

LOIS GREENFIELD
MOVING STILL



WILLIAM A. EWING



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 CHRONICLE BOOKS

FRONTISPICE: **Ha-Chi Yu, 2013**

I love the abstraction in this photo of Ha-Chi running in the silver ribbon. The black-and-white tones remind me of chasing the Northern Lights in Alaska, and of the days and nights following quickly on each other's footsteps.

PAGE 6: **Morgann Rose / CityDance Ensemble, 2006**

PAGE 9: **Sophie Kuller, 2014**

Sophie was a very talented intern who worked at the studio. Sometimes she stepped in to perform for my camera – that is, when she wasn't behind a video camera filming our shoots.

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INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM A. EWING

Over the last forty years, Lois Greenfield has been without question the most original and prolific photographer associated with the field of contemporary dance. In her New York studio she has worked with hundreds of dance companies and countless dancers. Yet this highly respected image-maker is no conventional 'dance photographer'. Her real interest is not the dance, but the expressive potential of the human body in motion.

This paradox is not difficult to resolve: if one is going to pursue this line of visual enquiry then one would naturally wish to work with dancers who have strength, agility, stamina and discipline, not to mention grace. Despite the illusion of infinite space in Greenfield's photographs, the actual space in which the dancers perform is very small – some just seven metres across. However, because Greenfield is working with professionals, a highly trained dancer can start from across the studio floor and with precision hit a specified point in space. On occasion the photographer has collaborated with gymnasts and athletes who share certain attributes with dancers, but these professionals do not have the same range of lyrical gestures, nor the experience of performing, in this case, for the camera.

Greenfield has worked with some of the most talented dancers of her time to create imagery of great originality. She works almost exclusively in her studio, where she can exert absolute control over lighting, background and props, and direct the dancers during long working sessions in which specific phrases of movement can be performed again and again with extremely subtle variations. This process is highly experimental. Greenfield is often quoted as asking the dancers 'to leave their choreography at the door', meaning that she insists they put aside the conventions of performance in favour of improvisation and experimentation. She is not interested in the visual vocabulary of dance, but in the flow of movement itself. This often pushes the performers to their limits, stimulating them to come up with highly innovative and non-repeatable moves that make for extremely dynamic imagery. Greenfield's directorial approach has inspired some choreographers to see movement in a fresh way. For instance, shortly after working with Greenfield in the early 1980s, the dancer and choreographer David Parsons created 'Caught'. This signature dance used strobe lights to create the illusion of stilled images as Parsons flew through the air on the stage. 'Caught' is still performed by the Parsons Dance Company all over the world, a tribute to a fruitful long-term collaboration between dancer and photographer.

Rather than capturing peak moments of a dance (the conventional goal of dance photography), or merely depicting striking arrangements of flying limbs, or celebrating a dancer's technical virtuosity, Greenfield instead seeks unusual, enigmatic moments that perturb our reading of the

image. We find ourselves wondering: Can a body really be doing what I think it's doing? Where did he come from? Where is he going? Is she rising? Is she falling? Are those bodies about to collide, or are they flying apart?

Greenfield has been inspired by diverse influences: the stop-action experiments of Eadweard Muybridge, Etienne-Jules Marey and Harold Edgerton; the dance studies of Barbara Morgan and Max Waldman; Henri Cartier-Bresson's concept of 'the decisive moment'; Duane Michals's emphasis on creating a moment that only exists as a photograph; Surrealism; Futurism; and even the painting and sculpture of the Italian Renaissance, with its biblical and mythological themes. Like her illustrious predecessors in the photography world, Greenfield is fascinated by the camera's unique capacity to capture patterns of movement that escape the human eye, just as X-rays show us realities about the workings of the body beyond our capacities of direct observation.

She has carved out a unique terrain for herself, in effect fusing two art forms into a hybrid with its own special characteristics. What she shows us in her photographs is not a sampling of something that could be seen on stage, or, for that matter, even in the studio. The flow of movement, and the 1/2000th of a second she extracts from it, is happening far too fast for the human eye to register. Greenfield reveals a reality that is in a sense invisible. The photographer is only able to achieve such spectacular results (without, it must be said, reconfiguring the composition with Photoshop) due to years of experience and a keen intuition; she has learned to sense when a dynamic pattern is building, then coalescing. Her photographs are, therefore, artworks to be appreciated on their own terms. As such, her work contributes to the rich tradition of still photography attempting to come to terms with a world in ceaseless motion.

Moreover, although Greenfield's key interest is the exploration of photographed motion with all its expressive potential, the fact remains that no other photographer of our time has worked with so many dancers and dance companies the world over. While the dancers' moves are exclusively for her camera, the fact remains that the spirit of the companies they perform with often shines through clearly in the pictures. Almost incidentally, then, Greenfield has left us with a brilliant portrait of the world of dance over four decades, while contributing a highly original body of work to photography.

As she explains in the interview later in this book, Greenfield's approach has evolved over the past twenty years. But her aim has never faltered: to look deeply into the fundamental paradox of a dance photograph – that it doesn't move, and yet it does.



INTERVIEW WITH LOIS GREENFIELD

WILLIAM A. EWING

The interview transcribed here may be seen as a continuation of a conversation recorded in 1992 and printed in *Breaking Bounds*, Lois Greenfield's first monograph.

WAE: *Lois, you have been working for more than forty years, and your last book dates from almost twenty years ago. What has happened to your work since then?*

LG: Some very substantial things. I moved from film to shooting with a digital back on my camera, and I started working in colour. In fundamental ways, though, my working method hasn't changed. It's just that now I look for a different moment, with a different kind of dancer, and with radically different lighting.

WAE: *Before we get into specifics about the changes in approach, technique, even, dare we say, philosophy, what has remained the same?*

LG: I am still fascinated by photography's time-altering alchemy, in which moving elements become solidified and what appears immobile is actually in flux.

WAE: *Let's get into the nitty-gritty of that change. To begin with, can we address the technical aspect?*

LG: First of all, I'm behind the same Hasselblad camera I have been using since the 1980s, but now I am shooting exclusively with a digital back rather than a film back. This means I no longer have to stop after twelve frames to change film. And I can see on the monitor exactly what I am shooting, right after I've shot it.

WAE: *Did this technical shift have artistic consequences?*

LG: Yes, very much so. When I started shooting with digital capture, I would convert the image on the monitor to black and white, because I was, after all, a 'black-and-white photographer'. But soon I started to prefer the colour version as it seemed much more three-dimensional. It's not that I was interested in colour *per se*. My pictures are not *about* colour. For the most part, my palette is extremely muted, relying on skin tones and a neutral wardrobe. I still love the body of work I did in black and white, collected in our two previous volumes, *Breaking Bounds* and *Airborne*, and wouldn't have shot those photos in any other way.

WAE: *And have there been other consequences of the shift to digital?*

LG: When I was working with 2¼-inch film, I had a defined square to compose within, and I always sought to include the negative's black border as part of the picture. This framing device became a compositional partner to whatever the dancers were doing. Now, I don't have a square negative to fill. The digital files are actually rectangular, either vertical or horizontal in format, with no delineated border. So it's more like a window on the event, which I can later crop into any aspect ratio.

Seeing the images on the monitor as I shoot facilitates the communication with the dancers. When they look at the computer screen, they can see not only the moments I was shooting, but also the expression on their faces and the details in their gestures, which we had been unable to discern by looking through a magnifying loupe at a 2-inch image on a Polaroid, as we had to do years ago.



WAE: *But the basic principle of reviewing the shot with the dancer or dancers remains the same ...*

LG: The problem is, you can't legislate what a shot is going to look like – my kind of shot, I mean – and you can't tell the dancer, 'Do the same thing but this time raise your right arm, look over in that direction, or toss your skirt sooner', and expect to get a perfect shot. That may work for still-life compositions, but not for dancers' non-repeatable movements. No moment ever comes back, and the most important thing is that I have to be totally engaged in what is actually happening in front of the camera and the split second I choose to shoot. Being able to review the images instantly has its advantages, yet it is not a determining factor in either the ultimate success of a shot or the percentage of good shots that I get. When I was shooting film, I always knew if a shot was working or not, and if not, could discuss with the dancers how to achieve it. Also, I work in a very counter-intuitive way. Everyone assumes that my camera is set in the continuous shooting mode and then I choose the best frame out of the series. Because I go on using this simple camera, which has no continuous shooting function, or auto-focus, I might add, I still take one frame at a time, in what today must seem a most archaic way of taking pictures. But it works for me.

WAE: *I am intrigued by the radical change in the lighting ...*

LG: It stemmed from a desire to work in a completely different paradigm. I set myself various constraints: a defined vertical composition; one overhead light, which obscured part of the picture in darkness; and each shot a solo, in which we see the dancer in a private moment, seemingly unaware of the camera (see page 13). A night-time look emerged, just by chance. As in all my shots, the pictures seem to evolve organically.

WAE: *So how do you choose your moments?*

LG: Out of a phrase of movement, be it choreography or improvisation, I will instinctively *anticipate* a moment that I think will resolve itself in an interesting way, and then I click the shutter. The dancers regroup and I ask them to do it again, and again, and again ... If one were to rely on a camera's continuous shooting capability, which automatically takes a burst of pictures per second, then one wouldn't get to choose that personal decisive moment – the camera would do it for you.



WAE: *Let's talk about that precise instant you click the shutter ...*

LG: In all my photos, I rarely shoot the peak of an action, I prefer to shoot a split second before or after. I am still looking for that enigmatic moment, or that ambiguous scenario when you don't quite understand what is happening, or why. The viewer senses that there is a narrative in the photo but they can't decipher it. I want to present the mystery of that instant (see page 2).

WAE: *Am I right in saying that that is what you were doing years ago, and yet not quite?*

LG: In *Breaking Bounds* and *Airborne* my enquiry was often about a movement in its pull against gravity, or the opposite – the liberation from gravity, with the figures floating, weightless (see page 118). My imagery is less acrobatic now. The new series I began in 2013, which I call *One to One*, is more about the expression and gesture of a solo dancer (see page 14).

Another way this new series differs from the older work is that the latter was about stopping time and capturing an otherwise imperceptible movement. The human eye can't register the 1/2000th of a second that I choose to photograph. The picture becomes a document of an event that happened, however surreal it may seem. With the new series, all the elements I just mentioned are the same, but when I look at these pictures I don't think I am looking at an instant that is revealed and preserved. Especially at the 5-foot-high scale they are meant to be viewed at, I feel that time is not stopped, but is passing before my eyes.

WAE: *Is there a difference in the approach now that stems from the dancers themselves?*

LG: That's interesting. After *Breaking Bounds* was published, the dancers who came to the studio assumed that I wanted that kind of athletic prowess and kamikaze spirit, when I actually wanted to get away from it! So, among other props, I introduced mirrors and reflective surfaces, which had intrigued me since my early days as a photojournalist. I found that these elements were conceptually transformative and added a new and unpredictable dimension to my imagery.

WAE: *I notice that you moved to a new group of dancers. Why was that?*

LG: With my latest ideas, I was looking for another sensibility and that meant I had to collaborate with different people. The one exception is Ha-Chi Yu, whom I have been photographing since she was a ballet student twenty years ago. Also, three of my newest dancers are from Taiwan, where they were schooled in what seems to be another approach – trained in rigorous technique as well as in the poetics of movement. Their bodies quickly became a vehicle for emotional expression.

WAE: *And how did you work with them on this emotional level?*

LG: I couldn't really tell them what I was looking for, because I didn't know myself, but I got what I wanted: moments of an incomprehensible but deeply felt emotion.

WAE: *And how do you choose your subjects?*

LG: I work with an eclectic group; I have no prerequisites. I am not looking for a pantheon of modern dance. Some of them are seasoned professionals, but I do equally compelling work with those just starting out, or who have studied dance but decided not to pursue it. For instance, two of my favourite subjects in my new series were recently both interns at the studio.

WAE: *I remember showing Richard Avedon one of your images when we had the 'Airborne' show in Lausanne. In fact, it was the one we put on the cover of the American edition of the book. He asked me how many negatives you'd combined! I was shocked, and replied, 'Richard, each photo has only one!' But I thought it was a real testament to your work, coming from him. So even back then, in 1998, people assumed manipulation of some sort. I'd like to talk about people's assumptions now when they look at your pictures: do you feel they grasp what you are after, and recognize it is not digital trickery?*

LG: Yes, I do. I feel people's appreciation of the work, that they get it. I see viewers linger over the photos trying to figure out how it actually happened. They question whether the moment is real. After all, our brain cannot register split seconds; when time is stopped, an ephemeral moment looks as solid as sculpture (see pages 106-7).

WAE: *There is another, shall we say illusionary, aspect to your recent work: mirrors. Why this interest?*

LG: I used mirrors in *Breaking Bounds*, but now I am using these and other reflective surfaces more adventurously. The reflections nested within the mirror can be as important to the shot as the dancer is. In fact, the reflections become a dramatic partner, incorporating off-screen space (see page 92).

As much as I want to shoot a spontaneous moment, I am a control freak trying to accomplish the perfect conjunction of gesture, form, composition and timing. It's an extremely painstaking process, especially with the addition of reflections that are constantly shifting. I love the fact that despite my rigour, I've got this element – this malleable mirror – that is totally out of my control. And it's a relief – I can't tell the mirror what to do! To go back to your comment about Avedon's miscomprehension, people don't seem to believe anything is real any more in a photograph. I stick by my earliest ideal: that although the picture may look unreal, it is actually factual. I am interested in my photos depicting the surreality in an actual photographed moment, not a composited one.

WAE: *In brief, what motivates you today?*

LG: What continues to excite me is the quest for a new and different image. I don't come into the studio with a specific idea. There is no layout; there is no forethought. I may have a lighting set-up, and I always have a bunch of scarves and assorted props that I've collected because I thought they were photogenic, and then we see what happens. I feel the process is like a careening vehicle and I don't know where it is going to end up. But on this ride I get pictures that are beyond my imagination. What you see is the result of the act of taking them. And that's why I do it. If I *knew* what the picture was going to look like, I wouldn't bother to shoot it.



WAE: *And that's what keeps you going?*

LG: Totally.

WAE: *Well, I could imagine someone saying, 'Lois has been doing this for more than forty years, she must be getting a bit tired'. I can't believe it myself, because the work doesn't show an iota of that. On the contrary, it's as full of zest as always. It's like a landscape in which you keep finding enough hidden in its valleys and forests to keep you exploring. Having said that, do you ever have doubts?*

LG: Doubts, not so much ... but there was sometimes the frustration of trying to step out of a defined style, even though it was my own. Then I would be re-energized by working with those mirrors, or fabrics, and all sorts of photogenic detritus, and that opened new doors for me. Most recently, my *One to One* series has led me down a completely different path.

WAE: *In your work the dancers frequently seem to be fleeing from something ...*

LG: Yes, I unconsciously often depict the dancers in this way.

WAE: *You say unconsciously – a psychoanalyst would love that! But the fact that you say it means it isn't an unconscious element. Or do you mean that you only became aware of this belatedly?*

LG: Perhaps! ... Or sometimes the dancers are caught in a storm – there is always an implied causality to their actions. I trace my interest in this theme to the semester I spent in Florence during college. I only realized how influenced I was by the art, with its biblical and mythological themes, when I started photographing dancers. I have also noticed that I have taken many photos whose composition calls to mind the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary as well as themes in Greek mythology. Without realizing it, I have shot images that could illustrate the myths of Icarus, Narcissus, Sisyphus and the like (see page 76).

WAE: *Going back a decade ago and we find you ... on stage! Both as photographer and performer! Can you talk about how this strange conjunction came to pass?*

LG: From 2003 to 2007 I collaborated with Garry Stewart of the Australian Dance Theatre on the creation of 'HELD', a dance in which I shot segments of the live action as part of the performance. It started with a photo session in Adelaide, during which I created moments that the dancers would perform as part of the choreography (see page 130). The 250 photos that I took each night were projected – unedited – instantaneously on the stage as part of the show.

WAE: *Two other interesting developments are your video work and your recent sojourn as artist in residence at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. How were those things related?*

LG: One of the projection projects I am working on with their Department of Dance and New Media is an installation in which my photos will travel down from the ceiling and onto the floor, and vice versa. The images will also move laterally, bending and stretching as they round the corners of a room. So the still image is being animated by virtue of the projector moving it. Another idea is modelled after the Sistine Chapel, having images traverse the ceiling and viewed from below.

WAE: *This is not an entirely new idea for you. What drives you to this next stage?*

LG: We're very used to seeing filmed movement and also to seeing the stilled moment in a photograph or freeze frame. I like the counter-intuitive concept of making a still photograph move. It makes me think of Galileo trying to prove that the earth rotated around the sun. After all, we call the book *Moving Still* and this title works as well for projections, i.e. 'still' as in 'continues to move'.

WAE: *There are several possible readings to the title ...*

LG: My husband, Stuart, found the title apt because each image is a still picture of a moving person and it is also *emotionally* moving. There is also the paradox of the dancer moving, yet being still ... So it's also uniting contradictions.

WAE: *I was rereading my introduction to Breaking Bounds. I saw the Elizabeth McCausland quote I had included, when she called for 'An image which, though it cannot move, and cannot hope to move, yet will seem about to move', and I thought, nothing has really changed as to the essentials of what you are trying to do. But it's also the general paradox of photography. And yet, with this severe limitation, photography has proved enduring – we can say that for the simple reason that it's still with us, to which several billion iPhone users will attest. This freezing or capturing or slowing down of time is obviously of great value to people, generation after generation. Facebook users continue to be attached to the still picture, even now that making moving pictures is extremely easy. There is just something about that fraction of a second.*

LG: Because we can hold it in our hand. There is still that fascination of holding a moment, and for eternity.

WAE: *It is not surprising, then, that the names of two dances which emerged from the experience of working with you were called 'Caught' and 'HELD'!*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As with my two previous monographs, *Breaking Bounds* and *Airborne*, I could not have realized this body of work without the dedication of a loyal, hardworking team.

Since 1983 Jack Deaso has been central to this adventure, lending his creativity on the set, his good sense, humour and darkroom skills to all the studio projects we have worked on together. From 2005 to 2007, Matthew Karas added so much to so many shoots that we found ourselves sharing a studio ever since. In recent years, Yi-Chun Wu, Kris Attendido, Aaron Burns and Brianne Wood have been indispensable, not only on the set, but in countless other ways. The newest members of our studio team – Eva Barajas, Alea Warner and Pia Moore – took the book to the finish line.

Since the computer replaced our darkroom, I have relied on the talents of Miwa Nishio. She has brought her skilled and subtle artistry to enhance each and every image in the book, while preserving the integrity of each photo as it was shot.

The idea for my newest series of photos, whose working title is *One to One*, was inspired by my friend the artist Grant Peterson. I started working on these poetic images in 2013 and kept shooting right up to the printer's deadline.

Paul Galando, the founding director of NYU/Tisch Department of Dance and New Media, commissioned the shoot that included the photo of XiaoXiao Wang and others for inclusion in the NYU/Tisch Dance and New Media's video made for Michelle Obama's 'Let's Move!' campaign.

My sincere appreciation goes to my publishers, Thames & Hudson in the UK and Chronicle Books in the US. Both took a risk on an unconventional book of dance photographs in 1992, and they continue to support my work.

My husband, Stuart Liebman, was the earliest champion of my work. For over forty years his discerning engagement with my photographs has both strengthened my vision and buoyed my spirits. When my sons, Alexander and Jesse, were young, I learned from them that what one imagines is at least as compelling as what is real.

Bill Ewing and I began our collaboration in 1979 when he included a few of my photographs in his exhibit 'The Fugitive Gesture' at The International Center of Photography in New York City. He was the first to recognize that my photos should be seen as hybrids, fusing dance and photography. He launched my first exhibit at the ICP in 1992, which coincided with the publication of *Breaking Bounds*. In 1998, as the director of the Musée de L'Elysée in Lausanne, Switzerland, he mounted my show 'Airborne'. Our dialogue has continued, working together on *Moving Still*. Watching Bill systematically review thirty years of contact sheets, black-and-white prints, chromes and digital files, and witnessing his process of selecting, then pairing the images, I learned so much about my work. He is a superb curator, and I cherish his insight and friendship.

Finally, with humility and gratitude I thank the dancers who have trusted me with their energy and talent over the past forty years. Stepping onto the blank canvas of my photographs, they have made miraculous moments happen.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

RESONATING FIELDS

- 2014 Alden B. Dow Museum of Science and Art, Midland, MI, USA
- 2013 Thrasher-Horne Center for the Arts, Jacksonville, FL, USA
- 2012 MUZEO, Anaheim, CA, USA
- 2009 Mikimoto Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
- 2006 Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona Beach, FL, USA

IMAGINED MOMENTS

- 2010 Jacob's Pillow, Becket, MA, USA

CELESTIAL BODIES / INFERNAL SOULS

- 2013 ERARTA Museum of Contemporary Art, St Petersburg, Russia
- 2010 National Museum of Dance, Saratoga Springs, NY, USA
- 2009 Nordic Light International Festival of Photography, Kristiansund, Norway
- 2009 Perth Centre for Photography, Northbridge, WA, Australia

AIRBORNE IMAGINED MOMENTS

- 2006 Saltama Arts Theatre, Saltama, Japan
- 2003 Biennale Internationale de l'Image de Nancy, Nancy, France
- 2002 Open Shutter Gallery, Durango, CO, USA
- 2001 Anheuser-Busch Gallery, Center of Contemporary Arts, St Louis, MO, USA
- 1998 Musée de L'Elysée, Lausanne, Switzerland

OVERLAPPING NOWS

- 2001 Melbourne Arts Festival, Arts Centre Melbourne, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

BREAKING BOUNDS

- 1994 Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, CA, USA
- 1992 International Center of Photography, NY, USA
- 1988 Musée de L'Elysée, Lausanne, Switzerland