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The Wedding Issue

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CAPTURING A COUPLE'S

“FIRST

LOOK”

Learn how one photographer approaches this key moment of the wedding day

By Amy Touchette | Photography By Dacia Pierson

One of the hottest trends in wedding photography today is capturing a couple's “first look,” a visual record of the private moment a couple first lay eyes on each other on their wedding day.

Traditionally reserved for the ceremony, when the bride and groom initially lock eyes from down the aisle, that old-fashioned ritual has become something that more and more couples do away with today and instead carve out time before the ceremony to exhale and really absorb their love for one another without the presence of family and guests.

Creating Ease In A Jam-Packed Schedule—For You And Them

It's a development wedding photographers, including Brooklyn-based Dacia Pierson, owner of Eager Hearts Photography, have embraced for many reasons. From a logistical perspective alone, “it's very complicated to fit in the bridal party photos and the family photos all during cocktail hour,” Pierson notes. “Rounding people up, finding a location that isn't used by the cocktail hour or reception and dealing with dying light” are challenges she often faces when couples go the more

traditional route and see each other for the first time at the ceremony.

Having a first-look moment before the ceremony also creates a calmer schedule for the couple, their family and guests.

“Usually, first-look images take place about an hour-and-a-half before the ceremony,” Pierson says, noting they're sometimes with a videographer, sometimes without. “After they're dressed and ready, we'll go into the first look, which transitions into about 30 minutes of couples portraits—just them together when they're feeling highly emotional—and

“I always scout the location for a space that will work well for the first look,” says Dacia Pierson. “I'm looking for flattering light, minimal distractions and a sense of environment. I chose this space because I was able to get a unique vantage point on it—slightly elevated, which was nice to show off the location as well as the back of Brooke's gorgeous dress.”



“China and Daniel’s venue was open fields and dense fern forest. I chose the open shade on the edge of the trees for its flattering lighting and space to move around to get different angles of the moment,” says Pierson.



then bridal party and family photos. Being able to do all required ‘posed’ photos before the ceremony means that we’re not trying to drag family members away from their drinks and conversations during cocktail hour, and the bride and groom get to share a drink and actually enjoy their guests.”

Perhaps most importantly, first-look images offer the couple the rare opportunity to absorb what’s happening that day.

“Logistically, I encourage it,” says Pierson, but “it’s also an intimate way to see their partner for the first time that

day without a hundred eyes on them. The pressure is off. They get to hold each other, tell each other how good they look, that they missed each other, and express their feelings about what’s about to unfold. Often partners are each other’s best friend, and to have that intimate time before the ceremony is really beautiful and important.”

Plus, Pierson adds, “they get to relax during cocktail hour. They get to be done with everything and just enjoy this party that they spent a year planning and however many thousands of dollars they spent on it, instead of being rushed

around to take photos.”

Building An Aesthetic Around Emotion

Carving out time for emotional moments like the first look is part of why Pierson’s wedding photography business has flourished so quickly. Although photography has been her passion since the tender age of 13, when she presciently declared to her family that she would become a successful photographer without even having picked up a camera, she grew her business out of a genuine joy for witnessing love.

“I’ve learned there are so many ways of expressing love. Some couples are playful, some tender and quiet, some loud and big and expressive—rarely is it how a romantic comedy portrays it, but they’re all genuine and connected,” she says. “Witnessing that, and learning from them, is really what drives me.”

It’s a proclivity that’s aptly conveyed in her company’s name, Eager Hearts Photography, and it’s largely what she thinks attracts her clients. “I like to think that I have a very classic vibe, in the sense that the images are really clean but modern because they’re not

driven by poses, they’re driven by emotion,” she states.

“I believe that’s what draws people to my work, that the emotion can really be felt. I often hear that my clients can’t believe how beautiful they look in their photos, and I like to remind people that’s silly because they relaxed into their authentic selves. I’m pretty highly attuned to people’s energy and moments that happen between the prescribed events and am able to catch those, but I’m not a documentarian, and I like to give people a slightly idealized version of the day. They’re clean

“The entry to Tina and Ryan’s hotel was so grand, I knew that it’d make a beautiful frame for the image,” says Pierson. “To get this, I stood on a park bench across the street from the doorway, putting myself about even with it, and had Tina show up behind where Ryan stood.”

and they’re classic and they’re beautiful, but they’re also very true to who they are emotionally.”

Taking The Lead

Being naturally moved by love and drawn to emotion isn’t enough in and of itself, of course. An essential part of



“I love it when grooms show emotion for their brides,” says Pierson.

Pierson’s process is clearing away any distractions that take away from the emotional charge of a photograph.

“When I’m photographing,” says Pierson, “I take the time to make sure the Starbucks cup is out of the way, that there’s not a sweatshirt piled on the chair, that the light is falling across their face beautifully. That stuff doesn’t just happen. It’s my intervention.”

Oftentimes, Pierson’s intervention goes way beyond clearing away physical objects and finding the perfect light, and she orchestrates the entire moment. She finds the location, figures out how everyone should stand and how the moment will unfold and gives them a little pep talk beforehand.

“Often people aren’t used to being photographed for eight hours in a day. It’s a very new experience for them, and they understandably get concerned about what they should be doing in front of the camera. I like to release them from that responsibility. This first-look moment is maybe the most emotionally charged moment of the wedding day, so I like to give a basic instruction about how it will unfold—which way to turn, where to stand, etc.—and then I tell them to forget about every single thing. ‘Don’t think about me, don’t think about the videographer, don’t think about what’s happening next. This is a moment just for the two of you, and I want you to feel it and be there with each other fully.’ I think they really appreciate it,” Pierson says.

Incorporating Activity And Overcoming Obstacles

To quell nerves during a first-look shoot and ensure it unfolds in the most natural way possible, Pierson also likes to give the couple something to do. “Humans photograph better when they’re in motion, when they’re relaxed, and they’re doing something that feels natural to them as opposed to ‘stand here and look at her,’” she says. Sometimes she’ll have a bottle



of Champagne at the first look so they can “just chill out for a second and celebrate with each other.”

She also loves it “when a couple reads a note that they wrote to each other just before the first look, so the emotions are really high, and it’s not just about ‘Hi, look at my dress.’ It brings forward all of the emotions of why they love each other and why they’re getting married. “Wedding photography is so much more than being able to take a good photo,” Pierson explains, “because the

circumstances in which we’re photographing are often not ideal. We’re cramped into tiny, messy hotel rooms... we’re managing turning on a dime to be every kind of photographer: a portrait artist, a documentarian, a still life specialist. We’re doing a thousand different things all at the same time.”

When it comes to making first-look images, the challenges usually involve solving limitations with location, space and light. “It’s a game of finding a space of flattering light that’s also free



of visual distractions and a place that looks pretty—or just embracing what’s around. The parking lot of a hotel isn’t great, but if you’re in New York and [the first look takes place] on a busy city street, how fun and how energetic and how beautiful,” she adds.

Creating Bonds Beforehand

What’s also “extremely helpful,” Pierson emphasizes, is the fact that she also made engagement photos for the majority of her wedding clients.

“If you show up to the wedding day like it’s a blind date, then you walk into the room, and you’re like, ‘Which one is the bride?’ It’s not the best start. That’s not usually how it goes, but a practice run is beneficial for everybody involved.” Having already spent time with the couple before the wedding day, “they understand my weird prompts and affirmations,” she says, laughing, “and they understand how to relax in front of the camera. They learn to linger instead of being hurried

and feeling nervous about what they’re doing. Later, they trust my presence at the wedding, and they know how I work, so the instruction can just be: ‘Take your time and linger and love on her and keep playing.’ They already know what to do.”

Choosing Equipment Mindfully

Despite the lighting challenges that often exist during first-look shoots, Pierson still relies on natural light to capture the highly charged moment—saving her small, powerful Profoto B10 lights and on-camera flash for the dancefloor, speeches and dinner, when natural light isn’t an option.

She wears two 5D Canon Mark IV cameras on her at all times, typically one with a 50mm lens and one with an 85mm or 28-70mm lens, in order to avoid the precariousness of switching lenses in a hurry. “I love shooting at 1.4 or 1.8,” she says, “and the 2.8 just doesn’t have the same quality, even if you’re at an equivalent focal length.”

Basking In Love

In the end, couples “all express love in their own individual ways, which is what’s so beautiful about being a wedding photographer. Some couples laugh hysterically after finally seeing their person. Some people get really, really emotional, and they start crying. Every single couple presents themselves and expresses their love in a different way, and that’s what is really evident at the first look,” Pierson says, “and it’s important to encourage and evoke that sort of emotion. My whole aesthetic is just encouraging them to be who they are together. From my end, there’s very little premeditation. I’m not inserting myself into it; I just encourage who they are.”

It’s a statement that underscores just how humanist a profession photography can be and how emotionally interdependent the dynamic between photographer and subject truly is. DPP

See more of Dacia Pierson’s photography at eagerheartphotography.com.