



Interview with the Artist

Matthew Kunkelman

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MK Your photographs reveal your methods and intentions...

BD My methods are arbitrary...however, I work in a very deliberate manner. I understand that my discipline requires extensive experience and patience with many sciences and derivatives of traditional art.

MK You often add the photogram to the final image. Is the photogram a kind of mark that grows out of your desire for control and the closed space of the studio?

BD The photogram creates a foundation for its own rhythm. If one studies what goes on or rather breaks down the image graphically and geometrically, then they may find a visual tension. I am suggesting that photography is print-making. In a way I am promoting handmade objects as a more valuable object than something with more technological derivatives.

MK What exactly informs or inspires your work?

BD Geometry is important to composition. My shyness also gives me a place to investigate. When mixed, these elements allow me to break down any object into planes, spheres, circles, and lines. I design each image around a specific event or episode...one being a cocked gun in my chest.

MK I feel like you want to be dislocating, mysterious; you use a large amount of black space but the studio is a constant. My question is that many of your photographs are missing parts of bodies.

BD Yes, well it's symbolic. i wanted to find a way of shooting the nude without showing one. The shape is very suggestive and the line is important. I prefer black space but will use background as a foundation for provocation.

MK What kind of relationship do you have with your models? Or more specifically, we were talking about photography being therapeutic for you, you yourself having to deal with a certain amount of physical pain. And I am curious that one of your models had leukemia. Does this knowledge come into play when you envision the shots? What added dimensions does she bring to your personal expression?

BD There is something in her...a strength. Both of us have a pain, a pain you can't see.

MK But you have chosen to work in a visual field. Many of your images have this half there, half hidden appearance. You talk about the image, I know the way things look are very important to you. You often describe your process and I realise there are many stages to creation. It is complicated. Does this reflect the content in an image?

BD It is going to look simplistic. The majority of people aren't making challenging images. A photo has got to be visually interesting. It's a necessity for me to like an image. It must have something to offer visually. I think people do an injustice when concept supersedes visual experience. The image must be conceptually and visually interesting to be successful. It's a total package.

MK You said you were more interested in the handmade objects.

BD The silver print is a handmade object one can experience. To experience something is what's important. When I asked Naomi Rosenblum where she thought photography was going her answer was digital. She added that many people will continue to work in the traditional method though.

MK Is there any fear that what's new in photography will be what's new in mechanics, not artistic vision. Your work may be outdated?

BD The fact that it will be dated is actually a beneficial thing. I think the silver print will be more of a time honored tradition. When something is done digitally it is quicker, more effective, better for the environment, therefore healthier, and you don't have to spend all day in the darkroom. Some people say it's just another tool in the creative process like the camera, but...would you rather receive a form letter or a handwritten one? Which is more personal and arduous? The experience will be very different.

MK You've said something quite interesting. You said you like to change the structure or appearance of the human body. I think that's happening a lot in your work. Maybe you

could talk about the “Untitled” piece with the pale face and feet.

BD I am very dependent on that model and image. The image has been in my head for two years. I was looking for someone with her bold features and expressive face. For this shot I need Jennifer to close her eyes. I didn't want the viewer to look into her eyes. The eyes help to define a picture, to complete it and if they are closed it helps to create a dream state even a state of mortality. I wanted to dislocate certain parts of the body, to bring together foreign elements in one shot. The appropriation of disproportionate objects sharing the same space at different scales. I think photography is a compliment to surrealism. The photograph is somewhere between painting and reality.

I want to make images that reflect pain without being depressing or full of angst. It's a precarious path. Many of my images are established to be provocative in the context of dislocation.

MK Does the lighting play a large role in how you set up the backgrounds?

BD My backgrounds in Prague don't share much similarity to the backgrounds here. I use background as a form of separation. I am not trying to be so careful and sterile about it because I think you lose an edge that way. Sometimes the more you learn about technique the worse you become. Right now I have enough technical education and I don't choose to become more technical. It is a way to avoid rust. I am concentrating mostly on the image!

The interpretation of classical beauty...what is considered beautiful? I am not going to try and make form perfect because there is no perfect form. I accept things and work within them to realize what lies underneath. The body is of primary importance. I see it in parts especially in the hands, the head, and the feet. Twenty five percent of the bones are in the feet and that is a large percent of our structure. The hands are important as symbols of manual labour. This might get back to the blue-collar relationship I feel I have with photography. The head is where the thoughts are born and the feet transport us. Getting back to the hands...maybe it is because I grew up in an Italian family, the hands are very valuable to the Italians in speech process. I see these elements as the most important and equally vulnerable parts of the human body.

MK From what you've said should I assume that your work is not informed by theory or criticism?

BD I am worried about learning too much theory. I think it's more technique. I'd like to find what exists inside myself. I want to rely on myself. So theory...much of my work is informed from personal experience. Like many artists. Kahlo's work is emotional and energetic. I like the idea of energising an image more than “expressing” one, because self expression can be too personal and therefore stale. I share my birthday with her and feel some very loose bond. I feel as if I know her, the pain she felt, the bus accident, her sentence to physical depression. I think she was able to pull individual experience and meaning onto to the canvas. She made a lot of self portraits and still lifes. I see the still life as a way to create a concept, an idea, I don't want my to become too consistent. I think if there is a diegesis in my work it's found in the negative space as much as the subject matter. Many of the objects isolated in the fields of black create a quality of both impression and recession. Of course I have my visual and literary heroes but I don't look towards them for inspiration as much as understanding.

MK Your work does create a feeling of fantasy...

BD I have no social or political agenda. I don't use the work to communicate that way. Everything photographed eventually becomes an object. If I photograph a body with propping support...eventually all things photographed become object on a two dimensional surface. The body can't move or speak and is philosophically flattened into one space with those inanimate objects with which it is composed.

MK You have many portraits, and can you explain the double self portrait?

BD This self portrait is one of the first images I made after arriving in my Prague studio in Opatov. It was difficult to do many of the little things- shopping, communicating, meeting people, travelling, etc. until I learned Czech and things began to open up. I even taught American Photo History in Czech to Czech students for the University of Usti Nad Labem. Anyway this image grew out my desire not to be alone or secluded. I am creating a front of what I wish I could be in all situations. I printed it dark and bleached the eyes so they would stand and stare directly in confrontation with the viewer. For me this is a very important image.

MK In another self portrait you seem to be standing behind a door, the view is reversed, it's not you who is directing the gaze, it's the audience. The horizontal slat is nearly looking back through the camera.

BD The visual tension with the closed door, again a simple image but it has the element of fantasy. When you see a door you wonder what's behind it. It's a separation from another world perhaps. There is mystery with a door...symbolism of duality.

MK Many of your images are fractured female bodies as well. Does that interpretation worry you?

BD I am sincerely not looking to offend anyone. I have no political or social agenda, but I have opened myself up to misinterpretation. You have to understand that many of these images are aggressive only in lighting sometimes and composition, not always concept. It's more about line and form. I am trying to create visual texture and tension as in the painted radiator with the nude headless form. The face creates conflict...it brings with it the possibility of many expressions. Without it you are forced to look at the line and there is very little left. When it comes to figurative work, personality is tertiary, pose secondary, and lighting primary.

MK I am struck by the amount of work and time it must take to set up the elements of these compositions. You're nearly creating a piece of art more consuming than the photograph.

BD Yes, the exposure is the easiest part and everything else takes hours. It's like building a model. I want it to appear effortless though. I want to make it accessible.

MK many times you've alluded to physical ailments, however you have yet to actually say what is wrong with you...

BD I have a paralyzed vocal chord, tinitus, chronic fatigue from a car accident, plantar fasciitis, and piriformis syndrome.

MK Technically what did you pick up from Prague?

BD Technically it was difficult to work there because of the poor materials. The work I witnessed was often strong but just as often technically poor. I learned I didn't need technology to create images. I see a lot of photographers talking about lights and name brands but in Prague there was no distinction. For example you had light, but what you did with it was the critical difference. You don't need technology to create good images.

I wrote in my journal that "good work comes from good minds and inferior work comes from good cameras."

MK Can you expand upon the fantasy at play in your work?

BD I am concerned with scale and ratio. I isolate figures in black space which was, I guess, the way I felt when I was living in Prague. I lived in a 1950's style Communist housing project. It was a huge inorganic black and grey spot in the city...it was kind of an existential experience. Physically I am engaging the fantasy and my health problems by dislocating parts of the body and attempting a reinterpretation of accepted traditional notion of the body.

MK Lastly do your work following a tradition?

BD Self portraits are very traditional. Kahlo had more physical pain than I ever hope to know. She is the perfect marriage of traditional and experimental work. Whatever Frida Kahlo is bound by...whatever tradition she comes from...I think that is where I might fit. I don't know exactly where her paintings fit but that would be a good place to investigate my work.