

JENNIFER WOLFE

IN NO GREAT HURRY

Documenting the Work and Wisdom of Photographer Saul Leiter



Saul Leiter

Tomas Leach's documentary *In No Great Hurry: 13 Lessons in Life with Saul Leiter* is a tender and intimate portrait of the photographer and painter considered to be a pioneer—along with Diane Arbus and Robert Frank—of the New York School era of photography of the 1940s and '50s.

Leiter could have been lauded as the pioneer of the artistic use of color film but was never driven by the lure of success. Instead, he preferred to

“drink coffee and photograph in his own way,” according to the film's synopsis, amassing an archive of beautiful work piled high in his New York apartment. Leiter came to acclaim late in life. While much of his most powerful work was made in the 1950s, it wasn't truly rediscovered until nearly a half-century later.

Leach, who initially learned of Leiter's work through a 2006 monograph, “Early Color,” reached out to the photographer's gallery and

was eventually put in touch with the man himself. “Looking at the images, I was just blown away by how beautiful and fresh they were,” the filmmaker says.

Following a year of meetings at the photographer's East Village apartment, Leiter finally agreed to participate in a film, albeit with several provisions. “Some of his stipulations were that it could only be me and him, so there was no crew, and that there be no third-party

involvement, so there wouldn't be any kind of backers or commissioners telling us when we had to be done by or what the film had to focus on," Leach recalls.

Leiter died last November, a week before his 90th birthday and just days after *In No Great Hurry* screened in the DOC NYC film festival. "My own achievements are rather minor," he insists on camera, as if questioning the need for a film.

Leach shot the film in 16:9 aspect using a Canon EOS 5D Mark III DSLR camera, selected mainly because of its size. Production took place over the course of 18 months, with Leach periodically flying from London to New York to interview Leiter and follow the photographer around his neighborhood and cluttered apartment.

"Obviously, being one-on-one with somebody, there are only a small number of cameras that you can use practically. It was almost the only choice," says Leach of his decision to use the Canon 5D. "You can't bring in a big camera, you can't change the way the space works, especially with someone whose space is so important to him, and there's also something nice about shooting with photographic lenses and equipment when it's a film about a photographer."

To record audio, Leach employed a shotgun microphone and two Zoom recorders, which he placed unobtrusively around the apartment as needed. This setup allowed Leach to record conversations with Leiter even when he was off-camera, a strategy that paid off during filming as well as during the edit. "I recorded quite a



Tomas Leach with Saul Leiter

bit more audio than I did picture," Leach says. "Because we were one-on-one, it would have been too difficult to run the audio takes with the picture; at times I needed to put the camera down—either to help him lift something up or out of the way so I could shoot it or to fiddle with something, make changes—but was able to keep the audio going while the conversation continued."

Footage recorded from the Canon EOS 5D at 25p PAL H.264 was converted to DNxHD 120 files and stored on G-Technology G-RAID drives prior to being ingested into an Avid system for editing. Leach worked with two other editors, Johnny Rayner and Kate Baird, to organize material for the online edit. The team also created a 10-minute film to be shown around the world with exhibitions of Leiter's work. Color correction and finishing were handled on a FilmLight Baselight system by colorist Stephen Gatti at MPC London.

"Stephen did a wonderful job," says Leach, who has worked with the colorist on a number of commercial projects. "We were quite happy with the grade, but after a friends and family screening in London he said there were a couple of things he wouldn't mind tweaking, and all on his own time he went in and made it even more beautiful."

"Saul is somebody who speaks very much to people across the film industry: directors, cinematographers, production designers and certainly colorists," Leach concludes. "There's something incredibly cinematic about his images. Even though they are portraits, there's something really fascinating about his work to people involved in cinema. The way he deals with frames, the way there's always a depth to them, speaks a lot to people who work in the film industry." **dv**

