

Moments Beneath the Threshold of Perception

Lois Greenfield

Unlimited by the structure of language, photography is able to transcend words and offer new ways of seeing, inviting the viewer to consider what happened just before, or after, a camera's click.

I have always felt that photography has an inherent visual syntax that is analogous to language. In other words, the way we see the world through photographs is structured not only by our ability to describe a photo in words but also by the conventions of photographic representation. All too often, the photographer's individual approach to image-making is hijacked by conventionally accepted photographic aesthetics; that is, how things "should" look.

At the sight of a beautiful landscape, for example, people often say with delight, "Now that's a great picture!" A photographed image often becomes the ideal upon which reality is appreciated. The experience of an event is heightened if it matches a preconceived image.

Years ago, in Bali, I was driving around the countryside, and despite the beautiful, terraced rice paddies before my eyes, I was not satisfied with the views until we finally found the one that was pictured on a postcard I had seen!

One could speculate on which language communicates better—the verbal or the pictorial. If we're to believe the adage "a picture is worth a thousand words," then the universal art of photography trumps the written or spoken word any day.

In many ways, the photographer can say more in a photo because she is not limited by the verbal structure of language. But I actually appreciate photography more for its ability to transcend words rather than to replace them. Isn't deeming something "indescribable" often the highest praise?

Since the goal of my photography is to create imagery that confounds and confuses the viewer, I am dealing more in the poetics of language than in its literalness. I prefer that my photographs tap into the unconscious rather than tell a story. I want my images to defy logic, or as Salvador Dalí wrote, I strive to "systematize confusion and discredit reality." There is no solution to my photographs; they are meant to frame contradictions, present the impossible, and find a coherence within chaos.

I've spent the last thirty-five years of my photographic career investigating movement and its expressive potential. My inspiration has always been photography's ability to stop time and reveal what the naked eye cannot see. What motivates my work is exploring the potential of a moment that I can only begin to imagine. What intrigues me is making photographs that seem impossible but that the viewer knows, or suspects, really happened. I can't depict the moments before or after the camera's click, but I invite the viewer to consider them.

The ostensible subject of my photographs may be movement, but the subtext is time. Dancers illustrate the passage of time, giving it substance and materiality. In my photographs, time is stopped, a split second becomes an eternity, and an ephemeral moment is solid as sculpture.

A new visual syntax for photographing dancers came to me by happy accident in the early 1980s. I was shooting with a square-format

Lois Greenfield (b. 1949) is famous for her ability to capture the human form in motion as a compositional element. Her work is in permanent collections worldwide, and she has lectured and conducted workshops for many years. Her books include *Breaking Bounds* (1992) and *Airborne* (1998). She is currently working on two new collaborations: *Projected*, an interdisciplinary performance with the Argentinean choreographer and dancer Dario Vaccaro, and *The 18th Parallel*, a film exploring the connection between dance and prayer in indigenous cultures around the world with award-winning filmmaker Jodi Kaplan.

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camera and long lens for the first time. I invited dancers to ignore the constraints of choreography and improvise for my camera. I was drawn to those high-risk, nonrepeatable moments that are not plucked from a continuum. They exist only as isolated instants: they are uniquely photographic events.

The results of those early experiments appeared surreal, as though the dancers were glued together and frozen in impossible configurations. Simple questions about the images defied ready answers: "How did the dancers get in that position?" "Where are they coming from and how will they land?" The more incomprehensible the picture looked, the more successful it was in my eyes. All my pictures are taken as single image, in-camera photographs. I never recombine or rearrange the figures within my images. Their veracity as documents gives the photographs their mystery, and the surrealism of the imagery comes from the fact that our brains don't register split seconds of movement. These moments are beneath the threshold of perception.



I see the collaboration as not only between the dancers and myself but between the two media. Underlying the photogenic nature of the subject matter, there is a dynamic tension between dance and photography. I exploit photography's ability to fragment time and fracture space, translating 360 degrees into a two-dimensional image. We know that nothing in the real world can exist in two dimensions, yet photographs seduce us into believing they are valid representations of reality.

Photography's ability to be simultaneously a document and an expression of the imagination makes it an extraordinary medium. With no grammatical rules to guide the viewer's cognitive path, photography and all visual arts can, and should, continually offer new ways of seeing.

New York City



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