

Photographer Annie Leibovitz visits Merritt

By: Janine Stankus, Staff Reporter

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"Well, you all deserve medals for coming out in the snow," said Annie Leibovitz as she perched casually on the edge of a table in the reading room at Merritt Bookstore.

Yes, that's Annie Leibovitz—the woman who took the famous, fabulous photo of a nude John Lennon curled up next to his wife Yoko Ono just hours before Lennon was assassinated; the woman who documented the Rolling Stone's 1975 Tour of the Americas as their official photographer; the woman who was personally commissioned by Queen Elizabeth II to take an official picture for her visit to the United States in 2007; the woman responsible for capturing for so many famous faces and notable events throughout her illustrious career.

On Saturday, Dec. 20, this famed photographer appeared in Millbrook to discuss her latest book, "Annie Leibovitz: At Work." The loft was crowded with people who had snubbed the winter weather for the opportunity to meet the admired artist.

To Leibovitz, her newest volume is meant to be a primer for aspiring artists seeking to focus their craft. "The book is really done in my mind for young photographers," she said.

Emilie Hegarty, a graphic design student at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, who studies photography on the side, jumped at the opportunity to meet an icon in the field. "I have all of her books," she said, "but I never thought I'd ever get this chance."

Another young student was able to chat at length with Leibovitz about her own work during the signing. "She was very personable and very willing to talk openly," said Emily Bogel after speaking with Leibovitz.

Bogel, a photojournalism major at Rochester Institute of Technology, had expressed her difficulty sticking with a subject and building a body of work. "You have to find what you want to work with," Leibovitz told her. She cited her admiration for Lexi Sally Mann, a photographer from Lexington, Va., whose profound pictures are inspired by her own environment. "You have to put yourself out there a little bit, but stay close to home," she advised Bogel.

Though her own career has taken her all over the world, Leibovitz still pulls inspiration from her own home. Her three children, born between 2001 and 2005, have added to her insight. "I've been reading more children's books and fairytales," she said. "I'm beginning to really understand the minds of the children."

In 2007, she was able to incorporate this understanding in her creation of "Disney Dreams Portraits Series," which depicts celebrities in the roles of various recognizable Disney characters.

The photographer's work for magazines has also allowed her to delve into the story world. "Vogue is really a great landscape for fairytale," she commented. The December 2008 issue featured her portrayal of dancer Roberto Bolle in the role of Shakespeare's Romeo. Although the

shoot was supposed to take place in Verona, the actual setting of the play, they ended up shooting in Yonkers. This was not too unfortunate for Leibovitz, who pointed out that the Verona architecture would have become just as important as her subject. In New York, she was able to focus on the subject and allow her imagination to guide her. "I like really going out there and being in fairytale land," she proclaimed

Though Leibovitz's own life may seem like something of a fairytale, the artist's goal in assembling this new volume was to "dispel the smoke and mirrors" surrounding her work. "I've always tried to stay away from the celebrity aspect," she commented. "It was always about the photography."

Unlike previous releases, "At Work" includes text that relates the stories and ideas behind the making of each photo. Originally, she said, the collection was to be a kind of pamphlet including ten photos she had selected. "While I still have some brain cells left I should start to take some notes," was her initial thought. As she began to assemble the work, one story would often lead to another and the original photos became building blocks from which she developed an entire book.

The resulting 240 page volume was laid stripped of its cellophane in the hands of the majority of audience members at Merritt on Saturday, who read along as Leibovitz shared her insight on several passages.

One of the first sections in the book covers conceptual photography. It features a series of poets' portraits she shot for Time magazine. "These are blatant examples of where my conceptual work started to come from," she said.

She also referred to her long-standing professional relationship with Arnold Schwarzenegger, opening to a photograph of the actor posing in skis atop a mountain in Sun Valley Idaho. "He didn't want to take his shirt off," Leibovitz remembered. "He said it was because it was so cold up there, which it was, but I think it was because he didn't want to use his body to sell himself anymore."

In a section entitled "Being There," Leibovitz includes a photograph of architect Philip Johnson standing inside his famous Glass House in New Canaan, Conn. This photograph, she said, emerged "pretty much by accident."

Although Leibovitz has had the luxury of working with, as she put it, "enough equipment to be making a small film," she wanted to get the point across that sometimes less is more, and that subjects exist all around. "If it's just there in front of you, then try to capture it," she said.

In a later section entitled "The Road West," the series of photographs wraps up with a simple image of a roadway stretching out towards the horizon. The picture, she said, reminded her of the story behind Dorothea Lange's iconic depression era photo that depicts two young children of migrant workers with their faces buried in their mother's shoulders.

According to Leibovitz, Lange had been returning home from a grueling assignment when she

passed a sign for a Pea Pickers camp along the highway. Twenty miles later Lange's instinct told her to turn around and she backtracked to the camp where she was able to capture an image that would become a symbol for the generation.

Leibovitz felt that, as her collection neared completion, it was lacking an important element--"the unexplainable." The "road west" photograph was chosen as an ending from among several possible candidates because Leibovitz felt that it conjured up this idea. "I thought it was important to explain the unexplainable," she said. "I wanted to share this concept with young photographers."

The young photographers present at Merritt were certainly willing to absorb any wisdom that the seasoned artist had to offer. "I can't wait to read the book," said Hegarty as she snapped her own photos of the signing.

Hegarty and many others were surprised that such a high profile persona, a celebrity in her own right, was scheduled to visit the small village of Millbrook. "I thought, 'Millbrook, really, not New York City?'," she said.

Leibovitz, however, is no stranger to the Merritt Bookstore. "Scott and I go way back," she commented, referring to store owner Scott Meyer. In fact, Leibovitz has done signings at Merritt for each of her past five book releases. "It's so important to support the small bookstores," she commented.

Meyer said that he had no difficulty getting Annie to appear at his stores. "I just asked her," he said.

For Leibovitz, the smaller-scale signings offer her a chance to connect with her fans. "It's so great to see the people and feel the room."

Leibovitz generously signed copies of her books well into Saturday afternoon as stragglers continued to wander in. For those who happened to miss the event, Merritt Bookstore will have extra signed copies on sale and will even arrange for personalized copies.

According to Meyer, the signing was a great success, even in spite of the winter storm. "She's been talking to everyone," he said. "There's a few less, but we still have a lot of happy people here."