

The **Digital Camera** interview

# Urban photographer **Jean-Marc Caracci**

He turned pro in his mid-40s, armed with just a budget SLR and a desire to shoot man in the city. The enigmatic **Jean-Marc Caracci** talks to **Geoff Harris**





**Stockholm, Brussels, Sofia**

"This shot illustrates how I work. I liked this white wall with horizontal stripes so got into position. A man came. He started to stretch his arms, then he made this gesture towards the sky. There was an amazing perspective, with this round window where he seemed to actually take the sun between his hands."

All Images Jean-Marc Caracci

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## Interview Jean-Marc Caracci



### Profile

- A self-taught photographer, Jean-Marc Caracci turned pro aged 47.
- In 2007 he began Homo Urbanus Europeanus, a vast, ongoing project to shoot single figures walking through European cities.
- Caracci started the project in Bratislava; he hopes to travel to the farthest reaches of the former USSR.

**It's your worst nightmare: you're pushing 50, you've just lost your job in tough economic times, and you have no real qualifications.** What do you do? If you're Jean-Marc Caracci, you turn the nightmare to your advantage by following your lifelong dream of turning professional. Oh, and you also come up with an original idea that propels you from a skint nobody into an internationally feted 'name' in a couple of years.

The concept in question is Homo Urbanus Europeanus, a sprawling, ambitious project to shoot black and white images of European man in his natural habitat – the city, more specifically, the capital city. Caracci has travelled all over Europe for this ongoing project, going everywhere from well-established fleshpots like Brussels, through to far-flung Eastern European capitals like Riga, Ljubljana and Belgrade. But rather than photographing people in front of famous landmarks, Caracci captures them in quite mundane

### Berlin 1

**“When I saw the building shaped like a shark's mouth and a kid on a skateboard approaching it, I ran over with my camera. The kid climbed up onto the 'mouth', and I took the shot. It all happened very quickly.”**

surroundings, such as government buildings and car parks. So where did the inspiration for Homo Urbanus Europeanus come from?

“Strangely enough, the idea came to me when I was shooting in Chicago, in 2006. All those big buildings, those large streets... and all those small people, looking like ants. So I started to shoot people in Chicago, mainly alone, in their own space, their own natural setting – the city. Back home in France, I started to think about doing the same thing.”

### European union

Caracci's always been a people person, and recalls how he shot the people around him, rather than landscapes or animals, when he got his first camera as a teenager. Early influences included Cartier-Bresson, Elliott Erwitt, Sebastiao Salgado and the US painter Edward Hopper, famous for his studies of lonely city dwellers in the 1930s. The link with Hopper is clear, but Caracci points to



## Berlin 2

**“Again I waited until the person was framed perfectly by the buildings. The camera settings I use obviously depend on the scene and available light but here I used an aperture of f/6.3 at ISO 200 and my trusty 28mm lens.”**

deeper motivations than paying homage to a favourite painter.

“You know, many of my friends are psychologists, and they say I shoot people because I’m looking for myself. So my job isn’t to make photos of people, but to observe them and their behaviour... and trying to find out who I am. Believe me, it’s a never-ending job!”

Caracci was born in Tunisia of Sicilian origins, and had spent his adult life doing a series of uninspiring manual jobs. Despite the demands of work, he’d held several photography exhibitions in France. “When I lost my job, and realised after a few months, that it was impossible to get a new job, I just said “OK, let’s do what I do the best – photography.”

To understand what Caracci is trying to achieve with Home Urbanus Europeanus, and why he composes the shots in such a distinctive way, we need to delve a bit deeper into his philosophy.

“I consider myself an inhabitant of the world and, first of all, an inhabitant of

Europe. And as you can guess, I’m not a fan of frontiers. This project is a modest contribution to the friendship between European peoples. It’s saying, ‘let’s stop looking at our differences, and let’s look at our similarities... let’s make Europe more united, from Iceland to Turkey.’”

## Clear composition

So how exactly is this lofty ideal made concrete in the way Caracci works? “The images in Home Urbanus Europeanus, whether shot in Lisbon, Sofia or Tallinn, are characterised by their ‘Europeanity.’ National and cultural specifics are excluded, as much as possible. So that’s why you can’t recognise any city or country from the images and there are no famous landmarks. But everybody is able to recognise Europe from them, or at least the West.”

Caracci is much more than some photographic propagandist for greater European integration, however. Artistic considerations are also paramount, »

## In the bag

A lot of pros talk about keeping things simple and travelling light, but Caracci puts them to shame. All he’s used for the Home Urbanus Europeanus project is a Nikon D200 SLR with a 28mm lens! He also uses Photoshop to tweak lighting and contrast.



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All images Jean-Marc Caracci

### Interview Jean-Marc Caracci

which is why he focuses on a single moving figure, rather than a group.

"I like this surreal effect of a single figure. I wanted something very aesthetic, only one character in a large urban setting. A 'prisoner' of lines, diagonals, shadows and so on. For me this is the best way, to show the urban being. I also think loneliness is part of the aesthetics of life..."

Caracci's work has a deceptive simplicity on the surface, but every aspect is thought through carefully. How does he decide upon the composition of the image – what to leave in and what to leave out? "The first job is to find a good place and good light. Then I can wait a long time, sometimes up to an hour, or even whole days, until I get the right moment – by which I mean when an individual comes into the frame at exactly the right place."

So in effect, Caracci is taking carefully planned candid shots – nothing is staged, or artificially added. The fact that

he's been able to shoot in so many diverse locations, in our increasingly paranoid, camera-averse age, says a lot about his tact and skill. "Sometimes these passers by object to having their photo taken, but not very often. I also shoot relatively far from them using a 28mm lens. But I always have problems with police or security guards. Because I can stay at the same place for quite a long time, shooting these passers by, the authorities assume I'm really interested in the buildings. A policeman in Madrid once dragged me inside the building I was shooting and demanded to know

#### Madrid

"I noticed this triangle of light and set myself up opposite. A young man moved into the light, right in the middle of the triangle. Sometimes it's magical: nothing special happens and then everything falls into place perfectly."

why I was shooting the Ministry of Finance. It was hard to convince him I wasn't a terrorist!"

#### Just one camera

Caracci has never shot a single colour frame for *Homo Urbanus Europeanus*. Why? "There's something in a colour picture that distracts the viewer. Take Edward Hopper's paintings, for example. They only have a few colours, because they don't need any more. It's very difficult to shoot urban settings without distracting colours getting into the frame. Since my project is about man in the city,

#### Jean-Marc on shooting in mono

**"It's very difficult to shoot urban settings without distracting colours getting into the frame. Since my project is about man in the city, black and white is the only choice"**

## Behind the picture Zagreb



### LIGHTING

"Again, I noticed these triangles of light. I simply waited for someone to be in the right place, in the light, and took the shot"

### LENS

"All my shots for the Homo Urbanus Europeanus project were taken using a fixed length, 28mm lens and available ambient light."

### WAITING GAME

"I waited until the person was framed by the buildings before taking the shot. I can wait ages and sometimes come back to the same place several times. I'm like a hunter, waiting for his quarry to come into his line of sight..."

black and white is the only choice."

Camera-wise, Caracci has kept things simple for this project and only uses a Nikon D200 ("because the D700 was too expensive and the D3X is just a dream!"). As you'd expect with such a massive project, the Nikon digital SLR has been a god-send.

"Imagine trying to shoot 21 capitals in 20 months using film!" he wryly notes. "Today's digital cameras have very good quality, you can process images quickly and, best of all you, you can send images around the world with one click. I definitely needed to invest in the Nikon D200 before starting the project and beginning my new life."

He uses Photoshop, but swears it's for enhancing light and contrast, rather than removing stray people or vans from his compositions. "Lots of people ask me about Photoshop. As I said, Homo Urbanus Europeanus is about waiting for one person to pass – one person only. So I didn't need to remove any stray

people. The project is huge, but it's my choice, and I do it as well as I can."

At 47, Caracci will have given hope to many people who fear they've left it too late to turn pro. What other projects is he involved with, and where does he see himself in ten years? "Well, I just photographed Lisbon, the 21st capital in the Homo Urbanus Europeanus project, and will go on to Bucharest, Luxemburg, Tirana, Vienna, Budapest and so on. So I'm just gathering more European capitals and countries into the project.

My dream is to photograph the extreme parts of Europe, but it's too expensive for me to go and shoot Moscow, Baku, Tbilisi, Minsk and so on (I'm looking for sponsors!). My big goal is to be known for my art, and then get enough money from it. In ten years time you'll either see my sleeping under a bridge or exhibiting to the whole world!" 📷

**SEE MORE** of Jean-Marc's images at <http://homo.urbanus.free.fr/portfolio>

## Be inspired Jean-Marc's tips

- Don't be afraid to take shots of people even if they get angry with you or don't agree with what you're doing.
- Use a fixed/prime lens that best meets your needs. Leave your zoom at home... your lens must be your own eye.
- Let yourself be inspired by your favourite photographers.
- Work in all directions at the beginning until you find your own style, your own way of shooting.
- If somebody dismisses your work as being too simple, be proud of it. One of the hardest things in art is to stay simple.