



air

lois greenfield's work levitates

time



A trio of dancers floats dreamlike in midair, skirts billowing and arms outstretched. Are they rising or falling? Caught in flight, a wraithlike dancer looks to be fleeing her reflection in a huge mirror. Or is the mirror about to swallow her? Defying gravity, a muscular, airborne dancer is frozen in space, hovering serenely. Or is he about to crash to the floor with a thud?

Welcome to the dramatically unconventional world of Lois Greenfield, where the rules of gravity, time, and space have been suspended in favor of what she calls her "desire to confound the viewer."

As she explains in a quiet corner of her busy Manhattan studio, "I like my photography to have a mystery to it. I want people to wonder, How did they—the dancers in my pictures—do that? However, I don't want viewers to solve the mystery; I just want them to be present and know this is a moment that really happened."

Greenfield's work is world-famous for its elegance and for the seemingly unattainable configurations she inspires dancers to achieve. Like airborne acrobats, they appear to be floating, leaping, even flying through

by robert kiener

space—weightless and frozen in time by Greenfield's keen eye and split-second exposures.

"I work with this rule of thumb," she explains. "If you understand what you're looking at, then it is boring." No one who encounters her work could ever call it that. Indeed, a *New York Times* review of Greenfield's photography noted, "Her best pictures are touched with the impossible." Another reviewer wrote, "Greenfield's work inspires us to reevaluate how we see the world, and movement, in particular."

For more than four decades New York-based Greenfield has won accolades as one of the world's best-known, most innovative dance photographers. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vogue*, *Esquire*, *Elle*, and many others. She's had exhibitions around the world, and her photographs are in collections as varied as Switzerland's Musee de L'Elysee and New York City's International Center of Photography.

Greenfield, 66, has produced three well-received books, "Breaking Bounds: The Dance Photography of Lois Greenfield" (1992), "Airborne: The New Dance Photography of Lois Greenfield" (1998), and her latest, "Lois Greenfield: Moving Still" (2015). *Vanity Fair*



called "Moving Still" "dazzling," and CNN gushed that it was "A photo book that dances before viewers' eyes." Her commercial work includes assignments for clients such as IBM, Disney, Sony, Rolex, and Seagram's.

Greenfield began her photography career in Boston in the 1970s as a photojournalist. She found news work unsatisfying. "I was more interested in taking a beautiful or interesting picture than one that merely illustrated a news story," she explains. She returned to her native New York where she began photographing dancers, either performing or in dress rehearsals, for the *Village Voice* and other publications. But she soon found the role of dance photographer too restricting.

"Someone complimented me for a picture I had shot of Mikhail Baryshnikov doing a beautiful 10-foot-high leap. But I was thinking, This picture isn't artistry; it is just a window on an event. He is a great dancer but it wasn't a great photo. It was merely a photo of a great dancer." She'd grown tired—and a little rebellious—of what she now describes as



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Lois Greenfield

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“merely capturing photos of someone else’s art form.” As she explains, “I had no interest in being just a handmaiden to the dance.”

A 1982 project photographing dancer David Parsons in her studio was Greenfield’s turning point. “It was an epiphany,” she remembers. “David is a brilliant dancer and suddenly he started throwing himself around and through the air in my studio. It was while photographing him improvising that I realized I wanted to shoot dancers independent of choreography. I took

the dancer out of the dance.”

Inspired, Greenfield sought to create a hybrid between dance and photography. She worked with strobe lighting, set at 1/2,000-second flash duration, to stop dancers mid-flight and preserve moments from improvised dance.

She was not only stopping time, but her photos were revealing what the naked eye cannot see.

She discovered she could best capture movement when dancers dressed in a flowing out-

fit or whipped fabric in the air as they moved across her small studio, a technique photographer Barbara Morgan had used decades earlier when she photographed famed dancer Martha Graham in a billowing skirt.

“The movement of the dancer is encoded in the arc of that fabric,” says Greenfield.

Greenfield’s brown eyes light up when she explains how important capturing just the right moment is. “It is everything,” she says. She confesses that she doesn’t try to shoot the peak moment (“that moment when

“Many people think my pictures are Photoshopped. Never! Ever!”



the dancer is in the most perfect Olympian form”) but aims to capture the instant just before or after the peak.

“That moment, and we are talking micro-seconds, is when the dancer starts relaxing,” she explains. “I have to anticipate that moment. If you wait until you see it, by the time you press the shutter it will be gone. The way I shoot is that I feel instinctively that the next split second is going to be something interesting.” Greenfield quickly adds, “But I can’t tell you what it is.”

To get the picture she desires, Greenfield instructs dancers to “leave their choreography at the studio door.” She explains, “I’m less interested in shooting choreography. I don’t want my pictures to simply replicate something you could see sitting in a theater audience.” She wants dancers to look relaxed,

graceful but with a purpose to their actions. “Other dance photographers seem to want to show how strong and powerful dancers are. I am after the opposite, showing them floating or being buffeted by invisible forces.”

Her images are a result of collaboration with her models. “Most of my work comes from spontaneous combustion with the dancers,” she says. “I have no preconceived notions and every shoot is like getting into a car without a road map. I leave it to the dancer to improvise because I want to capture something that emanates from them.”

A typical studio session consists of Greenfield asking dancers to repeat their moves again and again as she tries to capture what she calls “a miraculous moment.” As she explains with a wry smile, “I take one picture, then wind my camera and say, ‘Can you do that again?’”

Because timing is so important to Greenfield’s results, she uses Broncolor electronic strobes set at 1,2000 second flash duration and relies on a 1980s Hasselblad 500C/M set to 1/250-second shutter speed with a Leaf Aptus 75 digital back. Surprisingly, she never uses a motor drive (“I don’t even own one!”) and advises students in her workshops not to use them. “If you use a continuous mode you are giving over your decisive moments to the camera,” she explains. “The camera isn’t talented and can’t take the picture for you.”

Greenfield has adopted digital partly because it saves her from loading film and makes it easier to show her models on a monitor what she’s looking for. But she is adamant about never manipulating her photos. “Many people think my pictures are Photoshopped,” she says. “Never! Ever! What you see in my photographs is exactly what I shot through my lens.” Even photographer Richard Avedon once asked if Greenfield’s photos were the result of combining negatives. “So many people think I manipulate my pictures,” she says. “But I don’t even know how to use Photoshop.”

Commercial clients such as Raymond Weil, Rémy Martin, and JVC Jazz Festival have commissioned Greenfield to create campaigns and signature images featuring her unique style. Others use her stock images. Her work has also been licensed for merchandise such as calendars, notebooks, note cards, and umbrellas.

Because she gets a thrill out of “seeing people accomplish something they think they cannot do,” she holds several two-day photo workshops a year in her studio. Attendees use Greenfield’s equipment and take turns photographing professional dancers under her guidance.

Flipping through Lois Greenfield’s latest book, looking at page after page of startlingly unique pictures, it’s obvious she’s fulfilled her desire to make photographs that, as she once wrote, “tap into the unconscious rather than tell a story ... and defy logic.” •

loisgreenfield.com

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