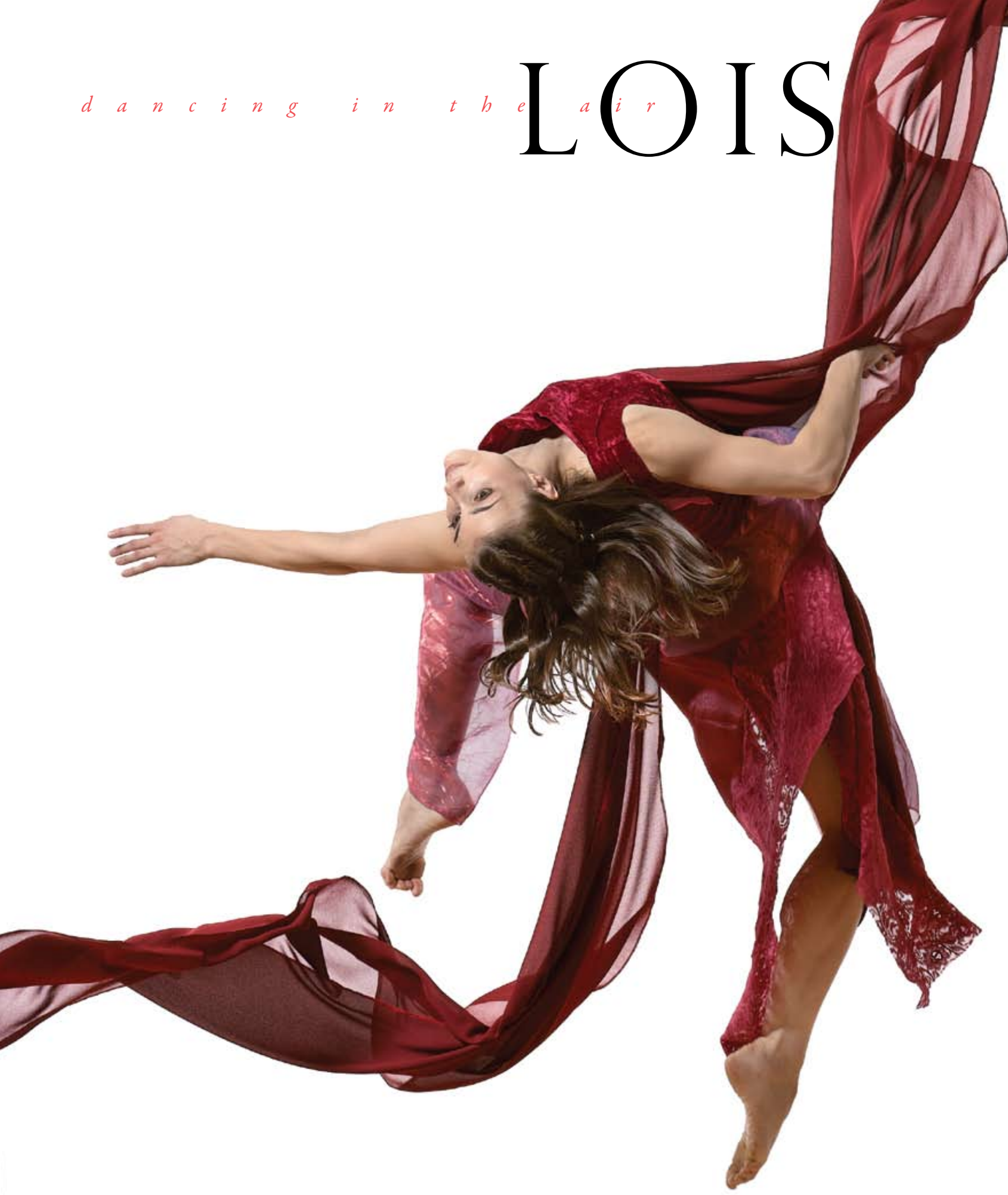


d a n c i n g i n t h e a i r

LOIS GREENFIELD

b y l i n d a l . m a y



“The inspiration for my work is dance, or the exploration of movement’s expressive potential, but I rarely photograph actual dances,” says Lois Greenfield, who has been doing photography since the 1970s. Never formally trained, Lois instead majored in anthropology and filmmaking at Brandeis University near Boston—discovering photography through community service projects she did during the summers. When she began shooting for many of Boston’s counterculture newspapers in the 1970s, capturing everything from maximum-security prisons to rock concerts and dance performances, Lois discovered that she liked photographing dancers, but not on location in such uncontrollable circumstances. In 1982, she opened her own studio and effectively changed her style of shooting dance.

Lois is the perfect example of a photographer following her own passion and dream who didn’t worry whether or not there was a niche for her unusual images. Lois shares, “This journey started back in the 70s when I was assigned to cover dance rehearsals for a newspaper for which I was working. I got frustrated with the limitations of shooting in theaters because I wanted more control of the lighting and the dancers’ movements. My goal was to create unique and exciting photographs that transcended their usefulness as documents of the dance. That led me to collaborate with the dancers in experimental and improvisational ways. Then, as now, my interest in photography is not to capture an image I see, or even have in my mind, but to discover something beyond my imagination.”

Lois continues, “I had no particular connection with dance, but I did enjoy shooting dancers more than being a photojournalist.

However, as time went on, I became less and less interested in merely documenting choreography and more fascinated with the dancers’ bodies as subjects for my own aesthetic preoccupations. In addition, I wanted to reveal a dynamic interaction between the mediums of photography and dance.”

Although New York City photographer Lois Greenfield’s subject matter—dancers in motion—may seem restrictive, the applications for these surreal images are broad and limitless. Commercial clients use her stunning imagery to illustrate ads or drive home a particular concept. Lois comments, “Many of my images are used for stock. People from all over the world visit my website. They may find an image

they can use to illustrate a concept, such as balance, timing or reliability. My images are rarely used to illustrate dance. Rather, my images of dance are used metaphorically to illustrate different concepts.”

Some of her numerous commercial accounts include Adidas, Cutty Sark, Disney, Epson, Foot Locker, Hanes, IBM, Netscape, Pepsi and many others. Her photographs have graced the covers and pages of many publications, including *American Photographer*, *Dance Magazine*, *Elle*, *GQ*, *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. Her work has also been exhibited in the International Center of Photography in New York City, the French Foundation of Photography in Lyon, France and the Southeast Museum of Photography at





Daytona Beach, FL, which commissioned a retrospective of her work in 2006 that is still touring. She has also published two monographs, *Breaking Bounds* (Thames & Hudson, 1992) and *Airborne* (Thames & Hudson, 1998). Her outstanding images have won many awards and honors.

Lois has taught numerous workshops and seminars through the years around the globe, including the Santa Fe Workshops and Tuscany Photo Workshops, along with workshops in Australia and Asia.

Nowadays, she prefers holding small workshops in her New York City studio, where students learn her method of lighting and photographing dancers. One of the methods seen consistently in her work is her ability to make her dancers into living monuments. Lois says, "My method allows me to stop action at a $\frac{1}{2000}$ of a second, so viewers get to see something that cannot be seen with the naked eye. Our eyes see the continuation of movement but we never see that split second stopped. So, in my images, everybody appears as solid as sculpture. I always tell my dancers to remain relaxed. I don't like them to betray the effort that goes into their movements, but I prefer a gentle demeanor, as though these feats are the most natural thing for them to do."

Lois does not need to advertise or promote vigorously because, 25 years after crafting her unique point of view, she is well established and there is a high demand for her work. Lois explains, "When clients are buying strictly dance photographs, usually they are looking for a particular dancer or dance. My images are fantasies. My subjects appear to be doing impossible things, without the aid of Photoshop, I might add. They may look like angels, or like they are floating or flying through space." Lois continues, "Sometimes, clients like a particular shot and will ask me to duplicate the movement. I can't copy my own work because each image is a unique, spontaneous moment. Even the dancers are not able to recreate the movement they did in a specific photograph, and no two frames will be alike even at the same shoot."

Back in the 80s, Lois bought her first Hasselblad 503CW square format film camera and she's still using that same model today, but instead using a digital Leaf back in place of film. Her two favorite lenses are the 100mm and 120mm focal lengths. Lois says she chose the Leaf back because there is no shutter delay and it renders such beautiful tones when images are converted to black and white.



“I just click the shutter in anticipation of the moment when all the elements in the photograph coalesce.”



Proper lighting is crucial to Lois' work because her subjects are in a state of constant movement as she shoots away. That's why she prefers working in her studio where she has much greater control over movements and the lighting. Lois has since had to figure out a way to light her moving subjects over a wide area. To do so, she sets up her basic lighting pattern to illuminate a 20x20-foot area, even though the dancers are asked to stay near a pre-focused-upon mark. Every session has customized lighting. She uses Broncolor strobes and power packs because she can dial the flash duration down to a $\frac{1}{2000}$ of a second, which produces crisp, sharp action shots. "Even shooting at $\frac{1}{500}$ of a second shutter speed I get motion blur. It's really the strobe that determines the exposure, not the camera," Lois explains.

During 25 years of experimenting, Lois and her creative partner, Jack Deaso, have devised the perfect lighting scheme. They start with a three-quarters light as the key, a sidelight parallel to the dancers and background lights—creating a directional approach. Sometimes the key light ends up behind and above the dancers, casting light over their shoulders and throwing them a bit into shadow. One of their favorite lights is the Broncolor Satellite Soft.

"Generally, we set up the lights in a certain way and then see how a given moment will look in that light. Once I've chosen the moments I want to shoot, we tweak the lights or re-orient the dancers' positions to get the sculptural lighting effect I want. Sometimes I may catch a dancer going out of the light because I want a dark, shadowy effect. My goal is not to light them evenly, but to find a poetic mood and emotional resonance through the lighting. Over the years, I have changed and improved my approach and now I light a bit more from behind and above," Lois says.

Although Lois prefers to shoot in the controlled atmosphere of her studio, occasionally she goes on location. One of her most challenging adventures was a dance performance she collaborated on with the Australian Dance Theater for their world tour, titled "Held," a dance inspired by her photography, in which she photographed parts of the live performance from the stage.

"It was a thrilling experience because I never imagined myself on stage or touring with a dance company," Lois says. "I shot 300 images of the performance each night. I was connected to the camera by a cable, but I could freely move about on stage. My images,



all of which were projected unedited, were instantly transmitted to two huge screens so the audience could see them juxtaposed to the live action. I don't think it had been done before, so it was a unique concept. Instead of using my Hasselblad, I used a 35mm DSLR system, which they provided. We used big banks of four Broncolor strobe lights each on the sides of the stage to provide not only enough light but the clarity to stop the action."

For Lois, catching the subjects at just the right instant as they are flying about in midair is the key to getting such great action shots, a feat which seems to come naturally to this New York City image-maker. "Anticipating the right moments is instinctive for me. I just sort of know which ones to single out. The moments I choose may not be what anyone else would pick. I don't like peak moments, because those are too static. I don't like anything that looks posed. I may shoot moments when the dancers are coming down or going up. I just click the shutter in anticipation of the moment when all the elements in the photograph coalesce. My subjects appear to be in their own little worlds. To me, they look like classical sculptures or baroque art—but definitely free and natural. Sometimes, a narrative can be imposed on the scene, maybe the dancers are fleeing or being tossed around by an unseen wind," Lois says.

Talking about her newest series, "Celestial Bodies/Infernal Souls," Lois explains, "Recently, I have returned to my early fascination with reflective materials and their ability to distort reality. One of the themes of this exploration is the dialogue between what the camera sees and what the mirror represents. These reflections offer multiple and even conflicting perspectives nestled within the composition. A single point of view is replaced by a profusion of possibilities. The dancers reveal themselves as poetic figures, playing out a mythic and eternal drama."

Looking to the future, Lois plans to complete her third book of dance images. Her work is ever-evolving—she continues to improve her craft, always looking for a different direction or approach. Lois has also begun another collaboration with a dance company, which will involve film and still photography. Although she enjoys shooting still photography, filmmaking was one of her early interests so she's anxious to get back into that medium again and experiment.

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