

Dance Photographer Lois Greenfield

“The root of my interest is movement,” says dance photographer Lois Greenfield, “or rather how movement can be interpreted photographically. And dance provides a perfect opportunity for this. You might say that dance is my landscape.” In Greenfield’s landscape, dancers dispense with gravity as they walk on air, hang in space, and intersect the image frame and each other in improbable movement. No tricks are involved: no wires holding up the dancers, no unusual point of view making it look as if the dancers are in the air when they are not, no composite of dancers assembled from different shots.

Greenfield approaches her work differently from conventional dance photographers who often have the choreographer arrange a pose for them or who simply capture the peak moment of a movement. She says of her earlier work, “People would look at one of my pictures of Baryshnikov in a spectacular leap ten feet off the ground and say, ‘What a great photograph!’ But I knew that it wasn’t; it was merely a great dance moment competently captured.” Her dissatisfaction with merely recording dance choreography led her to explore other ways of working with dancers. She quotes a Duane Michals comment she heard at a lecture as part of her inspiration: “I want to create something that would not have existed without me.”

She began collaborating with dancers David Parsons and Daniel Ezralow, encouraging them to see how their bodies moved, independent of the choreography they had been trained to perform. That left the dancers free to soar, leap, lunge, and fall, and Greenfield free to explore her personal vision. Each already had an active career, but when they got together, Greenfield says, something new happened. It felt, “as if we were toys which came to life when the toymaker went to sleep. At night the toys played!”

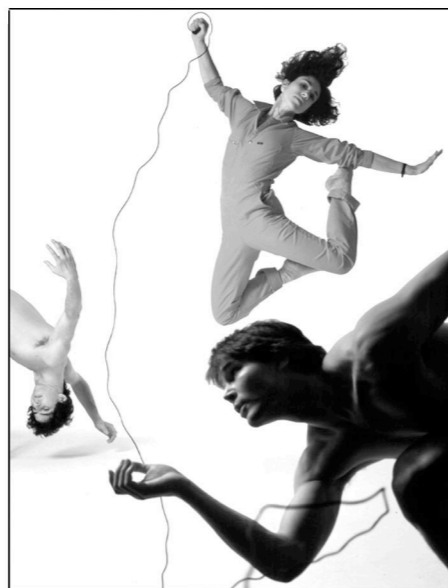
Recording motion sharply is vital to Greenfield’s stop-action photography. She uses a Broncolor Grafit A2 electronic flash because she can adjust it to a very short flash duration for the crispest possible image. She began with a 35mm single-lens reflex camera, but switched to a medium-format single-lens reflex Hasselblad that she now uses with a digital back. That camera synchronizes with flash at a faster shutter speed than most 35mm cameras, so she is less likely to have problems with existing light registering on the image and causing blurred motion.

When she switched cameras, she discovered a bonus: the square format improved the composition by giving equal emphasis to all sides of the image; she prefers it to the standard horizontal frame that seems to replicate ordinary vision. Unlike a rectangular format, dancers could no longer fit next to each other in the same way within the frame, which inspired her to place them in unconventional arrangements.

Greenfield’s dancers are sharply photographed, but not simply frozen in time. Questions about the past and future enter the pictures, too. “Because of the seeming impossibility of what my dancers are doing, you can’t help asking yourself, ‘Where are they coming from? Where are they going?’ Or even, ‘How are they going to land in one piece?’ ”



LOIS GREENFIELD Sierra Ring and Dartanion A. Reed, ASEID Dance Company, 2006



LOIS GREENFIELD Self Portrait with Daniel Ezralow and David Parsons, 1985

Lois Greenfield thinks of the dancers she photographs as her collaborators, not just as performers who are demonstrating choreographed moments from a particular dance. One of Greenfield’s collaborators, Daniel Ezralow (shown at left), described himself as “a piece of clay which he would throw up in the air to make a different shape each time.” “I’m obviously slicing time into very thin fragments,” Greenfield says, “Yet I’m really exploding time by allowing the viewer to contemplate the 1/2000 of a second that my strobes afford me.”

Of her recent work, in which she often uses props, Greenfield says, “I add elements and props to add psychological drama and transform the identity of the dancer.” She feels intrigued by metamorphosis, the changes “from human to animal, or animal to plant, from spirit into matter and matter giving way to spirit.” In the photograph at right, she “wanted the image of the dancer to appear the way a viewer would see sand pouring through an hourglass.”



LOIS GREENFIELD Sham Moshier, 1995