

Subtleties of Expression, *PHOTO TECHNIQUE MAGAZINE*

A Conversation with Lois Greenfield by Bree Lamb

Lois Greenfield is a New York City-based photographer whose work focuses on capturing human movement in its most elegant and evocative forms. To label her a “dance photographer” is to overlook her insight and investigation into the subtleties of such powerful modes of expression. With over 25 years of experience in personal and commercial work, it is her expertise coupled with her insatiable curiosity that continues to be the driving force behind her success.



Wu-Kang Chen, *Dust*, BALLET TECH

Bree Lamb: I’ve read that you studied anthropology in college and I found this to be really fitting given your photographic interests. The human need for music and movement is a deep one yet often difficult to verbalize. Do you think your anthropological studies influenced your interests and techniques, if so how?

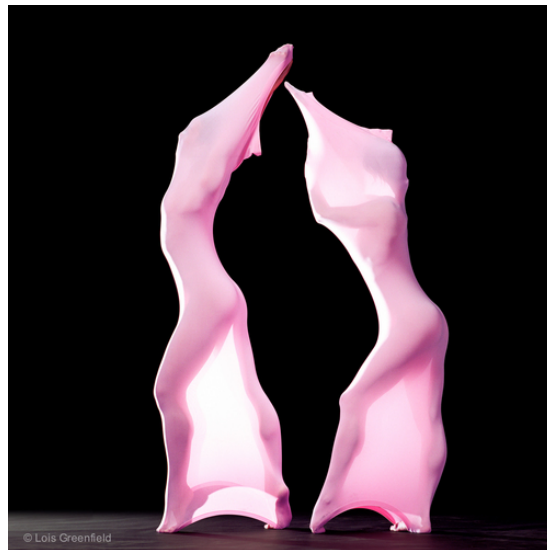
Lois Greenfield: I never saw a connection between anthropology and my dance photography until I realized that my relationship to photographing dance is that of an outsider. The anthropologist enters another culture not to become a part of it but to analyze it. I am looking at dance from another perspective, that of a photographer. I am translating their movements from the stage to the camera, I’m not looking at dance the way it was intended to be seen.

My goal is not to represent dancers but to collaborate with them outside the constraints of choreography. Freed from the circumscribed steps in a dance, the dancers I work with improvise, knowing that I will pick up moments that are expressive, even though not part of a dance.

BL: I can't help but be reminded of Eadweard Muybridge's human locomotion images. Do you ever look at your work as scientific studies as you discover the subtleties of human movement that our eye often cannot see?

LG: Unlike Muybridge's studies I am not looking for an answer or to analyze the mechanics of a jump. But like him, I am interested in moments beneath the threshold of perception, moments only recordable by camera. The fact that so many of my dancers are portrayed floating would make it a different kind of study, as floating is effortless, a non-action. These moments make the dancers look angelic.

I am interested in capturing the evocative nature of movement, not the analysis of it. As to the role of science in my photos, gravity, or rather the absence of it, is usually a theme in my images.



Alexandra Apjarova, Tatyana Brikulskaya

BL: How does your training as a documentary photographer and having to respond, adjust and compose on the spot translate in the studio capturing movement of dancers?

LG: In both situations the photographer has to work very quickly. A photojournalist has to have quick reflexes to snap the right confluence of moment, lighting and composition. As a studio photographer, I determine the lighting in conjunction with what the dancer is going to do. I don't shoot dances, rather I work on an individual moment that may or may not come from choreography. I refine that moment, asking the dancer to repeat the movements a few times. As to the question of composition, I am very particular about both the shapes and the relationship between the dancer's forms, as well as the details of their gesture.

When I began working in a square format years ago, I started looking for a compositional strategy that involved the inclusion of the negative's border as a narrative partner. As to the decisive moment, since I am photographing split seconds of movement, 1/2000 of a second to be exact, I have to anticipate what the movement will look like and press the shutter before it

happens. If I wait to see the moment, I will have missed it. The documentary photographer has the luxury of seeing the shot before deciding to click the shutter.

BL: Your ability to anticipate movement and click the shutter at the precise moment continues to distinguish your work in this field of photography. What is your shooting pace? Can you sense when you've "gotten" the shots and is there a definitive end to each session?

LG: I have had three studios since the 1980's, two of them had 20 foot cycloramas with a soft floor (grey 'Marley' or wood) so the dancers could really move, not just pose. I was shooting film until 2003, so I never really knew what I was shooting until I saw the contact sheets. But I did have a good sense of whether or not I got something exciting. The best part about looking at the contact sheets was finding wonderful surprises I wasn't aware of while shooting. In any event, although I have never worked with a dancer who has told me they are tired, there is an arc of energy and inspiration to every series I shoot. At first the dancers are very spontaneous, but after 10 or so tries the shot starts to look dead, so I just move on to another idea.

BL: How important is pre-visualization for a series, especially when working on a commercial assignment? What is your collaboration with art directors?

LG: Most commercial assignments start with a layout from an art director. Often, however, the art director will tell me the concept they are trying to achieve and leave the rest to me. Of course we do a casting session to choose the models who can give the client the 'look' they want as well as what I need to make the shot. During the shoot I collaborate with the art director on the poses, lighting etc., as the point is not only to make a beautiful photo but to convey their message about the product they are selling.



FANG-YI SHEU

BL: How does your workflow change when switching from personal projects to commercial assignments?

LG: On my personal projects I don't usually start off with a specific intention, I am more like a careening vehicle driving down the road, or off the road, trying new ideas with props or lighting as well as movement. Where we end up is anybody's guess! On a commercial project almost every detail is decided in advance or on the set. The models and wardrobe are given the most attention as the viewer is supposed to identify with or aspire to look like the people in the ad.

BL: Can you tell us about your studio setup? What equipment do you use?

LG: I use Broncolor strobes and a Leaf Aptus 75 digital back on my 500cm Hasselblad. My camera has no autowinder or autofocus!

BL: How is the atmosphere different when shooting on various locations? Is the setup extensive?

LG: All my set-ups are simple, whether on location or in my studio.

BL: How do your lighting and photographic choices emphasize the "expressive potential of movement" I have heard you refer to?

LG: I usually prefer a sculptural lighting for the dancers. The expressiveness comes from the dancers' gestures and facial expressions which give a purpose to their movements, a purpose the viewer may not be privy to, yet we know it's there. I don't often shoot the "peak moments," as I find other moments have more narrative potential.

BL: Can you describe your process for creating images that include several people who are elevated and at varying angles to each other? Is it all done in camera or are there any post-processing techniques that you employ?

LG: I NEVER use post-processing to make group shots or to reconfigure the dancers within the frame. The dancers are simply jumping, some higher and perhaps some lower, some in front and some behind. And yes, they might be on different angles to each other.

BL: How do you keep your work fresh and innovative?

LG: That's a good question. It's both easy and hard to do. Easy because I always have new ideas, hard because when an artist creates a signature style, it's often hard to not work in that style. Working with different kinds of dancers can bring fresh energy and inspiration. And giving oneself constraints can often catapult an artist to the next level.

BL: What do you emphasize to your students when teaching workshops?

LG: Funny you ask that, I am currently on my way back from Istanbul where I taught a weeklong course at Robert College, a very well known high school for exceptional students. The first thing I wanted to convey to them was that you don't have to "know" what you are doing before you start. Inspiration can come at any time during a shoot, usually when you are not worrying about it.

I am more into creative process than creative product. If I knew what the image looked like before I took it, I would end up with far less interesting images than I do. My process of discovery as I shoot leads to photographs that are beyond my imagination.

www.LoisGreenfield.com