty of the drive down Okemos Road, with the frost on the trees and the sun rising — if it weren't four degrees outside, I'd have stopped the car and taken pictures."

The power of photography struck Elbinger even before that first portrait of his sister. "When I was 10 years old," he recalls, "it was the centennial of the Civil War, and my father brought home a book by Matthew Brady, who hired half a dozen photographers, at his own expense, to document the Civil War."

"I looked through that book and it just stunned me that Brady had that kind of foresight."

In high school, Elbinger was already ambitious enough to photograph the Beatles from on stage during their 1966 Detroit visit. He then worked for the

State News while studying photojournalism at Michigan State in the mid-'60s, and went on to capture many memorable images for the Detroit Free Press and United Press International.

Over the years, Elbinger has returned most often to the portrait genre, which has grown from an exclusive status symbol to a democratic, digital commonplace.

"You can do things now that just three years ago were unthinkable," he says. "Theoretically, I could be at a wedding on Saturday, download my pictures the same night, pick out the ones I want, put 'em on the Web site, and by the time people get home from the wedding, the picture's up there on the Web site."

Elbinger's huge archives have also benefited from the rise of digital technology. "Because of the scanners I'm using, I'm getting better prints than I did from the negatives," he says. "Like my Beatle pictures — I can see more detail than I could when I was printing them in a traditional darkroom."

Elbinger knows each technological advance also has the potential to sap the wonder and novelty out of the form. "Nowadays, you take pictures for granted," Elbinger says.

"Although," he adds, "I try to take pictures you don't take for granted."



Courtesy Elbinger Studios

Two of Elbinger's 'Favorite Places': the Great Pyramid of Cheops and a lush tree outside his hotel room in Nicaragua.

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