



Interview: Dynamic Photos of Dancers Frozen Mid-Movement by Lois Greenfield

By Jenny Zhang December 17, 2015

For the last 35 years, legendary dance photographer Lois Greenfield has explored movement and its expressive potential in dynamic photos of dancers frozen in split seconds of extraordinary motion. Twirling, soaring, and contorting into incredible forms, her subjects are immortalized as sculptural figures immersed in the improvised, unchoreographed instincts of their own graceful, powerful bodies.

"The ostensible subject of my photographs may be motion, but the subtext is time," Greenfield writes in her artist statement. "I am dealing in the poetics of a visual language rather than in its literalness. I want my images to defy rational explanation. . . Their veracity as documents gives the photographs their mystery, and the surrealism of the imagery comes from the fact that our brains don't register split seconds of movement."

A selection of images from the past two decades, including Greenfield's newest work in color, are now published in the New York-based photographer's third book, *Lois Greenfield: Moving Still*, just released last month. The elegant monograph is available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Chronicle Books, and Thames & Hudson.

We had the chance to ask Greenfield a few questions about her creative process. Scroll down to read that exclusive interview.

What is it about freezing expressive human motion in time that captivates you so?

My inspiration has always been photography's ability to stop time and reveal what the naked eye cannot see. A dancer's movements illustrate the passage of time, giving it a substance, materiality, and space. In my photographs, time is stopped, a split second becomes an eternity, and an ephemeral moment is solid as sculpture.

What do you ask of your subjects when they dance for you?

I am not as interested in photographing dances as I am in discovering each dancer's unique way of moving, independent of choreography. I like to incorporate simple props for the dancers to improvise with, such as fabrics, shredded paper, mirrors and reflective surfaces, which add to the ambiance. What has kept my interest in this obsessive inquiry for 40 years, is that each time I invite a dancer into the studio, I have absolutely no idea what the resulting images will look like. My working method takes me beyond my imagination.





In an interview with William E. Ewing in your new book, you state that you "instinctively anticipate a moment" before clicking the shutter. What drives that instinct, and how have you refined that sense over the years?

Dance photography is an anticipatory art form. The moments I shoot are split seconds, and if I were to wait until I saw the moment I want, and then push the shutter, it would be too late! My decision as to what moment to shoot is based on my expectation that the following split second will coalesce into an intriguing configuration. Instinct is innate, not something that can be learned. I find that my timing is different from other photographers, who mostly shoot the peak of the action, whereas I shoot a fraction of a second before or after the peak.

What questions and reactions do you hope your photos prompt in the viewers?

I want my images to defy rational explanation, but that the viewer knows, or suspects, what really happened. All my pictures are taken as single image, in-camera photographs, with no digital manipulation.

My quest is for a moment—in which the conjunction of the dancer's movement, expressive gesture, and implied narrative becomes part of an enigmatic or ambiguous scenario.

The point is not to have the viewer figure out what is going on in the photo, but just to present the mystery of that instant.

My Modern Met granted permission to use photos by Lois Greenfield.