

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Pictures by Lois Greenfield;
text by Theano Nikitas

Master dance photographer Lois Greenfield's images capture elegant motion. Her pictures appear to defy reason, logic, and even the laws of physics. On the release of her new book, she reveals to us exactly how she does it. Hint: it's not Photoshop.



FOR DECADES, Lois Greenfield's photographs of dancers have inspired viewers with their beauty—and their intrigue. "The point," she says, "is not to have the viewer figure out what is going on in the photo, but to present the mystery of an instant."

Watching Greenfield work, whether in a crowd at a busy trade show or in one of her workshops, is as inspiring as her photographs. The ease with which she collaborates with her subjects is amazing; she knows exactly when to trigger the shutter, pausing on occasion to suggest a

slight adjustment to the dancer's movement or timing before they go again—"one more time." And as any dancer who has worked with Greenfield knows, "one more time" may be repeated several times until that magic moment is captured and preserved.

As a photojournalist early in her career, Greenfield covered a number of different beats—including dress rehearsals of dance performances. After ten years of that, however, she grew tired of documenting choreography in poor lighting. Instead, she

**OPPOSITE:
SHEER BEAUTY**
Dancer Sophie Kuller was captured with a Hasselblad 500 C/M, Leaf Aptus II 7 digital back, and a Hasselblad 100mm Planar lens at ISO 50, 1/250 sec f/8. All images in the story use these settings unless otherwise noted.

**THIS PAGE:
BOUNCE**
Greenfield asked dancer Jennifer Minzy Lee to jump on a trampoline, a prop the photographer rarely uses.



says, she wanted to “use dancers in my own exploration of movement.” And that’s exactly what she’s been doing for the past 30-plus years.

“I wanted the dancers to express themselves in new and different kinds of ways,” Greenfield explains, “so I encouraged them to create these split-second moves that actually could never be part of a dance.” Her images have always generated questions—viewers often wonder if the figures were suspended from wires or were composited using software. But Greenfield, who continues to be one of the most well-respected and innovative photographers in her field, captures them all in the camera.

Get Started

If your familiarity with dance is limited, Greenfield recommends developing a relationship with a local college dance department, dance studio, or dance company, and ask to photograph their dress rehearsals. “This is a way to learn and to get familiar with the

language of dance” without having to direct the dancers. By shooting rehearsals, she says, “you don’t have to worry about telling the dancer what to do; just shoot the best moments you can.”

When you are ready to work with someone privately, you’ll have a portfolio of images to show your skills and a contact list of dancers. For shooting rehearsals, Greenfield recommends using a DSLR set at ISO 3200 and 1/250 sec with an aperture between f/2.8 and f/4.5. Set it to continuous AF and bring a 24–70mm lens; a 70–200mm is recommended too.

For private shoots, get a signed model release. In addition to the standard terms, Greenfield strongly recommends including a clause that releases you from liability in case of injury or accident. Of course, she adds, “You should not allow the dancer to do any moves that seem risky.”

Greenfield almost exclusively photographs in the studio. As she points out, “you can really shoot dancers in any room with a wall,

CLOCKWISE: BALANCE
Greenfield captured this on Kodak Professional Plus-X 125 Film (1/250 sec at f/11, ISO 125) as a commission for an arthritis drug. She asked Andrew Pachó to imagine partner Lisa-Marie Lewis as a bubble on his finger.

ANYTHING MIGHT BE A PROP
Always on the lookout for unusual props, Greenfield brought the orange hammock used by dancer Ha-Chi Yu back from Belize.

SUBTLE MOTION
Performer Maureen Fleming’s movements are so slow that they’re often imperceptible. As she changed form, the fabric became a moving extension of her body’s stillness.



a wood floor, and enough room for the dancers to jump—most dancers can do a jump in a couple of paces.”

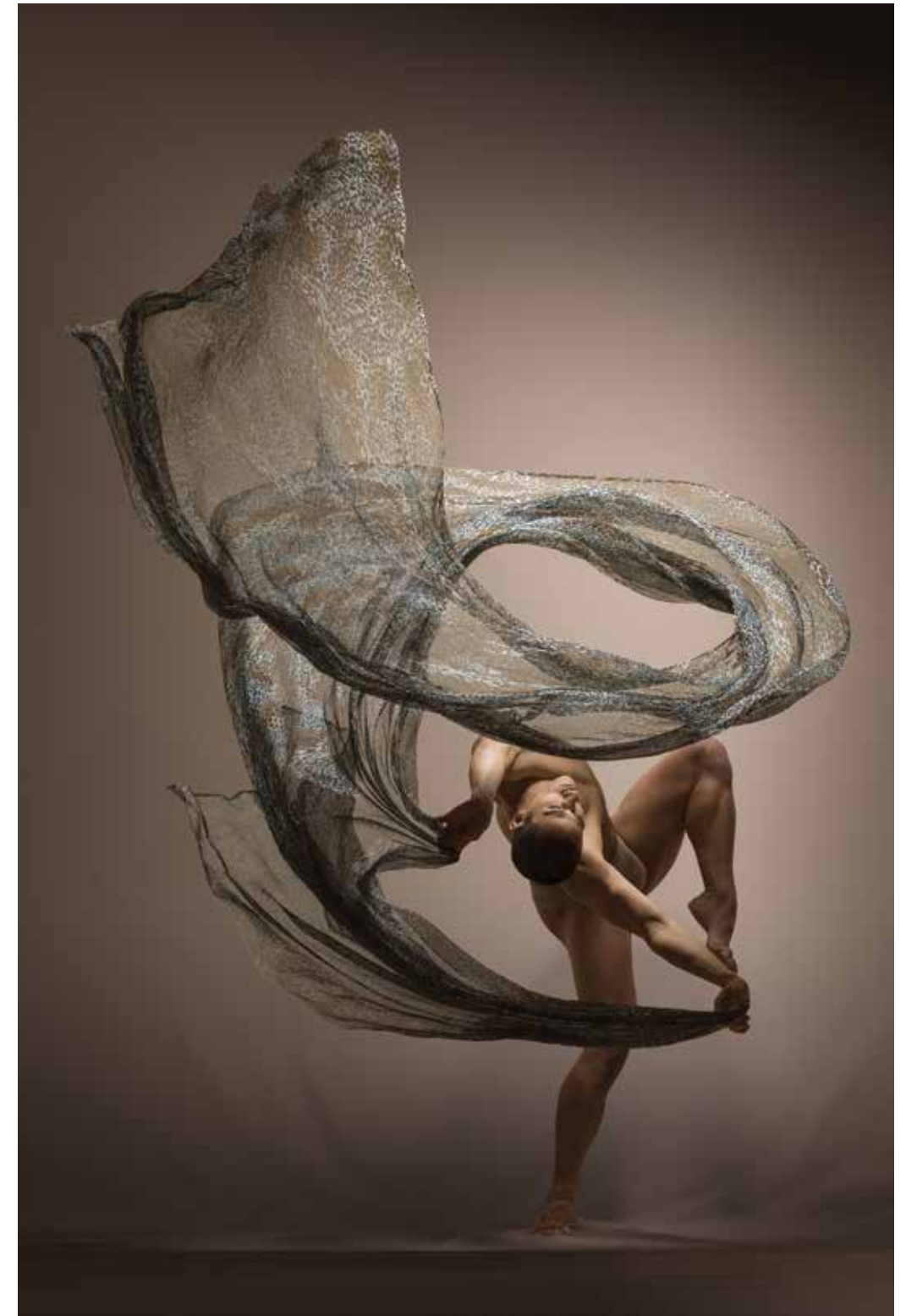
A white backdrop, whether a wall, paper, or a piece of muslin (Greenfield uses the latter in her studio and stretches it taut), is ideal. “White is great because it’s versatile,” explains Greenfield: “Depending on how you light it, it can be white, light grey, or dark grey.” But seamless paper and fabric are slippery and can be dangerous. Greenfield recommends you bring it to the ground and tape it without creating a sweep, adding that even without a sweep, a separate piece taped to the floor is still too slippery to dance on. Avoid concrete surfaces too; a wood floor is best because it has a certain amount of flexibility and is easier on a dancer’s body.

Prepare the Shot

Despite the visual complexity of Greenfield’s images, the setup itself is quite simple. She shoots using manual exposure with a Hasselblad 500 C/M and Leaf Aptus II 7 digital back mounted on a tripod. And her settings are consistent: ISO 50, 1/250 sec shutter speed and, for adequate depth of field, an aperture between f/5.6 and f/8. She focuses manually on a predetermined spot, which is marked for the dancers, and shoots only one frame at a time, usually using 120mm CF Makro or 100mm Planar lenses (76mm and 50mm equivalent, respectively). The focal length you use will depend on the size of the studio but, notes Greenfield, “you want to be as close as you can because that will make the dancers appear to have more volume and look more sculptural” as the lens-to-subject distance decreases.

You don’t need a medium-format camera or a digital back to make great images, though. A tripod-mounted DSLR will work fine; just be sure that the shutter is responsive enough to capture the exact moment you want.

Greenfield shoots tethered to check for composition, focus, and details such as whether the dancer’s expression is relaxed and eyes are open. “I’ll bring the dancers over to the monitor now and then to show them the images,” says Greenfield. This allows her to suggest possible changes to the movement, facial expression, or



IMPROVISATION
Neither Greenfield nor dancer Jordan Isadore could figure out how he had twirled the scarf this way, creating a unique moment.

use of a prop or costume element. If you use a tripod and set framing and focus points beforehand, you may be able to avoid shooting while looking through the viewfinder. According to Greenfield, this will better allow you to engage

with what’s happening in front of the camera. Ideally, you’ll keep your eyes on the dancers and your finger on the shutter.

And don’t forget the lighting. This can be as simple as a single beauty dish with or without a grid, lighting



a dancer from overhead, as used in the image on page 68. Greenfield uses this setup to create what she describes as a “modulation of tonal value” in which “things disappear into darkness and it retains an air of mystery.”

Alternatively, she often sets her key light—with an umbrella or Broncolor Satellite Soft—at a three-quarter angle to her left because “it has a good spread over the entire shooting area and has a directional quality that gives you sculptural shadows,” she says. Additional strobes are positioned to illuminate both sides of her backdrop at about 3/4-stop brighter than the key light to create a white background.

A flash duration of 1/2000 sec or faster is critical to capturing the split-second moments in Greenfield’s images. To achieve that speed, the photographer uses Broncolor Grafit power packs with a bi-tube head. Set your strobes to the shortest duration possible, and remember that lower power settings deliver a faster burst of light. At slower speeds, you may notice a slight blurring of the feet if the dancer is moving very quickly.

Capture the Magic

Spontaneity and collaboration with the dancers is key for Greenfield’s work. She recommends that you try to have an assortment of props on hand. Long cuts of lightweight fabric are photogenic and complement the dancers’ movements. Let your subjects improvise with the props and see what evolves. “One thing that truly excites me is when you bring in a prop and you’re surprised by what happens,” the photographer explains of her process. “If I knew what the picture was going to look like, I wouldn’t be interested in taking it.”

Keep in mind, though, that less experienced dancers generally need more direction, so be prepared with a few ideas. According to Greenfield, asking them to jump is often a good way to start. Then, when something works, refine the movement.

Give the dancers a defined area to move in so they’ll be in the light, and show them the spot you marked. One of the reasons Greenfield manually pre-focuses is that she needs “an instantaneous shutter response. With autofocus,” she points out, “there is a delay between

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Although not based on a choreographed routine, these members of the Martha Graham Dance Company used a signature jump to create this group shot. The dancers and Greenfield timed it perfectly. This image was captured on Kodak Ektachrome 100 Plus EPP 6005 film.

pushing the shutter and the time it takes the camera to measure the distance to the subject and capture the moment.” And, she continues, “shoot single shot rather than burst mode. If I shot with a motor drive, which I never do, I would get some intervals of the movement, but it wouldn’t necessarily be that magic moment.” With continuous shooting, “you’re giving over your decisive moment to the camera and you won’t necessarily get the moment that’s most expressive.” Plus, most strobes can’t recycle fast enough to keep up with burst shooting.

She also cautions against photographing the “peak” movement, which can look static. Rather, try for the “split second before or a split second later that shows the movement in flux.” Greenfield’s images are enigmatic narratives with the dancers ascending or descending, fleeing or running towards something. In a sense, the photographer explains, “it makes the movement—and the image—appear dynamic.”

Greenfield’s latest book, *Lois Greenfield: Moving Still* (Chronicle Books/Thames & Hudson), is out this winter.