



Photojournalist and documentary filmmaker Nubar Alexanian poses for a portrait while talking about his craft and his passions at his workshop in Gloucester.

Paul Bilodeau photo



“Joseph & Lucia II, Georges Bank,” a 1979 photograph by Nubar Alexanian taken at sea with the Brancaleone family of Gloucester.

A storied lens

Photographer and filmmaker Nubar Alexanian takes viewers to the far reaches of discovery

We are sitting at an outside table at Caffè Sicilia late on a July afternoon. The sky over Gloucester’s West End is like a biblical portrait, bruised and swollen.

The soundtrack soon arrives with a concussive wave of thunder. Not the deep rolling, almost comforting, thunder echoing through a distant valley, but the sharp, flat crack of menace that seems to rip a seam in the very air around us.

Despite the setting, despite the spectral world of an unrelenting pandemic that has stripped

us of the comforts of normalcy, despite the social upheaval that grips and – in many ways – divides the nation, despite the possibility that we soon could find ourselves singed on the wrong end of a lightning strike, Nubar Alexanian is speaking of hope.

“For me, art is where hope lives,” he says.

The simple statement, full of light and gravitas, does not surprise. Not really. Because art is where Alexanian also lives, right up the street from hope, at the intersection of documentary photography, photojournalism and filmmaking.

By SEAN HORGAN • *Photos by* NUBAR ALEXANIAN



“Oak Tree, Myrtle Beach” is a panoramic shot taken by Nubar Alexanian in 1999.



“Hydrangea Leaf,” 2018

From stills to movies

Alexanian made his bones shooting as a top-of-the-rotation documentary photographer for some of the world’s great and influential publications. The New York Times Magazine. Life. Newsweek. Time. National Geographic. Heavy hitters all, in a sharp-elbow business of pure, unfettered competition.

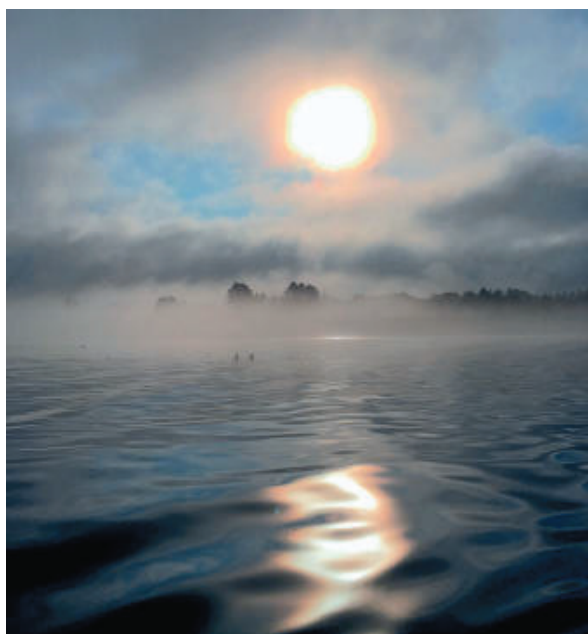
He took assignments that sent him all over the world — 40 nations and counting — and led, ultimately, to six books of impeccable photography from across land and sea. They include two on the sons and daughters of Gloucester and another embedded work called “JAZZ” with Wynton Marsalis.

Now there are new chapters, as Alexanian has turned his photographer’s eye and his ethereal composition — again, somehow inexplicably of light and gravitas — to documentary filmmaking.

The expansion of his artistic reach has produced several acclaimed works, including the masterful short documentary “Recipe for Disaster” about the invasion of the Great Marsh by the



Alexanian captured this shot of the Schooner *Ardelle* in Ipswich Bay in August 2011.



“Sunrise & Fog, Essex River,” 2016

insidious European green crabs (Best Cinematography award, 2020 Toronto

Documentary Short Film Festival) and the emotionally palpable “Journey to Armenia: Three Generations From Genocide,” which he produced with his daughter, Abby.

How does he toggle between the disciplines? How does he decide which medium is best to tell the story in front of him? How does he view himself as an artist? As a storyteller?

“I’m a still photographer,” he says in January while sitting in his Walker Creek Media studio at his West Gloucester home that abuts a portion of the Great Marsh. “I also make movies.”

But it has to be more than that, doesn’t it? He’s not just an artistic Swiss Army knife. When the subject speaks to him, how does he decide to frame his answer?



“Tree Shadow With Green Marsh Grass,” from 2019, is one of Alexanian’s more recent works.

“The kind of still photographs I love to take are ones that will stand on their own,” he says. “Photography is not a good storytelling medium. It’s not. If you’re going to tell a story with pictures, you need words or you need a picture before it and after it. You need some context. That’s the game I like to play. And it’s hard.

“But something gets under my skin or something calls me or keeps me, then I just go follow it,” he says. “In filmmaking, the demands are different, because that’s

a storytelling medium; that’s one of the best storytelling media.”

Revealing himself

That was the first of our conversations for a story that was scheduled to run in an earlier issue of Cape Ann Magazine. In the course of almost two hours, we managed to cover the basics on the life and times of Nubar Alexanian. How, born in 1950, he grew up among the long-established Armenian enclaves of Worcester and then set out for Boston University in

1968, the first child in his family to attend college.

“I was a kid in a V-neck sweater and matching socks,” he says. “Suddenly, I was hearing unbelievable music I’d never heard before. And there was the war.”

The Vietnam War raged at its jagged peak, and America — not unlike in the summer of 2020 — was aflame in protests. Protests for peace. Protests for racial and gender equality. Protests for social progress and protests for the simple, unbridled freedom of protesting. It was



This 2015 photo shows the homeland of Nubar Alexanian's maternal grandmother in Hussenig, Turkey, where she fled from genocide.

then that Alexanian discovered he had the discerning eye of the photographer and the stand-alone soul of a documentary journalist.

"I needed something to get me close to what was going on, but without the commitment," he says. "So I picked up a camera."

Suddenly, he could walk onto a stage while Jane Fonda railed against the war and talk to the world through his viewfinder and lens. The camera was his entrée. Nothing else about him really mattered.

"I looked like a tourist," he says. "No one took me seriously. I could go wherever I wanted."

And for 45 years, he hid behind the camera. Those are his words. "Hid behind the camera." But it wasn't really hiding. Because ultimately, as with all artists, he revealed himself in his work.

"You're doing things on the fly, really," he says. "And you have to make choices on the fly, not knowing really where it's going to end up. In the end, I've got to think it's as much about instinct and

experience as anything else. If I was sent on an assignment to do a story about you, I have to shoot through everything I think I know about you in order to get an interesting picture of you or an interesting set of pictures about something."

He calls it "going to zero." And going to zero is not always an easy journey.

"Going to zero is tough," he says. "But when I teach, it's the thing I talk about the most. It's very uncomfortable. But that's how you know you are there."

"I just got off the phone with a friend



"Hauling Back Nets, Day Boat, Gloucester," shot in 1980, is the cover photograph on Alexanian's book "Gloucester: When the Fish Came First."

who has been doing this as long as I have," Alexanian says. "He said, 'I have no idea what I'm doing.' I said, 'Excellent.' He said, 'Right, I keep forgetting that.'"

Not long after that January conversation, the story on Alexanian was placed on hold for a later issue of the magazine. Then the world turned one too many

times and life devolved into masks and sanitizers and personal containment.

It was greenlighted again in July, and we met for the conversation at Caffè Sicilia. There was really only one pressing question: Can you still reach the creative crevices of your soul under lockdown? In retrospect, it seems a silly question to

someone who routinely goes to zero.

"The thing I find most overwhelming is there are two things right now affecting everybody on the planet – the pandemic and climate change," Alexanian says. "I'd love to do a film on those two things. And I want that story to be set here in Gloucester." 🍌

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