

ACADEMY

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Lois
Greenfield

Documents of the Imagination

LOIS GREENFIELD



Unlike most dance photographers, I am less interested in capturing peak moments from a dance, and totally fascinated by allowing the dancers in front of my camera to explore how their bodies move outside the constraints of choreography.

I came to dance from photojournalism. After I graduated from college I went straight into photojournalism, covering the heady events of the 1970's, from riots to rock stars.

In my early twenties I aspired to shoot for National Geographic, as I had studied anthropology in college. The newspapers and magazines I worked for also asked me to cover dance performances and dress rehearsals. I soon realized that I preferred photographing lyrical moments that didn't have to be a literal document of reality.

I worked for the Village Voice from the mid 70's to the mid 90's where my photographs appeared alongside reviews by dance critic Deborah Jowitt.



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I wanted to work with the dancers outside the constraints of performance, either transposing the choreographed dances to a studio with my own lighting set up, or asking them to improvise for the camera. I put down a marley floor so the dancers could leap and jump without fear of injury. At that time, I also stopped shooting dress rehearsals and live performance.

Instead of shooting with the Canon SLR that I used for my performance work, I experimented with a Hasselblad medium-format camera with black & white film. Shooting with the Hasselblad confined my frame to a square with a black border, which created unusual entrances and exits for the dancers, sometimes even cropping out parts of their bodies from the composition!

Shooting with Broncolor strobes and Grafit power packs that could freeze 1/2000th of a second, the results were startling: dancers caught in seemingly impossible positions. The human eye can't register split seconds of movement, but the photo can capture what the naked eye can't see. The photographs exuded both the athleticism and expressive potential of movement.

This initial exploration in my studio yielded a body of work featured in my first two monographs: *Breaking Bounds*, 1992 (Chronicle Books, USA; Thames & Hudson, UK, JICC, Japan) and *Airborne*, 1998 (Chronicle Books, USA).

To this day, I still shoot with the manual Hasselblad 500 CM camera body (my camera shutter speed is always set at 1/250th of a second, and my f-stop is typically set to F11) - but since 2000, I have been using a Hasselblad digital back.

"I wanted to work with the Dancers outside the constraints of performance"





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In transitioning from shooting with black & white film to digital and in color, I found myself further exploring the use of mirrors within my photographs. I have always been drawn to photographing reflections in mirrors since my beginnings as a photojournalist and travel photographer in the 1970s. I love the fact that photographing reflective surfaces expands the camera's perspective and incorporates otherwise off-screen elements within the frame.

As much as I seek to control all the variables within my photos, I am fascinated by the fact that mirrored surfaces not only offer multiple perspectives within the frame, but that these reflections are completely out of my control.

I think the most unusual part of my method is that I shoot one photo at a time – winding the camera between each shot, as I would advance film, even though I now shoot digital. I don't have any of the functions for continuous action on my camera- and I don't want any!

I want to take my own "decisive moment" and not let the camera decide! I never look through the viewfinder. If I did, I would be waiting for the dancers to enter the frame, and by then the desired moment would be gone.

Because my camera's body is fully manual, there is no autofocus feature. I have to pre-focus the camera and give the dancers a mark on the floor (a piece of tape with an X on it). I do not look through the camera; I only look at the dancers and use my instincts to catch an unusual moment. An assistant makes sure the dancer is always on the mark on the floor, as well as operating a fan if needed- and of course there is another assistant watching the monitor to make sure the shots are in focus.

"I do not look through the camera; I only look at the dancers & use my instincts to catch an unusual moment"





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We always zoom in on the faces, as the expression of the dancer is as important as his or her movements! I don't want the dancer to look at the camera, but to look elsewhere, and with a soft intention to their gaze.

I tend to choose a different instant than other dance photographers- I like moments that either have happened or are about to happen - never the "peak moment".

My newest body of work, featured in my latest monograph, "Lois Greenfield: Moving Still" 2015 (Chronicle Books, USA; Thames & Hudson, UK), is set against a dark background with one overhead beauty dish - in this series, the dancer improvises with movement and props under the illumination of one light.

I give very little direction because I want to capture the uniqueness of each dancer. I work with dancers from many different companies - such as Martha Graham, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and American Ballet Theatre, to name a few. I give the dancers many props to play with and encourage them to showcase a different persona in each photo.

I love teaching workshops for photographers of all levels in my NYC studio. Both the beginners, as well as the professionals, learn to grow in their abilities to direct the dancers, experiment with different lighting scenarios, and the use of props. Spotting the elusive moment of capture, they see how easy beautiful dance photography can be!

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