



## Lens Master

**Gary Bishop traded the mechanic's belt for the camera four decades ago, and he's still tinkering**

| By Steve Carter | Photography by Trevor Paulhus |

It's often said that "the camera doesn't lie," but iconoclastic photographer Gary Bishop would be the first to wrestle that truism to the mat. "A photo ultimately becomes the artist's interpretation of the truth," he maintains. "Anyone who's pointing a camera and saying they're representing 'the truth' is a liar, or stupid. It's only their interpretation of the truth." Bishop, a youthful 65, is a tireless philosophizing raconteur, and continues to riff on subjective photographic truth, on the paradox that what a photographer doesn't shoot is as significant as what he does shoot. Although he hasn't taught in several years, an interview with Bishop quickly morphs into a freewheeling lecture that suggests he was a gifted mentor during his nine years at Collin College. "It's far easier to learn craft than it is to learn and develop an aesthetic," he observes. "You cannot teach it." But right now at HCG Gallery in Dallas,

a group show entitled *Command, Shift, Tab, Return, Delete* offers an intriguing survey of 40 years of the Dallas photographer's work. Portraits, still lifes, Polaroids, and enigmatic, single frame, photographic short stories are all part of the picture, providing a rich overview of Bishop's ever-evolving vision.

Reared in Oak Cliff, Bishop's introduction to photography occurred by chance shortly after high school; at the time he was a mechanic hoping to be a Formula One racing driver. Leaving his house for a walk one day, a neighbor, out of the blue, suggested he take her camera along. "I'd never taken a photograph in my life, I knew nothing," he recalls. He shot some pictures of a motorcycle wreck he happened upon, and when he got home returned the camera to the neighbor, who had the film developed. "So later she showed me the photos and said, 'There's a narrative to this, this is good for someone who doesn't know what they're doing and just wants to race cars.'" Shortly thereafter, when he lost his mechanic job, a friend introduced him to a photographer who needed an assistant; he got the gig and learned his craft on the job. He's been a professional since 1969, and has done it all: photojournalism, editorial and commercial, fine art and teaching. His credits and awards are too numerous to mention, but one

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**POLISHING HIS IMAGES** From top: Gary Bishop, pictured at his temporary studio and storage space, has a current show at HCG Gallery in Dallas. *Katharine Hepburn*, 41 inches x 61 inches, 1971.



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"I wanted to show how mean we are, how indifferent we are to things we should care about," he explains, "but I finally came to the conclusion that I don't know how much of a difference I can make. Now...I'm interested in some sort of affirmation."

...CONTINUED key experience was his production and directing on KERA TV's *Newsroom* program with Jim Lehrer between '69 and '72. Shooting multiple images for a feature, Bishop would then arrange them frame by frame in the studio for the TV camera to pan across as the story was read. This fueled his interest in narrative work, and he jokes that "I was doing Ken Burns 25 years before Ken Burns was."

Bishop's photographic mission is about engagement, heart and the triumph of ideas over technique; he asserts that it's much harder to take a "good photo" than it is to simply "take a photo of an interesting thing." When he started working as a journalist in the '60s, he was passionate about illuminating societal inequities, the contrast between the haves and have-nots, the zeitgeist. "I wanted to show how mean we are, how indifferent we are to things we should care about," he explains, "but I finally came to the conclusion that I don't know how much of a difference I can make. Now, with everything going on in the world, I'm interested in some form of affirmation." The photographer has straddled journalism, commercial work and personal art throughout his career, but it's the commercial work that has underwritten the

personal, making it possible for Bishop to co-found the Allen Street Gallery some years back.

Married for 34 years and the father of two, Gary hasn't been overly concerned with showing his work in galleries over the years, and that's one reason why *Command, Shift, Tab, Return, Delete*, at HCG through Jan. 23, is a must-see. Some of his earliest work, including a portrait of a camera-bearing cowpoke who's sizing up the photographer's intrusion, and another of a pensive Katharine Hepburn, attest to Bishop's ability to dignify his subjects with respectful, empathetic curiosity, and an eagerness to celebrate the moment. Some works, like *Do You Get It*, border on the dada-esque. The piece is an absurdist conflation of image and text, the mysterious in search of meaning, that almost feels like a practical joke played on the viewer. A set of large, colorful, digitally-manipulated Polaroids bend reality to abstraction, and the photographer's *Tobias* series constructs an ambiguous narrative that may say more about subjective perception than it does about artistic intentionality. Bishop's tributes to John Lennon and John Wayne are also featured, in hushed studies that speak to the futility of verbal responses to loss. Already beginning to plot his next gallery show, Bishop adds, "Being a photographer has given me a quality of life I never imagined. It's like that Tennessee Williams idea, 'I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.' Really, that's what it is," he laughs. "I'm Blanche." ■

HCG Gallery, 1130 Dragon St., 214.760.9230,  
hcgallery.com or garybishopassociates.com.

1. *Tom Snyder Tribute to John Wayne*, Polaroid SX-70 series, 30 inches x 36 inches, 1979.

2. *Cowboy With a Camera*, 48 inches x 72 inches, 1970.

3. *Tobias Played Here #1*, 16 inches x 20 inches, 1994.

4. *Do You Get It?*, 50 inches x 62 inches, 2007.