

SPACE, TIME, DANCE DIGITÁLIS FOTÓ MAGAZINE

Dance photography doesn't mean for Lois Greenfield the work of a paparazzi or sitting behind the stage on the rehearsal. Her photos show such moments of human motion which are completely invisible to the naked eye.

The questions:

1. You make dance photography for more than 30 years, however, you don't consider yourself to be a dance photographer. Why?

I don't consider myself a dance photographer because I don't record choreography. I make photographs of dancers with whom I collaborate to make improvised images, most of which could never be performed on a stage.

Maybe the original impulse comes from a phrase of a dance, or maybe from an idea that had nothing to do with dance at all. Since the photograph does not show the moment before or after the shutter's click, the dancers prepare themselves only for the moment I photograph. These moments can be risky because their moves are not part of a continuum: they can all land with a thud! I rarely see dance performances, and almost never before I shoot.

What happens on the stage is irrelevant for my purposes, and frankly most choreographic elements can be reduced to a handful of positions, none of which interests me. What fuels my passion is the investigation of movement and its expressive potential. What better subject could I have than dancers?

Most dance photographers are after the "peak moment," I usually prefer the split second before or after that alleged "peak". The range of emotional and narrative nuances within a single series of jumps is enormous. A micro-second of difference can change an attitude of the dancer from that of striving to falling, depending if she is on her way up, or down. I will usually choose that moment of relaxation as I prefer to show the dancers without strain in their faces or muscles. Rather than betray their effort, I like them to look heroic and at ease in their feat, perhaps buffeted around by unseen atmospheric forces rather than slicing through the air.

I can't depict the moments before or after the camera's click, but I like to invite the viewer's consideration of that question.

2. You brought the dancers to the studio, instead of going to the theatre. Do you think that choreography is disturbing to see the essence, the beauty of the dance?

No, I don't think that choreography disturbs the essence or beauty of dance. A choreographed dance expresses the essence of that choreographer's vision. What I am doing is not a replacement for choreography, it is something completely different. Dance takes place in 360 degrees of space according to regular intervals of time, usually set to music. Photographs are 2-dimensional, and are just a slice of time, not a continuum.

3. What is the connection between dance and photography? What can photography tell us about dance without music, three dimensions and choreography?

What interests me is using photography's ability to stop time and reveal to the viewer what the naked eye can't see. Having seen the photograph, the viewer believes he or she has seen the captured moment, but that would be physically impossible, as we can only see the passage of time, not time standing still. In fact I read that it is actually a neurological disorder to see in stilled images! A photograph of movement is inherently surreal. You see something completely true, that actually happened, yet it is out of the grasp of human perception. On a physiological level we weren't meant to see these moments. People tend to be mystified looking at my configurations of dancers up in the air in some impossible position, because they assume that the time they spend looking at the images is the same as the duration of the event! But the "event" happened in 1/2000 of a second. It should be noted that I never photoshop an image, all my pictures are single frames of real events.

4. You show us a 1/2000th second slice of time of the movement of the human body. How can you find the exact moment for exposure and right focusing technically, without seeing the composition? How can one compose in such circumstances?

I prefocus my camera on a spot where the lighting is right for the effect that I am interested in. Then we try to make sure the dancers end up in that vicinity. Since they need room to travel, I am not too close to them, so my depth of field is greater than it is for other studio photographers.

The composition is always the exciting part, fitting dancers into the unnatural shape of a square, or cropping into them for dramatic effect. Now that I shoot mainly digital format, with a Leaf Valeo 22i back, I no longer have a square image, it is more rectangular, although I can still play off the frame. Dance is a subject whose composition is inherent in its form, but I like to work against that inherent photogeneity.

5. Which role is the square format of Hasselblad playing in your photography? Why do you like it?

The square format was crucial when I developed what became my signature style of the '80s. The difficulty of capturing dance in a square was not an obstacle, but a challenge that inspired me to think of composition in a completely new way. In addition I fell in love with the black border and often used it as a dramatic element, cropping the figures as they entered or exited the frame. (Degas cropped his dancers too, by the way, even working in a rectangular frame!) The

square gives each side of the frame equal weight, and gravitational pull.

6. When you changed for digital, did you have any problems with black and white? What was the difference in quality comparing with your favorite Kodak film? Shooting digitally, are your original shots are black and white or do you convert colour images by software?

Yes, shooting digitally black and white was not easy at first. But my Leaf back converts the color file into black and white images beautifully, with just as many tones, only no grain of course. Also, I have a fabulous young woman who makes exquisite black and white prints from my files. Again, only the lack of grain would betray the fact that it wasn't film.

7. Some critics say that your photos are not human enough because of the high perfection. Yet humans are never so perfect. What do you think?

For the same reasons those critics might find fault, others say that I show human potential, reflecting our aspirations and our dreams. I find the images mythological in content, even though they are authentic moments that actually happened.

8. Your photos are sometimes compared with the works of Henri Cartier-Bresson. What is common in your and his works?

This of course is quite a compliment. The common point is our shared allegiance to "the decisive moment," a phrase which he coined. I think though in French, his phrase is "a la sau-vette" which translates as "hastily." Either way the photographer must react quickly, because all the compositional elements within the frame are in flux and only cohere for a split second. Cartier Bresson sought out the fortuitous juxtapositions within street scenes, I instigate random acts of wildness within the studio and then look for the fortuitous, seemingly impossible juxtapositions of limbs and bodies in the air.

9. Do you like risky things? I ask because you take part in a dance performance with the Australian Dance Theatre, making photos on the stage, which is part of the performance. Is it not dangerous to show every image you shoot to the audience at once, without editing?

I would say it is courageous, as opposed to dangerous. I don't seek risk either, but I love the uncertainty of the creative process, being in a new project and not knowing where it's going. No writer would publish every word from his or her computer and yet I allow every photo I take to go up on the screen during the show. I was of course very nervous about this at first, but actually now that I am more comfortable with my role in the dance, I feel proud that I am willing to share my process with the audience by taking that risk. And a few clunkers at least serve to convince the audience that the show is actually being photographed live!

10. Please tell us about this performance. How did you get the idea? What is the choreography story? How did the audience react?

Like many creations that in retrospect seem predestined, *Held* was created as the result of a chance encounter with Garry Stewart of the Australian Dance Theatre, who was on business in New York when we met. During our conversation, I described to him what I call “live photo events” in which I shoot dancers digitally and project the images instantly upon a screen. I had done this in Melbourne and I was so surprised by the audience’s delight in seeing the photographs of dancers jumping.

The next day Garry and I met for lunch and he asked me if I’d make a dance with him, the premise being that the photography would be part of the choreography. Not knowing what to expect, I said “Sure!”. and I went back and forth to Adelaide, Australia a few times for the creation and then rehearsals of the dance. *Held* must be the only dance whose choreography began with a photo session, the very day I met the dancers! Then on to performances at the Opera House in Sydney, the Joyce Theatre in New York and Theatre de la Ville in Paris, to name just a few.

Held’s choreography is about photography, being photographed, and being a voyeur. In one scene I come out with a 200 mm lens and mingle with the dancers as I frame close-ups of body parts. In another, the Broncolor strobes, which are part of the set, are set to multiple flash and I take stroboscopic images. It’s such great fun!

Here are some words that describe *Held’s* conceptual framework:

This is the first time the inner processes of photography are “dramatized” in the context of a choreographed dance piece. The performance touches on the materials, methods and optics of photography and its time-altering alchemy. By stopping time, a split-second becomes an eternity. Ironically, freezing a split-second gives the movement more solidity than it had as a fleeting gesture of dance. We know nothing in the real world can exist in two dimensions, yet photographs seduce us into believing that it is a valid representation of reality. We end up convinced we “saw” what the photographs depict, even though it was beyond the threshold of perception.

11. After Melbourne and New York the spectacle comes this year to Europe. When and where can our readers see it?

The audiences all love the show and it usually sells out. Yes, I am in each performance, but it’s only an hour and I am only on stage half the time.

We will be on tour for a few months next fall, 2006, starting in Japan in late September then in Europe and maybe New Delhi. February to mid-March 2007 we’ll be in the UK. It’s best to check my website: loisgreenfield.com or the Australian Dance Theatre’s website : www.adt.org.au for tour dates.

To read more articles on Lois, click below to go to her website: <http://www.loisgreenfield.com/about>