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whitehot | March 2009, Daniel Gordon Interview



Photos by Daniel Gordon are at Groeflin Maag Galerie in Zurich.

Brad Phillips - Hi Danny. Daniel? You just opened a show at Groeflin Maag Galerie in Zurich. I know you usually take a while to work on a single body of work - so what's this body of work about?

Daniel Gordon - Hey Brad. Yeah Danny is okay. It's funny, we've never met in person, but I've seen a lot of your work in the flesh and we've definitely spent time in some of the same places with the same people--I'm thinking Zurich, Claudia and Davia etc. We've probably been in the same room together at some point and just not known it, so I hope we get a chance to hang out next time you're in New York... Anyway, yes, I just opened a show at Groeflin Maag Galerie in Zurich, and I also made an artist book with Onestar press to accompany the exhibition. Both the book and the show are titled Portrait Studio--I'm really psyched about how they turned out. The truth is that with my new pictures, I had no real direction until I started making work. So I was in the middle of the project when I began to see the threads of what "The Portrait Studio" could be.

In other words, this project didn't start as an idea, the idea came after I had started. I think that's why it took me a while to finish. Initially I saw an artist/muse relationship emerging in the way I was approaching my "subjects" in the studio. Eventually, I started researching that element, taking more direct inspiration from historical relationships that have had that dynamic. I think Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe are a good example of this. Another one is Dr. Frankenstein-who's "practice" is similar to mine when creating his monster: slamming together body parts to create a new being. I became aware that how I put these pictures together drastically influences what kind of artist/muse relationship, or story would be told, from horror to exploitation to love and beauty. I tried to combine and complicate those themes.

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BP – You've definitely managed to connect horror to beauty in these works. There is something both scary and tender in many of the pictures. In a way it relates to your earlier photographs where you were 'flying' - I felt immediately scared for you, and there was an element of horror in wondering just how you were going to survive the jump. But at the same time they were tender and beautiful, just you in your long underwear soaring through nature. Are the new works a permanent move away from 'straight photography'? Do you think that in making these sort of collaged works that you've closed a door in your practice? And on a technical note, are these pictures spliced together manually or digitally? I really have to say that when I saw these works in person in Zurich, I felt confident that they were something I had never seen before, something brand new and fully formed. It's funny to me how fudging with our sense of dimensionality can become very unnerving.

DG - Mmmm. Well, there's a lot of questions there. Let me first say that I'm glad you brought up my flying pictures, because as you touched on, I think they relate to what I'm doing now. I believe that the art of photography has to do with making ordinary moments extraordinary. If I look at what I'm making now, and what I've made in the past, on a fundamental level, I don't see varying degrees of 'straightness' in my work, but rather a continued investigation into this phenomenon that seems like magic--and it's easier to just call it magic, but in truth, I think it's really a complex combination of factors that create the possibility of allowing the camera to transform what is in front of it's lens. And this isn't a new idea at all--even for old school street photographers like Friedlander, Papageorge, Arbus, Winogrand, etc. etc. I mean, I know I make pictures in different time and in different ways than that crew, but deep down I am interested in what they were interested in: Transforming space, light, and time photographically in order to create something that never *really* existed the way we see it in a photograph. So when I'm in my studio, and I'm printing pictures mostly found on the Internet, cutting them up, combining them in different ways to create a kind of 3-D collage, I don't really know if this thing I made will work until I look at it through the camera--sometimes it comes to life, and sometimes not. This process is not dissimilar to photography sometimes enabling me to achieve human flight, and other times I'm just an idiot flopping around a few feet off the ground in long underwear. So, I think that I'm as straight a photographer as you can be--I photograph what's in front of my lens and don't alter anything once I've made the exposure. For me, the magic is in the moment.

BP - The magic in the moment, that's something that keeps coming up lately. It makes you wonder about the shift between research based artists and artists that are still interested in what you called 'magic'. A bit of a modernist hangover in a way. I'm very interested in that moment you're talking about, as it relates to intuition, which is something I've always thought was invaluable when it comes to making good work. Have you reached a point in your working life where intuition is enough for you? Can you start working on a scrap of instinct and trust that the idea will sort itself out in a rational way over time? Because the shift in subject matter in your work over the past few years would imply to me at least, that you are comfortable going wherever your imagination takes you. And imagination has almost become a dirty word.

DG - Yeah, it's totally a dirty word. It's funny, when my girlfriend, Ruby Stiler, was in art school she and a friend had an ongoing competition to see who could use the word 'imagination' the most times during a critique. I'm not sure if there was ever a winner declared, but, in the midst of such a critical environment it was definitely good for laughs. In a way, the word 'imagination' negates the intention of the artist, and can potentially minimize the content of the work. But don't get me wrong, I value imagination, I'm just not sure if it's a constructive way to talk about art. As for intuition, I'd say that most of my favorite artists worked/work intuitively, from Philip Guston to Stephen Shore, whose work is very conceptual. I think the important thing to realize about intuition is that it is a place to begin, and when it's brought me somewhere that I believe is interesting, I then have to work really hard to figure out what it means to be there, and to develop the aspects that seem meaningful. For me it's much more interesting to feel my way around than to plan and execute. I'm not suggesting that an artist shouldn't be critical or smart, I guess I just wonder, why make something if you know exactly what it's going to be like when it's done. That just seems so boring to me. So yeah, I'll follow a scrap of intuition until it leads to a dead end, and then I'll follow another one, and another one- following the scraps might be the most compelling part of making the work.

BP - Well I definitely agree with you that following the scraps of intuition can be the most compelling aspect of making work. But for me, process based work, work about getting to the product, ends up being a bit of a boring object lesson. There are a lot of similarities here between what you're saying about arriving at a body of work, and eastern philosophy. And more and more lately I'm making this connection to the activities of artists I really admire. Anyway, you are also sort of a magician, or an alchemist. So you are supposed to keep the methodology of the trick hidden. The flying pictures are perfect examples of a magic trick, and emblematic of sort of 'putting one over' on the viewer, which I like. I like some antagonism towards the viewer. In your piece 'Orchid' - there is so much going on, and I can't imagine how it was made, and I don't understand the lighting, and I don't understand the shapes, and this culmination of misunderstanding can often lead to at least a vague new kind of understanding. Not to ask you to reveal your secrets, but for example, how was that piece made?

DG - I searched for images on the Internet, printed them, constructed some of them into 3-D objects sometimes using foam core as an armature, while I let other found pictures remain 2 dimensional. So in a sense I make a 3-D collage, light it, and then photograph it either with a 4x5 field camera or an 8x10 view camera. For me though, it's the things that give away the illusion that complicate things, and make the pictures more interesting. Recently I've been pushing my pictures more and more in the direction of revealing as opposed to concealing. So when I talk about magic, I'm really just talking about how amazed I am at what the camera can do. When I think about illusion on the other hand, that seems to be more about the artist's hand. In the case of my flying pictures the illusion is pretty well concealed, but there are glimpses into the physicality and the mental struggle of going through with such an experience over and over again. There's one picture in particular where you can see on my face how difficult it was to mentally maintain this idea that I can fly, knowing full well that I'm about to hit the ground pretty hard. I'm currently working on an edit for a book of my flying pictures that is hopefully going to be released in the fall, and at this point I have enough distance from the project that I can see the value in giving up a little bit of the illusion in some pictures as a way to complicate the project as a whole. I don't think of myself as a magician, or even really an illusionist, but there's no doubt in my mind that the camera is both.

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