State of the Art

Lois Greenfield

Lois Greenfield captures the fleeting and breathtaking moments of bodies in motion without tricks or digital alterations. She started her career as a photojournalist, and after many years photographing for the Village Voice, in 1982 she opened her New York City studio, which allowed her to control the lighting and direct the dancers. Lois Greenfield's work has been exhibited in museums and galleries throughout the world. Her first monograph, Breaking Bounds (Chronicle Books) was published in 1992, and the work exhibited at the International Center of Photography. By the time her second book, Airborne (Chronicle Books 1998), was published, Lois was photographing commercial campaigns for international clients. As the world's preeminent photographer of dance, her signature images have created a new aesthetic in dance photography. More of Lois Greenfield's photography can be seen at http://www.LoisGreenfield.com.

Figure 6–39
Lois Greenfield. *Copyright © Paul Waldman.*

SW: What led you to become a photographer, and especially a photographer of dance?

LG: It was quite by chance, as I had no real interest in dance. I was an aspiring photojournalist working for newspapers in Boston in the early 1970s. Among the usual newsworthy subjects, such as protest marches and rock n roll concerts, I was assigned to photograph some dress rehearsals of dance performances. To my surprise, I found that with dance as my subject I could indulge in just making interesting pictures, without dealing with what the picture was trying "to say."

SW: What decides or motivates your choice of black-and-white versus color, especially now that what type of film is in the camera is not part of the equation?

LG: Like many " fine art" photographers, I gravitate to black-and-white. I am not sure why, perhaps it's because the black-and-white image is revealed by light and shadow, and not by forms defined by their color. Maybe it's just the level of abstraction that the

absence of real-world colors provides. When I used to shoot film, I had to decide whether to put in color or black-and-white film because the kind of spontaneous, high-risk moments that I like to capture are not repeatable. Shooting digitally, of course I get both, which encourages me to often exhibit both the color and black-and-white versions of the same photo. I find getting beautiful black-and-white images from a digital file more of a challenge. I am, however, totally satisfied with the range of black-and-white tones that my Leaf digital back affords me, and my Epson printers and papers give incredible results. But I do miss grain!

SW: Do you sketch out, or storyboard, the work before you shoot?

LG: Most of my work comes from spontaneous combustion, in collaboration with the dancers at the moment of the shoot. Sometimes I propose a theme or a prop to explore, as I did with Sham Mosher, who jumped while my creative collaborator, Jack Deaso, poured his special mixture of flour on him. Most of my images are created specifically for the camera, and

Figure 6–40
Sham Mosher, 1995. *Copyright © Lois Greenfield, 1995.*

are not part of any performance. I can't predict or envision the moment I will capture, so I just react to what is before my eyes, and honor the ideas that pop into my head. And, of course, some of the most interesting shots are the unexpected, accidental ones.

SW: To what extent does serendipity come into play in your photographs?

LG: Serendipity is my most constant muse.

SW: Do you use a motor drive, or are you releasing the shutter only at the precise peak moment?

LG: I never use a motor drive for a few reasons. When I started photographing dancers in a studio instead of on stage, my first instinct was to use a motor drive as I had been doing during dress rehearsals. But in the [19]80s, my strobes couldn't recycle fast enough to use the motor drive. (Steve, I don't think they can now, either.) But rapid-fire capture became irrelevant to my new-found process, in which I would wait and pick just one moment from a phrase of the dance, instead of trying to capture as many moments as I could and pick the best later. I hesitate to use the phrase "peak moment" to describe my timing because for me the apex of a jump, say, is a static moment, just an allegedly perfect position. I prefer the narrative and expressive potential of either a split second before or after that "peak." The moments I shoot are based on an intuitive, or perhaps I should say predictive anticipation, as I am framing an unknown future.

SW: The content of your images are never manipulated in Photoshop; can you comment on that in relation to the integrity of the image?

LG: The seemingly impossible configurations of dancers in the air are all taken as single-image, in-camera photographs. What intrigues me is making images that confound and confuse the viewer, but that the viewer knows, or suspects, really happened. Their veracity gives the images their mystery: "How did those dancers actually do that?" The surreality in my images comes from the fact that human perception isn't equipped to register split seconds of movement. Thanks to my Broncolor Grafit packs and Pulso flash heads, my flash duration is 1/2000 of a second (which trumps the 1/500 shutter speed on my Hasselblad camera). We can't see 1/2000 of a second with our naked eye; ironically, my photographs give the fleeting gestures a solidity they didn't have as part of our temporal continuum.

SW: I'm aware that you never use Photoshop to alter the content of an image. Where in the digital workflow do you find a place for Photoshop, as an interface for prints? Do you make your black-and-white conversions in Photoshop? Do you use Photoshop to adjust contrast, control tonal values, etc., as you would have in the past in the darkroom?

LG: The darkroom is a good analogy for how we use Photoshop. We convert the files to black-and-white with the channel mixer, and adjust contrast and color, highlights, and shadow. We are now scanning my negatives, and of course creating the final digital files in Photoshop.

SW: I like a phrase you used in an earlier interview, that "digital capture has separated itself from digital manipulation." Would you comment on that?

LG: I've run from any digital attribution to my work, and am continually defending the authenticity of my photographs as documents. The fact that I may shoot with a digital back instead of a film back only describes my means of capturing that image. A writer can choose to write with a pen on paper, or a napkin. He can type on a typewriter (what's a typewriter?) or a computer, dictate words to a tape recorder, whatever. The tools of writing are separate from the words and ideas.

SW: I find it interesting that you eschew digital manipulation, but are a willing accomplice in mixed media where your photography is transformed or becomes part of a greater whole; specifically the Australian Dance Theater's "HELD," where you participate in the dance performance shooting and simultaneously displaying your photographs on-screen for the audience, and the exhibition "Resonating Fields."

LG: Nothing in the concept or the performance of "Held" involves the transformation of the image I shoot. I am on stage photographing as part of the dance, and every photo I take gets projected real-time

Figure 6–41

Flipper Hope, Jack Gallagher, Daniel Ezralow, and Ashley Roland, 1993. Copyright © Lois Greenfield, 1993.

on two screens. Each photo stays up until I shoot another one, which also goes up unedited. The image isn't changed or manipulated in any way, it functions as a "live" element, showing the audience moments of the dance that they couldn't see, because I am photographing split seconds beneath the threshold of perception. The choreography for this collaborative piece began with a photo shoot of The Australian Dance Theater in their studios in Adelaide. The choreographer, Garry Stewart, made sure to "embed" the dance with moments that either I created or would lend themselves to my aesthetic.

In my retrospective *Resonating Fields*, we created "Euclid's Dream" (a clear Plexiglas cube with each of the six sides printed with one of my images) to explore the re-animation of my images. As the cube spins from a string, the images on each side float by the ones on the other sides, alluding to the way human configurations coalesce in my photos. My photographs present a moment out of time; the cube gives the illusion of throwing those images back into the flow of time. The cube is also a three-dimensional representation of my square-format photographs, and, as such, "Euclid's Dream" also expresses the tension between the two-dimensional art of photography and the reality it purports to represent. None of my images are digitally manipulated in either "Held" or "Euclid's Dream," but they are presented in a different form and time base than the usual traditional printed image on paper.

SW: You are a teacher yourself; what advice do you have for the beginning photographer learning Photoshop?

LG: My advice to young photographers today is to shoot *without* looking at what they just shot, they should only engage with the subject they are shooting. The photographer has a unique ability to capture and shape a moment. Photography is an art about perception, it's a window into each individual's way of seeing the world. I would recommend learning the tools, but not letting the tools determine the aesthetic.

SW: Thank You!