

CALIFORNIA DREAMS

by Philip Gefter

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Larry Sultan, who died last Sunday at the age of 63, was one of my closest friends. That he was also an internationally recognized photographer was an added bonus. How could I not delight in the patina of glamour that his reputation lent to who he was? Since I knew him before all the art world attention began, though, I can honestly say his success never compromised his integrity or humanity.

As an artist, Larry was known to challenge the photographic image in one way or another throughout his career. His best-known photographs are from two highly regarded bodies of work, *Pictures From Home* and *The Valley*. They possess a quality of hard-edged California light, heightened color, optical precision, and, often, domestic familiarity that, together, comprise a visual signature so influential that recent films, such as *A Serious Man*, *Punch Drunk Love*, and *The Savages*, borrow from that “Larry Sultan” look. The projects that define Larry’s career probe the narrative possibilities—and limitations—of photography. His work intentionally hovers in the ambiguities between fact and fiction, raising questions about whether a made-up story might actually pose a greater truth. His domestic scenes allude to the spontaneous moments they are staged to emulate, but the balance of pretext and subtext is what he was really aiming for. While he photographed real-life situations, the degrees of staging nod, perhaps, to the artifice of advertising tableaux. While Larry was keenly serious about his work, he was equally playful in his exploration, always riffing on the conventional and predictable, not only for amusement but to poke at the anatomy of form itself to see if there were other ways of making a picture, telling a story, thinking about the world, imparting meaning. *Evidence*, published in 1977 at the beginning of his career, is turning out to be his towering achievement. This small book was made in collaboration with Mike Mandel, whom Larry met while in graduate school at the San Francisco Art Institute. The series is a collection of black-and-white pictures culled from the archives of government agencies, public utilities, university laboratories, and private corporations. The photographs were made as documentation or proof of actual fires, crime scenes, land sites, and scientific experiments. Larry and Mike removed them from the contexts for which they were created and sequenced them without captions, imbuing the pictures with surrealist properties subject to endless narrative interpretation. While the pictures closely resemble the look of black-and-white documentary images that came to define “art photography” in the 1970s, *Evidence* was among the early postmodern work to contest the growing acceptance of photography as art, photographer as “artist-author,” photographic documentation as fact, and the truth-telling capability of the medium as unwavering. [Click Image to View Our Gallery of Larry Sultan's Photography](#)

In the 1980s, Larry produced a body of work called *Pictures From Home*, an exploration of his own personal history and an observation of his parents as they personified the post-war optimism that fueled the idea of the American dream. His chronicle was told in a combination of still images culled from his family’s home movies, photographs he made of his parents in their affluent retirement community near Palm Springs, and conversations he recorded with them about their lives. MoMA showed a wall of the film stills in 1987 and SFMOMA exhibited the entire body of work in 1989. (Both museums will soon be hanging his work in memoriam.)

He believed that *Pictures From Home* evolved from his experience looking through archives for *Evidence* and understanding the way context determines how we read photographs. “Weaving together my parents’ snapshots, film stills, business archives, and then my pictures of them was very much influenced by *Evidence*,” he explained in a 2008 interview. “The difference of course is that my own pictures figure predominately in *Pictures From Home* and stand in contest to the image/artifacts of my parents. But similar to *Evidence* the intentions of the project are to push at and extend notions of documentary practice.” During the next decade, he returned to his roots again for a body of photographs he made in the San Fernando Valley, where he grew up, in which he documented pornographic film production in suburban homes rented out to porn producers. Once again, an autobiographical strain is evident in his work; it was as if he were revisiting his own adolescent sexuality.

At the same time, *The Valley* documents the layers of fabrication in the act of image making; narratives mount in his photographs of porn actors feigning desire for the camera as he pulls back the curtain on the charade. “In *The Valley*, I wasn't interested in pornography as a phenomenon,” he said in 2008, “but in how it uses domesticity as a narrative. The sex industry can be such a tired, worn out subject but when it's imported into kitchens and dining rooms of a middle class suburban home something new opens up. At least for me it did.”

I met Larry in the mid 1980s when I moved to San Francisco briefly. He hired me to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute. Our friendship was immediate and continuous, even when I moved back to New York. Here is what I always loved about him: he was contemplative, playful, curious, generous, and a sensualist with style. I always seemed to agree with his conclusions, whether they were drawn from an arcane cultural analysis or leveled at the ceviche, say, that was less than divine. He was a natural teacher, an avid reader, philosophical about life, with a poetic gift for description. His students at the California College of the Arts, where he was a professor for the last twenty years, were very lucky to have such a mentor. I certainly learned from him all the time, even when he wasn't trying.

One day 25 years ago, we were sitting on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean at the Headlands Art Center, just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, where he had a studio. We were talking about intelligence-- what composes it, how it's manifest-- in a conversation based more on random curiosity than any empirical or clinical evidence. “Isn't imagination really the final measure of intelligence?” Larry asked. He was suggesting that innate intelligence may be hard wired, but imagination allows for the reach of ideas that takes us all forward. I have never forgotten that. Surely imagination is what drove his own intelligence. He was diagnosed with sarcoma, a rare form of cancer, in August and had to come to terms with dying in a manner of months. He looked the reality of his abruptly abbreviated life straight on, and, once he absorbed the overwhelming shock, with honesty and tenderness he began to help everyone around him with his death.

A month ago, Dru Donovan, Larry's studio assistant, sent an e-mail to his friends on both coasts reporting that Larry once said there was nothing better than to watch his friends dance. It was a rallying cry and, so, his friends made a surprise video for him in record time. The New York contingent shook their hips and waved their arms for 7:09 minutes to “Superfreak” by Rick James. In total surprise and with utter delight he watched his friends from all over dancing in art galleries, artists' studios, in the kitchen or the garage. Touched, he sent an e-mail to everyone “to let you know the dance tape almost killed me—I wanted to join you guys so badly with some new cancer moves—really jagged and myotic.”

He died at his home in Marin County, surrounded by his wife, Kelly, his two sons, Max and Will, and his two dogs, Steve and Deedee. It's the most beautiful house at the end of a boardwalk that extended out between an inlet and a marsh with wrens and egrets and a view of the San Francisco Bay and, of course, that Larry Sultan light.