


# L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

## Recap & Reload : Howard Greenberg – Interview by Nadine Dinter

 [oeildelaphotographie.com/en/recap-reload-howard-greenberg-interview-by-nadine-dinter-dv/](https://oeildelaphotographie.com/en/recap-reload-howard-greenberg-interview-by-nadine-dinter-dv/)

Nadine Dinter

March 7, 2023



**It's my greatest pleasure to kick off a new series for The Eye of Photography. Together with the established "What's New" features that we have been sharing with you since September 2019, our new series presents in-depth interviews with renowned gallerists, publishers, curators, and more. I am thrilled to start with one of the most famous New York-based gallerists – Howard Greenberg. Ever since I started working in photography, Greenberg's shows, activities, and collaborations have been a huge inspiration for me. On the occasion of the Saul Leiter exhibition at the Helmut Newton Foundation in 2018/2019, I finally had the pleasure of working with Greenberg for the first time – what a joy!**

**Please join me now for the first part of "Recap & Reload," featuring Mr. Howard Greenberg:**

**Nadine Dinter : When and how did you start your career in the arts / photography business?**

**Howard Greenberg :** After college, in 1970, I purchased a camera and never looked back. I had not intended on a career in the arts, as a photographer, or certainly not as a gallerist. However, my love and obsession with being a photographer turned into a similar

love and obsession with the history of photography, particularly with my discovery of the transcendent beauty of changing materials available during that history when utilized by the great photographers. I morphed from being a photographer to founding and directing a nonprofit “center” for photography in Woodstock, NY, in 1977 to opening my own commercial gallery in 1981.

**What was your main motivation to open a gallery? Do you have any particular role models or idols?**

**HG :** My motivation for opening my first commercial gallery was the realization that I loved the history, and also that there were great treasures close by (Woodstock was an important art colony founded in 1902, and many photographers lived or had strong connections there). I could have a gallery in Woodstock during the warmer months and then be on the road with the photographs I was finding and acquiring all the time. If I had gallery role models, it would have been the early NYC galleries like Witkin and Light. However, for me, it was more about the discovery of great work and then finding ways to sell it and then create a gallery business. I assure you I did not sell many photos from my Woodstock gallery in the early ‘80s. The business grew from my many trips to NY and other cities, which allowed me to form relationships with the few curators and collectors at that time.

**Who was the first artist you signed on?**

**HG :** Good question. I actually did not have any desire to work with any of my peers or contemporary photographers at that time. My interest was in discovering the history. So, I can say that among the first estates I represented, which I remember as being important, was that of Martin Munkácsi. There was an exception; Kenro Izu. He had a second home in Woodstock, and I saw his work at the photography center in, I think, 1982 or 1983. We met and have been working together ever since. I would say that he was the first “contemporary” photographer I signed on.

**After how many years in the business did you get the affirmation you needed?**

**What drives you to continue working as a gallerist in your space?**

**HG :** Another good question... I’ll give two answers. One is that when my car was broken into in 1980 in a midtown NY parking lot, the tape deck and suitcases for a several days stay, and other things were stolen. All they left was a thin 16×20 portfolio case with seven very valuable Alfred Stieglitz prints in it. Even then, they were worth far more than my car, and I thought to myself, I’m in the right business. Second affirmation was the sale(s) I made to the newly formed photo collection at the Getty Museum. The formation of that collection is a very interesting story in itself. However, I can tell you that the money it put into the hands of several dealers and the market in general, as well as the new wider perception that photography had verifiable value, was a game changer. This was in 1984...

What drives me to continue? Well, of course, there are many reasons. One is my belief in photography continues (although it’s all changed and is not, shall I say, as pure as it once was.) Then there’s the gallery and staff. I do feel responsible for several people and their livelihood. I’ve always looked at the gallery as somewhat of a family affair and still do. And

importantly, the gallery has evolved to stand for something about photography that's, in ways, different from other galleries. I believe this only because of the volume of feedback I've had over the years from so many people, and such a variety. I've tried to keep the gallery about photography first and trends, politics, social issues, and specific genres second. There seems to be a large enough audience since a long enough time who respect this. And it makes me feel like the gallery deserves to survive, even lasting way past myself.

### **What's your business philosophy?**

**HG :** I've always tried to be loyal to the photographers and estates I represent, and act in their best interest. Same for the wonderful clients/collectors/museums I've worked with. And then, I believe that in my gallery, the staff has occupied a very important place in the business. I've tried to cultivate that and maintain long-term employees as much as possible. A successful gallery is one that develops and maintains relationships even when it's not financially productive to do so. In the long run, this is what works and is also personally very gratifying.

### **How many artists do you represent now?**

**HG :** I have no idea, seriously. I suppose I could count, but that wouldn't be accurate. There are different kinds of representations. One where you are the primary gallery, and all the workflows through you. I consider this the most important kind of representation. We used to call it "exclusive." Another is when you are one of a few galleries, and the photographer or estate controls the work and is the hub of activity. And then there are the collections of historical work that you are deeply into. I could say I represent them, but in truth, I might only own a large inventory and/or continue to be active in the "secondary" market in that photographer's work. Anyway, in an attempt to find a number, I would suggest looking at my website and counting!

### **Has there been a big turning point, an overhaul of the gallery line-up, or major move (of whatever kind) since first opening your gallery?**

**HG :** Actually no. I like to think that the gallery has, more or less, been consistent in who/what in photography it represents. Any perceptual change has been gradual over a period of time. As for moves: from the Woodstock gallery to a tiny space in Soho from 1986–1991, to a large, beautiful space (for its time) during 1991–2003, to the midtown space since then... the gallery has certainly moved. And I believe with each move, there's been a change in what has been possible and, accordingly, the success of the business. Fortunately, it seems to always move forward.

### **Any highlights or challenging moments?**

**HG :** Many.

### **Any particular anecdotes you want to share with our readers?**

**HG :** Dozens. Let's save them for next time.

### **What's new & what's in store for 2023?**

**HG** : Now I'm living in Berlin, and although still very much involved, the staff runs the gallery day to day. That includes programming for exhibitions and more. I'm consulted, of course, but I really don't participate in all the decisions. So I must suggest speaking to my staff to answer the question.

### **Your advice for photography collectors?**

**HG** : My advice for photography collectors, if they intend to truly "collect" and not just buy a few pics for the walls (which is also fine by me), is: Educate yourself. That means go to exhibitions, ask questions, look at books, and even read a few. Then buy one or two or three photos that appeal and live with them. Seek out other collectors for their insights. However, as this activity goes on and some semblance of confidence develops, follow your heart. Buy what appeals to you and not your friends. Understand yourself better by the collecting you do, the images and prints you live with, and why they bring you satisfaction... or not. And always buy the "best" you can afford, and know that a \$1000 photograph can bring you as much joy as a \$100,000 photo. It's all very personal in the end.

### **No-go's & to-do's when it comes to the photography business?**

**HG** : That's a tough question, as one could write a book about how to be in the photo business. What I'll say here is to think long-term and, hopefully, have your own taste and reasons for the photos you show and sell. I believe the best dealers have their own visions. It's the belief in this vision, plus an ability to present it to the world in an attractive, creative way which will allow success to follow. Of course, you must also treat your artists, clients, and colleagues correctly, with integrity and clarity. And last, if you don't really love the photos you're selling, don't bother. Otherwise, the business will not work, at least not in the long term.

### **Photographers on your watchlist?**

**HG** : You tell me. I'm still learning...

Thank you very much for taking the time, Howard!

### **Current exhibition:**

Edward Burtynsky, *African Studies*, 4–27 March 2023

**Follow the gallery at [@howardgreenberggallery](https://www.howardgreenberggallery.com/) and find more information at <https://www.howardgreenberg.com/>**