

TALK MAGAZINE

Questions for Lois Greenfield

In Belgium, we could say nonsense is our specialty and we had great Dada artists who precisely played with gravity in their photographs, troubling our perception, questioning our certainties. Playing with motion, space and time, which reflections do you initiate through your photographs?

I am honored to be considered in the company of the Dada artists, but I am not sure that my motivations are the same. I am not trying to go beyond photography's primary function: to accurately depict the 'real world' in 2 dimensional images. My experiment is with its time-altering alchemy. By "stopping" time, a split second becomes an eternity, and an ephemeral moment is solid as sculpture.

I am trying to slice time into otherwise imperceptible milliseconds. These split seconds are beneath the threshold of perception, and appear to the viewer as surreal. I never use photoshop to reconfigure the dancers' position or add elements in the frame. In fact all my photographs are single, in-camera images. Staged snapshots. They are simply documents- documents of my imagination- and of a collaboration between the dancers and myself. The moments I capture are created for the camera's ability to fragment time and fracture space. There is friction created between my straightforward photographic method and the resulting enigmatic imagery.

What intrigues me is making images that confound and confuse the viewer, but that the viewer knows, or suspects, really happened. I want my images to defy logic. As Salvador Dali wrote, I strive to 'systematize confusion and discredit reality.' I can't depict the moments before or after the camera's click, but I invite the viewer's consideration of that question.

But beyond reflection, and in response to the nonsense, some of your photographs recall to me the emotional strength that appears through Auguste Rodin's sculptures, both with muscled bodies, hard like stones and fixed in movement, sometimes curved, enlaced. Is this force a goal for you? What kind of emotion do you like to express? (You can illustrate your answer with one of your favorite pictures)

It is interesting that you mention the emotional strength of the figure in Rodin's sculptures. I remember spending an exhilarating afternoon in the Rodin museum in Paris a few years ago. But I don't feel much of a connection to or inspiration from his work.

The only Rodin sculptures with which I feel a kinship would be the likes of the marble statues 'Danaide' or 'Fugit Amor'. The gentle smoothness of the bodies and their very expressive positions, as though in movement (Unlike the static "The Kiss," or the "The Thinker" for example) come the closest to my own work.

I am truly impassioned by movement so that is not surprising. Like Rodin, I am drawn to mythological themes. One of my new collections is a body of color images called, "Celestial Bodies/Infernal Souls," which references themes in Greek Mythology.

You ask what kind of emotion I like to express. I can't think of any particular emotion I am looking for, but their faces are always calm. I actually want there to be a mystery in their motivation. The dancers have a purpose to their movements but we don't know what it is. I never accentuate the very necessary effort involved in the dancers movement. Instead, my dancers appear to be floating and relaxed, often angelic. Their power is such that it appears effortless. In that sense, the background is not a void, but an invisible force that is motivating their actions.

I do find however that I create scenarios of flight- by that, I mean fleeing. Years ago I was often consciously alluding to the biblical theme of the Expulsion of Paradise. Now using fabrics and distorted mirrors, the dancers might be seen as escaping a big wave, or chased by their own reflection. Since I am drawn to ambiguity, the dancer simultaneously might appear to be engulfed by the wave, or about to be swallowed by the mirror.

Technically, you have chosen the square format, no blur, sometimes colors, sometimes black and white, no digital retouching... Could you please explain the way you technically work and why?

As to my technique, it is very simple. I work in my studio with Broncolor Strobes whose flash duration is set at 1/2000 second or more, and an old Hasselblad medium format camera I have had since the the 80's. (no motor drive or automatic anything!) Now that I am not shooting film, I put a Leaf digital back on my Hasselblad and am no longer constrained by the square format that dominated the aesthetic of my work before 2005. What is most surprising about my method is that I don't shoot continuous action. I take just one shot for every short phrase of movement, which might be repeated many times. Digital photography allows me to shoot both color and black & white images at the same time. At first I thought I would be converting the files to black & white, but I usually choose the color version (except of course for special projects such as my annual Breaking Bounds wall calendar). Which is not to say that I wish I had color versions of my classic black and white images from the 80's and 90's. I can only imagine these images in black and white!

As I said before I am not interested in digital manipulation of my images. To quote Andre Breton, "I'm interested in depicting the union of two apparently incompatible realities."

Spectacular and unique performance, bodies stretched to their maximum, breaking limits, released, what could that tell us about our human condition, our identity, in a world in which social life almost always represses our physical potential?

I think the extraordinary feats of my dancers expand our concept of human potential. Freed from the constraints of gravity, they soar, they float, they cavort in an alternate universe where physics holds no sway.

I read that you considered the great photo reporter Sebastian Salgado as one of your main influences but at first sight – except some compositions – your works are almost opposed, especially because we generally oppose scenery-studio and realism in photography. What is your point of view, where are the similarities and the results of this influence in your work?

Just because one admires a photographer doesn't necessarily mean they are an influence on one's work. Among the things I appreciate about his photographs are the biblical sweep of his tableaux and the beautiful tones in his usually predominantly grey palette. His images show a deep sense of

compassion and humanity for his subjects, always depicted with a sense of grace. As someone who once aspired to photojournalism and veered off into more personal expression, I am filled with admiration for the way Salgado puts an indelible stamp of his own artistic sensibility on his sprawling, socially relevant oeuvre.

□

