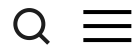




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***Has Existential Crisis* - Artist Interview with Mike Harrington**



Mike Harrington with Anastasia Standrik, fellow The New School alum who was featured in the exhibit

Blog post by Tian-Tian He

Mike Harrington, the Director of Sustainability Engagement here at the Tishman Center, recently exhibited his photo series ["Has Existential Crisis"](#) as part of the Human Impacts Institute's [Creative Climate Awards](#) exhibit. This annual exhibit showcases climate-inspired work from artists around the world, focusing this year on the theme "Inspiring a Climate Renaissance."

"Has Existential Crisis" combines portraiture with images of the Buddhist figure Kannon, who represents compassion, to explore

in the climate space and the role that compassion plays in their work. Having worked with Mike at the Tishman Center for a while, I also found that the photos also reflected his own sensitivity and compassion well. I sat down with Mike to discuss the origins of this project, the conversations that happened around the photographs, and what he's learned from the process.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Tian-Tian He: *Can you talk a little bit about the concept of the project, and what first inspired you to do this?*

Mike Harrington: The concept of the project comes from a few things. For one, I work in the environmental justice space. And I know that there's a lot of animosity toward black people in the world and it's something I understand, because it's an experience I've had my whole life. But I also think about the role that compassion plays in my life and how that allows me to do the work I do. So I was curious about the role that compassion plays for women and non-binary people and people outside of my experience that do climate work. Because with climate work, you can't choose who you help, like if you're trying to make air quality better, you have to make it better

for everyone. You can't just pick someone you don't like and be like, well, you're gonna have toxic air and everyone else around you isn't. So I think I just wanted to know a little bit more about why.

And I started with women, just because that's who was around me at the time. I luckily had some friends that work in the climate space that were happy to help me with this project. My friend Caroline was the first person that I got to photograph and she actually came up with the name for the project, because during the project, I asked people a number of questions. And one of the questions I asked, her response was — “Has existential crisis, thinking about this.” And that's why the project is called “Has Existential Crisis,” because it is about climate change— and that is an existential crisis.



Caroline #3 - Photo from Mike Harrington



Caroline #4 - Photo from Mike Harrington

And then there's the part about Buddhism; there's a Bodhisattva that has different names, depending on which country you're in. In South Asia it's Avalokitesvara, in China and Taiwan it's Guanyin, in Japan it's Kannon... So it's this Buddhist avatar of compassion that is non-binary. That's why I thought it was a good idea to look at the statues for inspiration. And then I started taking photos of the statues themselves, as well.

Do you have a personal background with Buddhism? How did you first learn about Kannon?

I learned about Buddhism a while ago, when I was in college. I just generally learned about all the different bodhisattvas, it must have been something I was reading or watching or because Kannon is a popular figure in a lot of South Asian and East Asian entertainment. As you know, I watch a lot of anime and manga. And even in Naruto, there's like a depiction of Kannon; Hunter x Hunter, Kannon comes up in a lot of those works. I think I saw some photos when I was doing a photography certificate at Parsons, from this Japanese photographer, these photos at the temple of these old dilapidated statues. And the photo I liked the most was of Kannon, the avatar of compassion.

I really liked the image of Kannon because there's so many different types of this bodhisattva. There's one with a thousand arms, one with six arms, or two, and then eleven heads. And there's a part of it that really spoke to me— basically, Kannon hears the cries of the world. And it bothered them so much that their arms split into a thousand, their heads split into all these things. They ripped apart because of how upset they were about what was going on in the

world. And then the Buddha brought them back together and gave them all these arms and all these heads so that they can help people.



Photo from Mike Harrington

Oh wow— I wish I still had that, like sensitivity to the world that I would be that disturbed by everything that's going on. [...] There are just like so many bad things that happen over and over again that you kind of get desensitized.

Oh, yeah, I can understand that you can't pay attention to all that stuff, it's not healthy. So I'm not saying that everyone I'm working with feels that because a lot of them have expressed things like what you say, there's so much that they

it, but a lot of them still keep doing this sort of work. So I'm just curious as to why you want to do this work in a world where a significant part of it does not like your existence.

How did the picture taking process just play out? Did you ask them questions as you were photographing them?

So this project, now I think about it, is kind of scientific in a way. My first degree is in psychology. So when you take a picture of something it's like, how do you get an impression of this person through one image— I don't think it's possible. You can get an impression of a person at that time, but not a rich one. So the reason psychology comes into this is because I ask everyone the same six questions and they're supposed to invoke different emotions. Then I'm sitting across from them with my camera, and I take photos as we're having a conversation. And sometimes it's interesting, they'll naturally pose like the statues.

After we do the questions, I'll do a lot of research on that person. And sort of think about them, what they look like, what sort of vibe do they give that's similar to the statues I've seen. For instance, one person is of Vietnamese descent that

helped me with this. And there is a Vietnamese depiction of Kannon called Quan Âm. So I asked, do you mind if we pose you like the Vietnamese version of this bodhisattva? I try to find a concept of Guanyin that sort of fits in with that person's personality.

So do you have those six questions that you ask while you take the pictures?

Oh, with me right now? I do try to keep them a little bit secret because I don't want them to think about what that question is beforehand. I want it to be more of a genuine experience of like, when they hear that question how do they respond. But I can tell you one of them is what's something that you're scared of? Or who is someone that you don't like?

That's a fun one!

Yeah, someone that you like or don't like. And it's 50/50. People usually pick someone that they like, but sometimes people are like, "Yeah, there's a specific person that I dislike that comes to mind." I like that question because even though I'm comparing people to deities, I'm also saying that these are well rounded people and they're human. Even though they're doing work

that benefits everyone, there are still going to be people they don't like, or you know, everyone has their flaws. And even though there's this juxtaposition between these statues that are in this reverent space, I tried to mirror that with the photos, but I also want to make sure that I'm capturing their humanity.

It's a project more about visibility, because I want to talk to women and non binary people, but I may even go into queer people in general, because that's another experience that while I've observed, it's not my life experience. So I'm also curious, like, why would gay men do this as well. And I think the challenge is finding more people to do the interviews with that are representative of who's working on climate. I think because of where I work in my position, it can be tricky to find a wide range of people.

So I feel like you acknowledge really openly that you're a cis man who can't relate to the experiences that women and non-binary people have in the climate space. So what's kind of the dynamic of you going in and asking them to talk about something that you might not be able to relate to? How do people react to that?

Oh, the questions are so open-

ended that I'm not saying like, you as a woman, what do you think about this? But they're questions that I have thought about myself, and then I'm posing it to someone who says a much different experience to me, so I do treat it more like a conversation. I'm willing to be vulnerable with them as well because sometimes they'll ask me the same question back. But it's mostly me listening to be honest, and not trying to steer the conversation one way or another.

In the beginning, I tell people you can answer these questions however you want. And even though I acknowledge that I am the one that's editing and choosing the photos, I'll send them the photos and say, these are your photos, and if you don't want me to show anything, I'm happy to not do that. I think it's important that if they're letting me control that image to a certain degree, I want to make sure that I'm doing it in a way that's respectful to them. But yeah, I tried to do it as respectfully as possible and I tried to listen more than anything.

Yeah, I think it sounds like you're taking not so much of an investigative approach but just like a conversation.

Yeah, I learned a lot every time I

talked to someone, everyone's very wise. I think everybody just has wisdom but I don't know if a lot of people listen to everyone. There's people of various ages that I've done it with so far and I keep learning all these interesting things about people. Some of their struggles and sometimes silly things, like one person is afraid of toasters. She's just afraid that she would be washing the dishes one day, and the toaster will fall into the sink while she's washing the dishes, and it'll kill her.

But yeah, I do learn a lot. I'm very grateful that everyone is so open to speaking with me about these questions and answering them. I get way more out of it than— for some of them, they said it has been useful for thinking about things, but I feel like it's all equal because I get so much out of it, just talking to them.

What are some of the biggest things that you learned from people through this?

Some of the stuff I've learned has helped me in my real life, like I'm starting a PhD program, and one of the people told me something that I put in my PhD application. She talked a lot about how she thinks it's very important that everyone

has an equal opportunity in life, to do what they want. She said she wants to help create an environment where that's possible for everyone. And I was like, wow, that's great, I agree with that. But I'd never put it like that before. And a lot of it is about death, weirdly enough, so many people talked about that. And it's something I think about a lot, but I've never thought about it the way some of these other people talk about it. So it helps me to deal with that.

Sometimes it's just very interesting stuff that I would never know, because there's so much you don't know about someone. Someone said one thing that they were scared of is never breaking the rules, because they always follow the rules. And they were like, Oh, I like I don't want to have regrets. So I don't want to be so law-abiding, I want to try to break rules. It's all these interesting tidbits about people that I would have never learned otherwise.

Loan #4 - Photo from Mike Harrington

*Is there anything about
photographing someone that
changes your relationship with
them? Like maybe something
about seeing them through the lens*

of the camera or having that specific context?

Yeah, there is, it's something that one of my photography mentors told me. And it's kind of strange, but whenever you take a photograph of another person, it's really a photograph of yourself. So taking the photograph, and seeing how people react to it is very interesting. I learned about how some people feel about me because I've usually felt that— not felt— people *are* afraid of me, like, I know that so many people are afraid of me just walking down the street or just like existing. And then when I looked at the photos, one of my photography teachers complained because he's like, “I think these people seem to like you. And I don't like that, I'd like to see what it looks like if you take a photo of someone that doesn't like you.” But I always thought I was very unlikable, that's something I was told most of my life. So that's been helpful for me to be like, oh, so some people do like me.

It's something I see already when I meet these people and I'm like, I want to see if I can capture this certain thing. Because everyone has behavioral patterns that you see, people will do the same gestures and stuff. And I'm like, Oh, that's an interesting gesture. I wonder if I can capture that.

Sometimes, I'll do this thing where we talk about the project and do a short meditation. And then I'll see the power that some of the women have— sometimes they'll say, I feel like I'm not very strong, or they're not sure of themselves, or they have these doubts. But then I'll have them do the pose and I'm like, think of yourself as this boat or think of yourself as being so powerful that nothing can touch you, that you're above everything. And then I'll see them looking very powerful and peaceful at the same time. So yeah, that's something I really liked to see.

That's something I learned when I take the photos, because I think a lot of the time, I've noticed that so many women younger than a certain age tend not to be very confident. I think it's partially because of our society, we don't encourage women to be confident in themselves. So, being able to see that strength and that power, just even briefly for a second. And it's not me doing that, it's them, their like inner power and strength, but I'm somehow able to capture that briefly.

Yeah, I think even though you're not causing them to be that way, it's really powerful for someone to see them have that strength.

Oh, yeah. I'm always impressed with everyone I've worked with on this. And even seeing those images sometimes makes me feel better. Yeah.

Is there any specific picture that you feel like oh, I really captured this person's energy?

I think there's a few. There's one I have in my office of my friend Lida. So in the picture she has like three heads and eight arms because she's always doing like a million things. That's like the first time I've been able to do the multi-arm thing, I think that captured her pretty well. There's like so many, it's really hard to answer that question ... it's really cool to see that I captured that person's fierceness or their general energy.

Lida #6 - Photo from Mike Harrington

Do you feel like this project has changed you and your perception of the climate space?

Yeah, it's definitely changed me. My perception of the climate space? I don't think so. I think it's pretty much the same. Well, yes and no, because I've learned a lot about why these people do this sort of work and what drives them to do it. But I don't feel like I have a big enough sample size to really say it changes my idea of the space. But it definitely changed me, I've been learning a lot of photography skills doing this and just making new friends and learning about the lives of people that I didn't know that much about.

And this has led you to think more

about what my role is and how to better support— so far women, but I do want to work with a wider group of people.

But it's really helped me to think about, how do I support women working in the climate space? And like women of different colors and different backgrounds, different et cetera, because unfortunately, a lot of the climate space, it's mostly white women. And especially in academia. So that's not the case of who is most affected by climate change and who is working against it. But that's what we see. So I wanted to be able to take more photos of people of different women, and people, not just women, from different backgrounds to show this face of climate, who is working on the climate.

Thank you for doing this interview with me!

Thank you!

Congratulations Mike on this accomplishment!! You can see “Has Existential Crisis” on show until May 11 along with other events, [which you can find here.](#)

If you are interested in reaching out

to be part of the project, you can reach out to Mike through his Instagram or website.

Website: mikedharrington.com

Instagram:
[@squalllionmonochrome](https://www.instagram.com/squalllionmonochrome)



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