

Michelle Final Draft

REMEMBRANCE OF PHOTO SAGE MICHELLE VIGNES

By Paul Kleyman

SAN FRANCISCO--The past few months have had me reeling with the life-and-death events one expects in one's later years, but can never completely prepare for when they arrive. The new life in my life is James Dylan Hardy, my grandson, born in Los Angeles on 8/8/12, a lucky number say my Asian friend, but a date not quite soon enough for him to meet my patron saint of truth in art, Michelle Vignes.

Michelle, my friend and mentor of four decades, died in San Francisco on October 5. She was 86 and succumbed to complications from lung cancer. You likely don't know her name, unless you are among those from around the world who love her photography or have even journeyed to her jewel box of a house on a steep street in the city's Diamond Heights neighborhood. Photographers from the renown Marc Riboud to budding talents sent by Michelle's admirers would pay homage to a photographer's photographer, to her patient eye on every shade of the human condition, to her pungent critique of, well, practically everything.

Assisted Cartier-Bresson and Capa at Magnum

The notable facts of her career are well documented in the photographic realm. Michelle started in photography as an assistant and then photo editor at Magnum in its legendary formative years (1953-57), working for the Robert Capa, Shim and Henri Carrier-Bresson, among the greatest names in photojournalism. The latter taught her to tell a story in a sequence of frozen moments. Later there were assignments for *Time*, *Life*, *Vogue*, *Newsweek*, *Paris Match*, as well as for smaller publishing venues she believed in, such as Pacific News Service, the parent organization of what became New America Media, where I'm now an editor.

Among her honors were the Chevalier des Arts des Lettres from France's Minister of Culture and the Oakland Museum's [Dorothea Lange Award](http://museumca.org/.../oakland-blues-interview-michelle-vignes) [museumca.org/.../oakland-blues-interview-michelle-vignes]. She

was a dedicated teacher in France and the U.S. and co-founded the International Fund for Documentary Photography and San Francisco's Fotovision to support the work of emerging documentary photographers, the world's fly-on-the-wall image-catchers, who often struggle for sustenance they need to give form to truth.

In recent years, Stanford University collected Michelle's photographs of the early years of the Black Panther Party. And in 2003, as her hands became increasingly arthritic and unable to press a shutter, Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, archived her entire body of work.

For all of the honors and accomplishments that usually stack up in obituaries, though, such accolades hardly reveal the core of what makes someone like Michelle both grander and deeper than our ordinary selves.

Although you're not apt to have known of Michelle, [her photographs](#) invite you to share her precious moments, motes of time you can live with her as if you had a reserved seat behind her iris. You can almost feel the reflex in her shutter finger at the instant it stopped emotion-in a face or maybe a place-that may well catch your breath.

Even her landscapes and city visions are peopled where none can be seen. From her book [Bay Area Blues](#) (1993), an arc of ramshackle buildings in Oakland curves along railroad tracks in the last light before the night hour, the only sign of life a small, oval sign topped with a star announcing Pete Stella's Soul Food Inn. There's life here. Or a desolate road stretches out through the prairie grass of South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation under a sky that broods for the fate of people you'll meet as you turn the pages of *Indiens d'Amerique* published in France in 2003.

Six decades ago, it was her visual intelligence that advanced Michelle quickly from her temporary assistant's job to a position as photo editor at Magnum. She was there the fateful day the call came that the photo agency's co-founder Robert Capa was killed while covering the First War in Indochina. Although a globetrotting adventurer who only popped into the Paris office now and then, he took a keen interest in the development of Magnum and was especially encouraging to the eager young assistant. For Cartier-Bresson, she eventually handled the editing, printing and sale of his photos, such as those he took in 1957 of the Soviet Union-the first images allowed by a Western photographer in the years after Josef Stalin's death.

The Kennedys, Che and Her Deciding "Moment"

Cartier-Bresson became her greatest inspiration, as well as her biggest source of aggravation, when she decided to try her own hand at photography. She always said that editing his work taught her how to tell a story, but also she learned from him the magic of waiting, of capturing the "moment," the deceptively simple abracadabra he used to explain the art in his craft. After she left Magnum in 1957, he helped her get hired as a photo editor at UNESCO in Paris and then as a photo coordinator at the United Nations in New York. If prompted just a bit, she loved to tell of her U.N. days, when she would meet the likes of John F. and Bobby Kennedy (President Kennedy was sallow and remote, Michelle recalled), as well as Che Guevara ("He was so sexy, all the women wanted to get near him," she told me.)

However exciting those occasions were when she'd escort such dignitaries to the Secretary General's office, herding the U.N.'s corps of press photographers for scheduled shoots and managing their competitive egos was not Michelle's idea of career development. It was 1966 and time for a change, time to take the plunge and become a photographer. And it was time to find a new and more nurturing environment for her than Manhattan. She'd been to San Francisco with a former boyfriend and ended up wedding herself to the place a poet famously called the cool gray city of love.

Through [the decades Michelle documented](#) Vietnam War protesters burning draft cards and refusing induction into the United States Army, the early rise of the Black Panther Party, the Rolling Stones' disastrous concert at Altamont), daily life and whimsical ceramic art in the Mexican village of Ocumicho, the wailing nightlife of the Bay Area blues scene, and the devout gospel tradition persevering in small and storefront churches around San Francisco and Oakland.

"Tenacious" doesn't begin to describe Michelle Vignes. She began documenting the tribulations of Native Americans with the occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay. Then, in the winter of 1973 this slight blond woman with a thick French accent and a limp went far beyond the usual French fascination with the *Indiens d'Amerique*. She turned up in North Dakota determined to witness the American Indian Movement's (AIM) occupation of the 1890 massacre site at [Wounded Knee](#). After eight

decades of frustration for Ogalala Sioux, AIM leaders, fed up with tribal corruption and the betrayal of treaties by the United States government, declared the reservation to be a sovereign nation and occupied Wounded Knee.

The February air in the Upper Midwest, where I come from, doesn't need wind-chill readings to be cruel. The crunch of icy snow alone can bite at the edges of your ears all the way down to your bone. Michelle once recalled to me one of the proud moments of her life as a documentary photographer, the incident in which she literally broke the ice and for the first time and got the protest leaders to accept her as a journalist who was serious about their cause.

They ignored her at first. Then, one day, Michelle, purse hanging at her side and a camera slung around her neck, found herself slipping and half falling against her car door as she tried getting in, and she would find out why only later.

Unstoppable

Decades earlier, when she was only five, the bones of her hips and legs had become frozen, more from the treatment than the disease. Some have reported that it was polio, but Michelle said it resulted from a general infection. The remedy then, before antibiotics, caused her to spend a year in a full body cast. Unable to grow with the normal articulation of joints from childhood athleticism, her bones fused together.

Orthopedic medicine was still primitive in 1931, even for those like her affluent family. Later attempts at surgery fell shorter than her permanently shortened leg. Soon after her last unsuccessful operation at age 15, Michelle's physician stopped by and, finding her inconsolably despondent, asked what she'd have liked to do had the procedure worked. Michelle recounted to me over 60 years later that she was incredulous. How could he ask such a thing to a child steeped in such despair? Bitterly, she replied, "I want to swim, I want to ride a bicycle and dance like the other children." And her doctor, she would recount, changed her life by simply asking, "What's stopping you?"

Nothing would stop her again, even the icy parking spot at Pine Ridge in 1973, as Michelle slipped again and eventually maneuvered herself into her

car. She'd noticed a small, impassive group of Indians watching from across the road. She did not expect them to help, and they didn't. Only later did she learn why.

Following her skirmish with the ice, Michelle found that suddenly the AIM leaders were welcoming and began answering her questions. Some time later one of the elders explained that as their group sat watching her from across that road, one of the younger men suggested they go help her into the car. No, said the elder, we'll help if she asks for it. They observed not a damsel in distress, but a woman of honest and relentless grit. Unbeknownst to Michelle, she hadn't merely earned their respect, she fought, ice and door, and won it outright. They saw that nothing, nothing would stop this little woman with the French accent and the limp.

When *Indiens d'Amerique* was published in 2003 three decades later, not only did American Indian Movement (AIM) leader **Dennis Banks** write the introduction, but he and several others flew to Paris for the opening reception of gallery exhibition mounted with the book's release. To her surprise, Cartier-Bresson, who seldom went out then, only a year before his death at 95, arrived at the event, where Banks and his group blessed Michelle and her 30 years of documenting their struggles with ceremonial benedictions of drums, chants, many hues and feathers. On that autumn evening in Paris, Michelle who was perpetually surrounded by new textures, sounds and rhythms, who was ever wrapped in shades of purple, scarlet, rust, ochre, blue, green, gold and bone was very much in her element. Sadly for Americans, U.S. book publishers rejected issuing an English edition here because, they told her, Americans weren't interested in the Indians anymore.

Although I only know of that magical Parisian night from her later descriptions, I was fortunate to accompany Michelle at times, especially when she needed a male escort to some of her dicier shooting locations in the 1980s and early 1990s. There was the truck stop outside of Sacramento, where she explored the lives of America's commercial road culture. Truckers could find food, showers, a variety of entertainment and a mobile community. One she photographed when I was not along proudly and rather weirdly (her word) showed off his long-barreled pistol.

Several times I accompanied her to Eli's Mile High Club in Oakland. Once inside the club all welcomed her like a sister, but she knew enough to protect herself from the car to the club door and back. That's where she needed me

or another friend. Inside the club, she would swing her Leica to rhythms. Moving now and then among the bumps and grinds of Eli's, she'd lift her small 35mm over her head or out at an angle in an impromptu photo dance. "Maybe I'll get something," she'd shrug.

Oh, she got plenty, although usually with endless patience and her eye in the viewfinder.

Here, in the ebony and ivory tones of a wee-small-hours mood, a man with deeply furrowed brow and trim gray beard along his jaw line forever listens, eyes closed, to a tune only he can hear as he delicately fingers imagined keys on the white tabletop. Michelle lets you smell his boozy reverie, with as much poignancy as humor. For this supplicant to the blues, forever in his dream lost and relived, she composed as much respect as one might find in one of her elegant Portuguese bullfighters, who do not kill in California, in **Harry Belafonte** or **Marlon Brando** schmoozing with leaders of AIM.

Michelle Vignes was a photographer, but her art was stopping time. There's AIM co-founder **Russell Means** seated, arching forward, eyes as wide as one of Michelle's cats listening for the next bark. In one of her signature photographs, Dennis Banks sits cross-legged in a grassy field, his native braids tightly wrapped and a pipe tucked in one corner of his mouth as he gazes off in deep contemplation. Behind him a stand of five teepees rise on the prairie as they might have done a century before; only the front end of a car turns the clock forward to a gravid moment in the late 20th century.

New Life

In losing very special people, the large personalities in our lives, I've found it sometimes too easy to default to quirky anecdotes when in reminiscing with mutual friends. I learned only to bring French wine to one of her rich and savory dinners, if I wanted her approving nod; and I never did master cutting a fine cheese correctly, always a occasion for one of her cutting reprimands. After dinner, we'd spend many a Saturday evening in front of her beloved "TV5Monde," French news, with the most beautiful anchors and news sets on the planet, and which Michelle didn't always care to translate for this non-speaker of her native tongue. She adored watching, of all things, competitions on the American professional bullriding circuit. Michelle knew the names of all the top contenders, and she frequently remarked on

which were the more sexy. (She'd impishly insist that the best riders are the Brazilians.) With Michelle, I learned about the longest eight seconds anyone can endure short of being bucked and thrown by an earthquake.

Remembering lost friends with shared humor is essential; we attract and sketch one another at the odd angles of our personalities. But the friendships that endure for years and decades fill in more deeply than the caricature of mere reminiscence. Michelle preserves for me and so many others through the intelligence and imagination behind her shining eyes and, yes, too, her sharp tongue.

My last moments with her were at her bedside a little over a week before she died. Michelle was weary and talking was a struggle for her that afternoon. After searching awkwardly for news to share or things to say, I simply held her hand. After a while I remembered a photograph I'd brought of my new grandson, James.

Michelle had seen my daughter, Shana, come into the world and grow, and was especially eager to hear how she was doing with her baby. But it was always challenging to present Michelle with something like a family photo. For a friend silent chill of tolerance might fog a sentimental image. But not this time. I held up the photo of little James in blue, his eyes dreamily closed and tiny arms tucked at expressive angles. And Michelle emitted a deep sigh, "Oh." Such pleasure in that moment, such new life.

Rest in peace my friend.