LARRY SULTAN
with Drew Johnson, Curator of Photography and Visual Culture at the Oakland Museum

The following oral history transcript is from a videotape-recorded interview. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. Funding provided by the National Endowment of the Arts and the Oakland Museum's Women Board for The Oakland Museum of California.

Drew: Where were your roots Larry and when did you decide to become a photographer?

Larry: I was born in Brooklyn and my family was part of that post-war quest for the better life, so my father came out here in 1950, by himself and we soon followed. Of course he couldn't find a job and there is a whole drama to that but I grew up primarily in Los Angeles. Brooklyn is a very dim memory for me. So I think of myself as really a Southern California product. It is a big influence on me and I left Southern California and came to the Bay Area in 1970 and became a photographer. Primilary out of default. There was nothing else for me to do that I thought had any value or interest or meaning. Also the times were so interesting, the streets were interesting, so being a photographer allowed me to be a witness, to participate in a way that felt right for my blend of being alienated. I mean I was the kind of kid who use to stand there with his mouth opened and stare at things and I still stare and so photography was a natural outgrowth to just being abstracted; just to endlessly looking at the world and I found a way of having a profession that seemed to be consistent with my personality. But there is a long string of mishaps that led to photography.

DJ: You were in art school?

LS: No, I graduated college with a degree in political science at UCLA and UCSB. I had taken a photo class and I joined Vista to be revolutionary. I went to Chicago and it just didn't work. I was organizing a tenant union in Illinois and, I just, it was so wrong and I realized that there was something calling me, so I didn't go to art school. I began photographing, it was 1968, for the Chicago Seed and the Good Times. It was the psychedelic culture and photographing rallies and trying to blend my political orientation to photography. But it wasn't until the early 70s, when I went to RISD for about three weeks to graduate school and quit and came out here and studied at the Art Institute that I thought of photography as an art form. Before it was just permission to reportage I didn't have a background in art. I didn't take any art history. For me looking at billboards on Sunset Strip was more interesting than going to museums. Popular culture was also much more vital to me than museum and art culture.

DJ: I think of the early 70s, San Francisco, Art Institute, UCSF, there was a real vital photography scene. A lot of those people came out of that. Did you have a lot of colleagues, students at the time, was there a photography scene that influenced you and did you have mentors?

LS: Photography in the 70s, the tradition of San Francisco photography was really a romantic tradition based around the Beat Generation and the lyricism of daily life and quite frankly it bored me to tears and I didn't feel in any way interested or adept at it. I didn't understand the language of academic critique, and I didn't feel comfortable sitting in cafe culture. I was interested in Bob's Big Boy combo plates with Thousand Island dressing and french fries. I mean, I come out of LA, and coming up here, the sheer pretention of it was horrific to me. So I started to work with another photographer named Mike Mandel, who's also from L.A. and we just worked against the grain of the Art Institute and the San Francisco scene of photography and the cult Jack Welpott and Judy Dater; all of the names that were big. We were really disaffected and we began doing work around found photography, appropriated imagery and we did our first billboard in 1973, while I was just graduating from the Art Institute. We did a billboard in Emeryville, a big 23 foot photograph. So we were, in fact Mike didn't even graduate, they withheld his degree because he wasn't making photographs, serious publishing. We published our first book while he was in graduate school, which was a book called "How to Read Music In One Evening"; which was a book of found photographs. We had done three billboards by then, but because he didn't do photographs he couldn't get a degree in photography. So it shows you how times have changed now. But then it was a very, I thought, it was a fairly reactionary environment. And coming from L.A., there's these fabulous artists like Ed Ruscha who I thought made great use of photography and John Baldessari and those were more of the people we were interested in because I was also interested in Zen Buddhism and I was trying to graft Minor White's influence to Edward Ruscha, which is about as hard as you can get. I mean those two just resist each other completely. But that was my over arching desire to wed those to and I think the book "Evidence" is a kind of blend of mysterious metaphor and slack dog document, so it does a fair amount of work to get those two together; those two influences together.

DJ: You did two things that seemed unusual for photographers, one was collaboration and another is public art. How does the collaboration work well for you, what do you gain from that?

LS: I think I was, well collaboration was a great way to do things that neither Mike or I were willing to do by ourselves. Collaboration is a way of edging each other on, of pushing past the boundaries of taste or magnitude or scale. You enable each other. Quite a few of the projects we did weren't that much fun to do and so having someone to do them with makes all the difference in the world. And I've collaborated not only with Mike Mandel For 23 years, but I have worked with my wife, I've worked with ex-graduate students, I have worked with sculptor Paul Koss. I am a social character and I love brainstorming and I love getting the kind of looseness that you get when you are collaborating, you really can get to things much quicker, get to ideas that are outside of ones normal frame of reference. And also there is an analytic process that comes from collaboration, because you've got to stand back and defend your ideas. To get your way, you have to be articulate. So it helps. It helped me a lot to one, understand what I am interested in and two, to be able to communicate that interest. So I think the thing about being an artist is that the models I had when I was a young artist were quite modernist, I

thought someone, an artist, should have a single vision. A good artist has a single vision that kind of unravels in a very elegant way throughout time. I am a very fragmented person. I don't do one kind of work, even though I think I am more associated with the work as a kind of photography practice. I have been working 30 years and I have done a lot of different things and the pleasure of it is that since you can't make a living as an artist, I mean very few people make a living as an artist, why not just do what you want to do. Instead of conforming to the model of what one thinks one should do why not just do it. Just get all of those demons out of ones system and all the pleasures and all the fantasies and just run with; and that has been terrible for my career but wonderful for my soul.

DJ: How did the public art come about and what are the attractions of public art? Maybe you can describe for instance your mosiac process.

LS: Public art began in graduate school with a simple frustration that meaning resides in images mysteriously. It always felt to me that meaning resided in the viewer bringing something to a image or a object. Because when I was growing up, as I mentioned, the Sunset Strip billboards your popular culture was really enticing to me. The idea of distributing work in a way that doesn't require people to go to a museum or a gallery, along of the lines of advertising, where people don't choose to see a image but it confronts them. It really felt to me that artists should be part of that culture and that in a sense be populist that way. And so from 1973, we started to make work that was on billboards, on kiosks, on post cards, in books that didn't take a curator. The only permission we had to get was with the billboard company to let us put it up, and when they didn't we put it up anyway. So the idea of doing things with ones 'owns agency', without having to go through a kind of power structure that seemed for a young graduate student or someone right out of graduate school, these are very mystifying things. How do you get to do something. Well so what we did was we decided to do it and found the resources to do it. So public art has been at the very beginning of my practice. I probably showed, my first show was on a billboard instead of at a gallery. So we've done together maybe 80 different billboards. Then in the 90s, when more money was opened up there was projects for artists that were not just temporary but permanent public art projects. We did a project in Oakland at Defremery Park. We proposed a mosaic on a pool and the mosaic was very simple, it was a digital image. We photographed kids swimming or jumping, diving and the pool is about 18 feet high; the columns. We took the photographs that we had taken and digitized them and turned each pixel into a one inch ceramic tile. From a distance it looks very photographic. From up close it just falls apart into kind of a digital noise. It was a very simple project that gave us the capacity of making a kind of photographic image on a building and it is still there. It has never been graffitised. It becomes part of that neighborhood and that was 1995. That was the first one where we actually got paid. And Mike and I were very well aware of the fact that here we were doing public art more as a intervention and now we are being legitimized and in fact it started to turn into a business and Mike is doing this as a profession now. I rarely get involved at this point.

DJ: It's one of those ideas that sound so simple, obviously it works so well. Maybe I

will skip over Evidence and concentrate on things that are likely to be displayed. So, Pictures From Home, could you talk about what spurred that and I guess that's connected to your interest in suburbs, specifically Southern California suburbs, and talk about the fact that it is not just photographs by you, it is a lot of things brought together.

LS: The time frame in the early 80s, a number of things were happening that I thought were very influential to me. In 1983 there were a number of influences outside of me and that helped me to come to a project. It is always a mysterious thing, why one does what they do. But the Republicans had hijacked the family and they had turned it into a ideological tool and family values. I felt the family they were talking about was quite oppressive and I felt that family was one of the most complicated, unnerving institutions and yet it is the last institution anyone I think believes in, most of us believes in. We don't believe in certainly the government. Most of us don't believe in the church, certainly we don't believe in the bank. The family still has a pull so it's a really interesting place. My family life was complicated. My father was a very strong character. He was an orphan and he came up out of the lower classes, worked his way up to being a vice president, a real Horatio Algier story, but he was pissed that I was a artist and he always gave me a hard time. He called me a loser. The other influence, not only just my family and the Republican family, but to me the question of documentary photography has always been at the center of my practice. I'm really interested in raising the questions about why we believe in photographs and at the same time trying to promote that belief, even though I know better. So for me looking at my family home movies, which are documents, but they also have the sense that a family projects its dream on to film emulsion. They celebrate the family in the most mystical, remarkable way. It's like a good folktale and when you can take stills out of a family movie and really select it, it is an incredible archive. A lot of my work to that point has been with archives, crashing archives, making work from an archive. So that my family's home movies were a repository of the most romantic, lavish pictures of home. Then my parents had all these annual report stuff. They would go to these conventions and my mother would dress up as a call girl and my father would look like a pimp. I mean it was all about fantasy and at the same time my father lost his job when he was younger than me, he was in his early 50s, because the company was sold. He never worked again. There is a lot of stuff about corporate America that gets brushed over. But the wound is deeply in the family, so I was really lost. I was in my mid 30s I wasn't married, there was a lot of personal stuff that was kind of festering that I felt that I should deal with and of course the best way to deal with it is to blame your parents, which I tried to do as much as I could. The second thing what it does is to try and understand ones self and ones influence and how the family worked together. So I began to study these home movies, looking for myself, looking for the evidence of my life. I realized I could re-shape them like a good dream. I could reinsert myself into family life, I could revise my whole family and I could tell the story of my family through their documents. I began then using movie stills, their pictures, snap shots and I began making my own pictures. My pictures were a blend of staged and documentary work, again trying to collapse the differences. To me the truth is about performance, how we perform, how we project and the truth can be staged and it can be found. I don't think there is such a division between the two. And I had gotten a Guggenheim. What I had written was to do an extensive portrait of my father; to give him

a context, a historical context, an image context. So it took me ten years. I worked on it ’83, and published the book in 1992, so nine years; interviewing them, telling their story. I felt it was absolutely crucial because one of the issues of my work then was you take an image that you have access to, people who trust you, but it is still kind of an intimate image, a private image and then you make that public. Well there is a kind of betrayal that happens, something is torn when you go from private to public, a trust. So I felt that it was really important, I felt terrible about this throughout the project, I felt I was; I had a secret and I felt I was betraying my parents. So the way I got around this was to actually have them in a sense be collaborators. They wrote, we discussed the pictures, they dismantled my position, I was under question. As much the home movies were under question, they are all partially true. Together they form a kind of world view that photography is about a world view, it’s not about truth that resides outside of belief. So to me it was a way of bringing a lot of cultural forces together and focusing it on a very personal urgent task as well. Which to me is a very moving and very important work, just for me on a personal level, it allowed me to resolve a lot of my issues with my family. At the same time I thought it was a risk to tell ones own personal story. Could one, by being so specific and personal, could one generalize or is it just narcissistic, self absorbed, self enclosed. I remember very distinctly taking my work around after a few years to curators, who supported me for my Guggenheim, when I went back to New York and went to The Modern and they wouldn’t even see me. They saw the pictures and I talked to one of the curators and I said: “well why am I seeing you?” And she said: “I don’t know. I mean they had something bad for breakfast, they are in a bad mood, they don’t like your work, I don’t know”. I saw the head curator and he looked and me and said in the elevator and said now loosen up and I thought well it’s not about being loose, but the model of it was what’s a male doing involved with families and why are you telling such a personal story, and who cares about your family. And it wasn’t until five years later, Jock Reynolds who, had moved from California back to Washington, he was at WPA and he gave me the first show of that work. And then The Modern showed in ’89, part of their California Photography show and then there was the Pleasures and Terrors of Domestic Comfort. So it was a really problematic body of work for a lot of people at that time in 1983, ’84.

DJ: You raised something that hadn’t even occurred to me. Would it have been perceived differently had it been a women photographer, because theirs was a history of domestic photography.

LS: Right. In fact the women who were photographing around family, Sally Mann and Tina Barney were being very well received, but I didn’t know of any men at that time who was doing that. And there is a great history; Dorothea Lange photographed her family, Diane Arbus photographed her family. It was certainly in. The one person who was a great influence on me who was a male was Danny Seymour; A Loud Song published by Lustrum Press and Robert Frank did Lines Of My Hand, which had some overtones. So it wasn’t that it wasn’t a male venue at all, it just wasn’t as common at the time.

DJ: What was your parents ultimate reaction and how did they come to view it?

LS: I think my parents, my father is very philosophical and he said to me, there is a picture of him sitting on a bed all dressed up, and he said: “look I am really happy to help you with this work but I really want you to know that I already know that that’s you sitting on the bed, that this is a self portrait. I know who I am, you know who you are, your values are part of this work, but let’s just make it very explicit, that is you sitting on the bed”. And I was always taken by the amount of no art training, how astute and clearheaded he was about photographic issues. My mother said to me; “look I don’t care how you pitch me as long as you are successful”. That’s my mothers voice. Finally, I think they were really moved that this was made into such a thing, a book, a museum show. They came to one of the openings at the MCA in San Diego where the show was travelling and there were people asking my father for his autograph, and all of a sudden he said: “I don’t know whether I am making you famous or your making me famous”. But we were bound together in some very odd enterprise that neither of us would ever have predicted. I mean I had mentioned to him when I first started, I said; “I want to do a project about you.” He said: ”you got to be out of your mind. Why would anyone be interested in me”? And I said: “that is exactly why because you are just an ordinary guy”. I didn’t say well what about Willy Lomann , The Death of a Salesman and all those great stories of lives that are almost fulfilled, you know the American story or in my case, success, but what is the pay off.

DJ: They are both good writers by the way.

LS: Well I helped them a bit too.I felt like a ventriloquist throwing their voice. You know part of that is fiction as well. I mean it is all not, I like that the idea of the ambiguity. I mean they are protagonists in a tale so it’s not all documentary.

DJ: Talk about the notion of going into archives, and I think a lot of visitors, art visitors, would have trouble seeing the result of that as being art and not being an artistic process. Where did your interest come from that is probably popular culture and sort of explain what you meant to do by seeing Evidence.

LS: Photography is really on it’s most fundamental, it’s like a big finger pointing and saying, ”look at that”. And when you take away all the mystification of craft, and all of the concerns of aesthetics there is something quite blunt and wonderful about ”look at that, isn’t that amazing”. And looking through the world, walking through the world as a sightseer or whatever is part of that you go with someone and say, ”look at that”, but also looking through photographs like that, medical photographs when I was a teenager I would look through genetic books and medical photographs. There is something unsettling about pictures, scientific pictures and so for me the world of photography has always been such a fascinating experience, whether it’s art or not doesn’t seem to be so important as the level of fascination. And in fact if it looks to much like art then it becomes kind of problematic. Having said that, the great tradition of this was very simply Duchamp. You know you change the context of the way you see something and it becomes art, so you put a silly little snapshot in a museum and it becomes an artifact. So knowing that, Mike and I went about experimenting with that boundary between artifact and art object and we began looking through, initially it was just mail order pictures, but

then we went to, one day we went to, between where I lived in the Bay Area and Mike lived in Santa Cruz is Mountain View, is NASA. We went to the space agency, the open archive, it's public, looking through their pictures, neither of us were interested in pictures of the moon but there was some really strange headgear that these guys were wearing and some of the inadvertent pictures were so wonderfully strange that it began to raise a question; well what about all the other archives, the Food and Drug Administration, the police departments, the University of California and all its scientific experiments, Stanford Research Institute, Jet Propulsion Lab? I mean California is full of great high tech aerospace archives. All of these places have to keep their photographs because of government contracts, the photographs document. And in the 60s and 70s, mainly in the 60s, 50s and 60s, they used view cameras. They didn't have 35 millimeter slides they made really beautiful black and white 4x5 negatives and sometimes they would make a picture that to anyone else's eye would be inane or strange, or why would you want that, picture of sometimes just a pencil used to measure a foot print or a cantaloupe there to hold something down, piece of paper down so it wouldn't blow away during a test. You know the kinds of things that the labs would never see, they would look through that. But we weren't interested in the denotation, what it really was a picture of. We were interested in what it looked like as a picture. So it just became this wonderful, I guess, journey through archives. And sometimes we looked at ten fifteen thousand photographs in a day and we would look at them, Mike and I after awhile we would look at them separately and come up with the same pictures, we got so tuned to what we were doing. But initially it was just fascination. Then we would begin to understand what the dynamics were, which was about technology, the book is almost entirely about men and the landscape, men doing things, about applied science, the way of knowing the world through taking it apart or testing it. It had a political overtone although it was not a polemical book it was more, I guess it looked a little bit like science fiction although it is very much about science fact.

DJ: Lets move to the Valley. I guess the question is; I was surprised after viewing the photographs that this was an outgrowth of your interest in the suburbs again. How did this come about, how did you end up on these movie sets?

LS: Well most literally I ended up, I got there through sheer chance. I was photographing, I was doing editorial work for a number of English magazines and some art director called me up and said would you go and do a shoot on a porn set, we are doing a series on great jobs. I thought shooting was a great job but it was a porn star is a great job. So I went there with my wife, took her along for protection because I didn't know what I would find there and landed in Burbank and drove to about four blocks from my high school, Taft High School, and up the street that I had known very well for having friends who lived on it and walking through the garage and into a house. It was a dentist's house and he had all his photographs on the wall, it was as if the dentist and his family moved out for a day and this group of rowdy young people moved in, kind of a circus family moved in and took it over and tried to act like a family, but it was really a horny family, strange family, but the just going to that house and walking through his rooms and looking in his bedroom, and looking at what he had on his dresser, what was standing outside and you had total access. Listening to the kinds of birds I grew up with,

mocking birds outside in the evening, I felt boy I had really been squarely planted back into a terrain that was so full of complications, my own nostalgia, certainly a kind of dark assertion of the ideas of suburban family, but also a kind of mischief that I really appreciated and wanted to explore. So at that point, I was there for four hours shooting and I thought man this is my next project. I don't usually work so clearly but I knew it, like a bell rang off that this was really so rich a terrain. My interest in the suburbs, I mean it's not just suburbs its, I felt that most of the ways in which we photographed middle class life was so generic and so critical whether it was Lewis Balz's tract homes in Park City, or Robert Adams' views of the west and Colorado, Phil Steinman shooting in L.A., and even Bill Owens' work was a certain kind of tacky and ironic. I didn't want to make irony, I wanted to do something that was complicated and dark, but also tender and treated the suburbs or my suburbs, L.A., the valley as something quite compelling and complicated, and rich. So it was to try to go from those kind of cold exteriors; inside, what goes on inside, what are the lives like inside? How poingnant are they? How frivolous are they? What do they look like? To me it is the most wonderful side of being a photographer, is I get to go inside, I mean I'm just a voyeur. I just get to go inside peoples houses, I get to go do things I could never do without the license of being a photographer. So that's how it started.

DJ: It may not be ironic but quite ambiguous. What's the role of ambiguity in your work and how do you use that in the series of the Valley?

LS: Well that's a good question, the roll of ambiguity. I think that part of the ambiguity is my own ambivalence. I don't know what to make of things, part of is that I like to give a viewer the same kind of openness that I am confronted by experiencing. You see something, you're fascinated, you a bit repulsed, you don't know exactly what it is, you don't have enough information yet to file it away. And before one can file it into the known, there are these moments in which you get to see without knowing what it is yet. I think those are the rare moments of seeing. Before one is completely protected or anointed by what we have already experienced. There is this great open moment in which you have to use your eyes, look at the details and make up your own mind. So that's, they're small and I don't think they last for long. To me the greatest moment I could illicit in a photograph is just the kind of, "what is that"? And to make them big enough that you confront them with your body. They're not erotic and yet there not purged of sexuality, they are right at that moment between, they don't make people look silly, they don't make them even look very sexy but there's something a little bit raw about them. And as I said, there is a bit of mischief and a bit darkness and there is a bit of desire, a bit of repulsion.

DJ: I know you called yourself the ultimate voyeur, but for a long time you didn't let sex be in your photographs and most of them you could show on television. Sounds like maybe you are heading more in that direction. Is that out of reluctance?

LS: When I first began I think that I was interested in, I have always been interested in banality, in the mundane and I liked the idea that on a porn set it's not so different from a forensic photograph. Something has happened that has touched the place and that the

event has left usually a residue, sometimes it's a half eaten piece of pie, sometimes it's some Kleenex, sometimes it's a shoe. I like the fact that those clues give you a sense of an event and that the imagination is stirred by that. And so I didn't want to show the explicit event, to me I felt that there was so much wonderful things around the event, portraits of people and so leaving it to the viewers and imagination it seemed to be the best avenue. And then I realized after 50, 60 pictures, seemed like I was withholding something. It seemed like a game and I felt that was distracting people, the viewer. Where is it? Come on, come clean. That left me with a really interesting problem. How do you photograph sex, because the literal qualities of porn shoots are not very sexy, they are not very interesting, they are more like clinical, the way they're lit. So could I make an erotic picture? Could I make a utopian picture? Could I make a beautiful picture? Could I make a picture that wasn't just full of alienation? I wanted to play. I began thinking that maybe the most radical thing I can do here was not bash, even though I have very mixed feelings about the porn industry, not bash sex, not make sex sorrowful, but fun. That is difficult and I guess I'm more of a prude then I thought because it was a real challenge and I resisted it for a long time. I tried my hand, in fact what happened is I had photographed from the very beginning certain scenes, but I completely missed them on the proof sheets. And it was only about five months ago, right before getting ready to do this book, that I began looking with a much more open mind and I thought, "well what is the quality of innocence, could I be innocent again looking at my work, just open"? And I saw these pictures and I thought, "man if I were to see them a year ago I would have changed the course of my work". But I had five months to continue shooting so they opened me up in a way I thought was much more playful and spontaneous and not so frightened.

DJ: I don't want to miss the opportunity to talk about an image that we will undoubtedly hang in the gallery which is Tasha's Third Film, what's going on there?

LS: Tashas Third Film is my third set so there was a kind of reciprocity there. Here was this situation, the house was amazing. There were so many opportunities for indoor/ outdoor and most of the shooting occurred outdoors. It was a nice warm day in L.A. On a set like this, quite literally it's called a gonzo set. Gonzo set means there is no script, no one is doing the long dialogue scenes. Because on a lot of sets people are really trying to make a film and they do endless dialogue takes. But this is they make up, so it's mostly people waiting around for the time to go do their scene. And here is this young girl, she is just out of, I think she is 18 or 19 and trying this whole business on and having conversations with her mother about "they're only giving me two hundred dollars for this, or five hundred dollars for that; kind of very weepy about the pay and commiserating with her mother, which I thought was very strange. Anyway she is bored and she is sitting there and these two guys are asleep to the side her and there is a scene going on behind her, but there is that one moment in all photographs, in a portrait, is how do you get that moment where there really is a bit of contact, something real and she just looked over and I had shot her throughout the day. She is very engaging, the use of curlers is an interesting throwback from the 50s, you don't see people in curlers accept on porn sets I think. And there is a vulnerability to her that I think really comes through in that photograph and certainly came through in life. She was a betwixt and between, not

knowing why she was doing what she was doing except for the money, and whether it was a good thing to do and certainly emotionally turbulent.

DJ: She talked to your mother on the phone or on the set?

LS: The phone.

DJ: Well this leads into also something people find very interested, particularly in photography which is some of the technical aspects. When you are on one of these sets can you talk about what specifically the type of camera you use. Is it a view camera or not, do you shoot a lot or do you just wait for the right moment, are you able to work fast or do you have to be very deliberate?

LS: One of the beauties of going on to a film set is that I'm a photographer, I like closed systems, I don't like walking the streets, I couldn't do a lot of the street photography of my generation. I like closed circumstances where there is possibilities, you could wander but you know why you're there. And I think of myself on porn sets as documenting fictions. I'm using, I like the theatrical lighting, I like their staging, I like that kind of weird theater and yet what I'm doing is not making film stills, I'm making almost contra film stills. I'm making those moments that are off, where the drama isn't being targeted right at that dramatic moment. It's an anti-dramatic moment, or a new kind of drama, my drama. So I just, I throw a lot of things at it. I use medium format, I never bring lights. I shoot at a quarter of a second or usually an 1/8 of a second. If I can get away with 4x5, if it's a still life or something that is not going to move around I use a 4x5, otherwise I'd say a good fifteen percent of my pictures are blurry because people are moving. But I like that the speed and the portability of a medium format on a tripod. And films are fast enough now that you can use really low light. And the thing that is so ironic is that part of the thing about working with people in a situation like this is that you have to have kind of a mutual respect. If I'm a pain then there not going to invite me back on the set. I'm there as a privilege, as an invitation. So if I'm using strobe all the time and getting in their way that's a pain. But I bring pictures back and I bring back the pictures that show their lighting, that really capture a mood and they say, "gee you make us look more beautiful than the films do". And the directors love it because I'm using their light, their kind of mise en scene, their practical lights and most of the still photographers come in there and blast away with their strobes and there's no atmosphere, so I'm catching the kind of poetics of the scene, of the film even though most of the films are really low on poetics. So that's how I work and I'm not a great technical photographer. I don't, I wouldn't know how to do the lighting.

DJ: Speaking of poetics, I read that you were sort of implied that black and white was not a language that was appropriate to the 21st century basically. Are you pretty much exclusive color?

LS: I'm shooting in color now, but I actually I don't have… There is something to be said about the realism of color and now that we can print color in a way we couldn't twenty five years ago. But I think there is nothing inherent about materials that makes

them contemporary. Certain materials get tired after awhile and they need to be renewed or kicked or pushed around, but no, I just shoot in color because it's the way I see right now. And these sets are so, some of the color pallet is just so fascinating to me.

DJ: You mentioned that you're beginning to embrace the digital technology. Has that affected your work? And even on this one series you're moving from the C prints to the digital. Can you explain?

LS: One of the things that when you make really large prints and there is any kind of burning or dodging, and when you want to manipulate the small areas you can't do it very easily and the long exposures tend to fog the paper. So I found that if I could scan my negative, have my negative scanned on a drum scanner, I found a printer in L.A. who prints for a number of artists and who is just a master printer and he could do things that I have never seen done with a conventional negative. Part of what I love to do is shoot real ranges from shadows to highlights, the kind of the way that the eye sees, when you are sitting in a room and there is the outside and all of that promise of escape and the garden and all that and then the inside. A lot of my pictures have this huge range of exposure and I couldn't get that on a negative through a C print; the endless burning and dodging, the technical stuff and each print that you make is different and it was a nightmare. And finally what happened to me is a lab lost a negative and the only way I could get a print was to take the negative that preceded that one, which was very close, and do a kind of clone with that negative and part of the print to get that image which is what the Oakland Museum owns. So that forced me to do something, because I'm a creature of convention. So I was forced to make a digital print and when I saw that it looked better than the C print, the conventional analogue print, I was completely sold. Also the archive, having ones work on a archive or CDs and DVDs, where if you loose a negative, you have the hard copies is such a relief.

DJ: I think people are startled when they see the scale of a lot of photographs today, is it simply a question of impact, why so big?

LS: I think photographs in their earlier iterrations as 8x10 or 11x14, they don't hold the wall very well and there was something, I think perhaps Jeff Wall, was one of the first contemporary photographers to take photography up to the kind of grandeur of 19th century painting, you know where it wasn't just 3x5 feet but it was 12 feet and fifteen feet and twenty feet and how did that affect a viewer, how do you work through the illusory space of a photograph, the kind of renaissance space that we deal with. It's a magical thing that happens and some people can be quite cynical and say well bigger, you can charge more and it has more impact and it does have more impact, but I think it is something more complicated than just impact. I think there is illusions, how a body meets an image, how a body meets a scene, how a body reacts to space, to another body. You do a portrait that is life size, you meet it, you look at it differently than if it's reduced down to a miniature. So I think it is about looking, it's really borrowing, if not appropriating from painting. The whole idea of vantage point and scale and the weight of an image. So now that technology has allowed us to make pictures that are as big as we want, really it gives people a choice. I think at one point 20x24 was an about standard,

now 40x50. I'm working deep in the conventions of modest scale.

DJ: Is there something you could identify as sort of a common thread throughout your 25 what is it now 30 years, is it a fascination of photography's place in the culture or…?

LS: I think that what moved me to be a photographer, that one could make images very different than other art forms, that were populist, that dealt with daily life, that dealt with our times, that gave me as a maker access into some of the places of contemporary life, some of the places that would be closed. That endless fascination with the daily, with the everday, with the mundane, with the provocative that resides within that has moved me from all these practices whether it is public art to editorial photography that I do or the projects like Pictures From Home In The Valley. I think of my work as very accessible, that deals with family life and daily life, suburban life and place, the psychology of place and people. We love looking at people. I love looking at people. So the projects change and grow and some of them are quite, they seem unweildy together. They seem like the same artist makes them. To me it's all about fascination. I think that the magic for me is that you look around and you are confronted with reality, you know. I noticed that you're wearing a turquoise shirt and someone is wearing a blue shirt and you kind of like those. But for me the sheer magic of photography is that I never know how it is going to translate the world exactly and whether the materials are analog, and the beauty of black and white, or the crazy quality of a color negative or a digital image. The surprise is how it translates reality, how it transforms reality into a image. And it's never, no matter how much you work as an artist, a photographer, you are never in complete control. You never have absolute knowledge of what it is going to do, and there's always surprises and how that image, a good image is truly, you don't know how you did it, it is truly magic. I always thought of a great photograph, for me, it's as if some creature walked into my room, like I get to look at a raccoon or a oscelot or a weasel or some strange creature. It's like how did you get here, what are you made of? There is a, it is truly mysterious and no matter how much, how many pictures I make, I have never depleted that quality of mystery. It is just amazing to make a picture that seems to have some magic. I don't know how it happens, it's unpredictable and half the time I'm not even aware that I made it. The ones that I thought were going to be great are so over stated and over determined and boring. It's always something else. I am endlessly fascinated, and I have students who do wet collodian plates, they do gum bichromate, there's people doing daguerrotypes. All of these things are still available, and they still retain the possibility. It's just that they seem a bit historical now. But that's how I would answer that question.

DJ: Certainly Ansel Adams and the zone system crowd, that's what their whole life was about.

LS: Control. And yeah I want to do that do, but you can't. And the more you try to control the world the less magic you get. It's really about being open and surprised. I never thought Ansel was such an interesting photographer. I thought he was a great technician. But it got into the mystification, the mystique. It was almost a mysticism of technique. Oww! When I see some purple curtains, I run for my camera, you know give

me purple curtains and a red suitcase and I'm in heaven!

DJ: I think most photographers are using digital. You're starting with a film negative.

LS: I use negatives and I go to digital only in the printing process. I'm not convinced that a digital image made with a digital camera can give me anything that I need, it's not…

DJ: Not yet anyway.

LS: I haven't seen it. It's the magical film that gets translated to...I'm getting more, the digital image gives me more of what's on that film than analog. So I'm maximizing the magic. I say I want this out, I want this in, bring this over. So it's a bit sketchy that way. Certainly it leaves documentary far behind.