

Two Emerging Photographers You Should Know

Isa Silva & Lottie Davies

ISA SILVA AND LOTTIE DAVIES ARE TWO VERY DIFFERENT EMERGING FEMALE PHOTOGRAPHERS. EACH PHOTOGRAPHER'S WORK DEMONSTRATES BOTH CONCEPT AND AESTHETICS, DRAWING A SURPRISING PARALLEL.

To be a photographer in today's image saturated culture is hard work. Appearing in a variety of forms and contexts – from the pages of glossy magazines and daily blogs to large-scale museum exhibitions, images are the signifiers of our time. There's an explosion of never-ending visuals; some are simply snapshots, while others are looking to be recognised for their artistic merit.

The definition of what it means to be a photographer has altered dramatically in recent years. In one respect, photography must be celebrated for its unique proposal, the equipment is affordable, the technology for post-production is often standard with many computer packages, and it's an artistic medium that is being accelerated as fast as the technology it relies on. On the other hand, there's a darker side to this utopia, because photography is now an art practised by the masses (in September 2010 Flickr reported 5 billion images). How can artists differentiate themselves, prosper and drive contemporary image making in a new direction away from the staid and ordinary? The photograph is being devoured; there are more images than ever before, but what constitutes art, and moreover, what makes a great photograph?

From landscape, fashion, advertising, wildlife, travel, fine art, documentary, architecture and portraiture, the confines of image creation are fluid. Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, Thomas Demand, Andreas Gursky, Corinne Day, Solve Sundsbø, Mario Testino and Rankin are just a few examples of photographers who demonstrate the discipline's amorphous nature. In this issue, we meet Portuguese born, Isa Silva (b.1987) and British born, Lottie Davies (b. 1971) who are both working in photography, but in very different ways. Silva's work primarily focuses on portraiture, but using surrealist concepts, she re-negotiates the boundaries of want and desire. Davies, winner of the Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize in 2008, works between fine art, editorial, and photo-journalism, however, she is exploring constructed meaning through appropri-

ated memories in her cinematic works. Although their subject material differs significantly, each photographer provides works that are not only beautiful, but also engaging.

ISA SILVA *in conversation*

How did you first become interested in photography?

When I started a personal project, *Platonic Shutter*, I had the overall goal of capturing human expression by illuminating only small fragments of the image and leaving the rest in the penumbra. Through this project, I understood that photography was more than just capturing moments, but transforming them, and that's when I was hooked.

Your work borders both fashion and portraiture, how would you define it?

I believe that both the portrait and fashion, in a photographic context, have roots in human expression. I have found that the barrier between the two sides is sparse and therefore my work oscillates between both worlds, without defining it or inserting one into the other.

What's the principal message in images like *Dumb World*?

Dumb World was created to show how intangible desires and frustrations are omnipresent. Through a circus of sad clowns and a numbing of the senses, we transform ourselves into androgynous fragile beings, constantly imbued with a dream. Where the stimuli are artificially incubated, creating desires and anxiety, we are sleepwalking, drunk with the embraces of materialism, submerged in a game of deceit that offers a cure for this own disease at a high price. *Dumb World* is ultimately an installation, where the observer merges with the characters in the image to create a physical and abstract construction.



Lottie Davies, *Quint*, 2008.

Which photographers influences you the most and why?

This is undoubtedly Eugenio Recuenco. I consider him an artist because creating a photo is just a part of his self-expression. I find it absolutely fascinating how he builds the stories through small metaphorical elements. It's amazing how we can see an image several times, and with each observation feel it in a different way. This allows us to extrapolate reality, and travel to a fantasy world that comforts us against the grim reality. Also, Paolo Roversi's construction and deconstruction of his subjects' characters and how he captures the human essence as meaninglessness.

Do you feel it's difficult to be innovative in today's image-driven world?

I feel it is extremely difficult to be original and creative when we are constantly bombarded by images. In a society that is the product of media saturation, being unique becomes an increasingly arduous journey. I think that only someone who is completely oblivious to the world manages to create something entirely new.

Where do you gather your inspiration from?

My source of inspiration comes mainly from literature, in particular, the American author and painter, Henry Miller (1891-1980). His way of seeing the world is absolutely inspiring. However, the greatest source of inspiration is just the world around me.

Finally, where do you feel photography is going with regards to the considerable developments in recent years?

Photography has evolved substantially with regards to digital processes. It has become a way of deceiving the world, instead of capturing its primary objectives. Increasingly, I feel that photography is becoming a construct of one reality, allied to other artistic areas, which will become fully intrinsic because it reflects the changes society has undergone over the past 10 years. It is difficult to refer to the future because technology is changing from day-to-day.



Lottie Davies, *Vola as Twin*, 2008.



Lottie Davies, *The Blue Bedroom*, 2008.

LOTTIE DAVIES *in conversation*

At what moment did you first become interested in photography?

My father bought a basic darkroom kit for my brother when I was 14, and being completely competitive I had to learn how to use it as well.

How do you create a relationship with your subjects?

I work with a mixture of models, experienced actors and students, depending on what look and attitude I need for the characters. I treat each shoot like an improvisation, where each actor has a reasonably good understanding of their character and the situation in advance. I often take the actors with me to the costume house, where as well as fitting the right outfit, we develop the characters and build a bit of background for them in their costume. I have a fairly clear idea of where I want each person to be in the image, but the interaction between them develops as we shoot.

Can you tell me about the wider narratives you create?

I love stories; film, theatre, literature, and the everyday stories we all have. In my journalistic work I began to realise that I was collecting life-stories from the people I was photographing, to illustrate the situations they were living. So *Memories and Nightmares* is something of an extension of that idea. I wanted to try a different approach, by creating images from an idea in someone's head, rather than the "found" images I often shoot. I've consciously used classical painting, film and illustrations to influence the look of the images, with the intention of tapping into subconscious looking habits.

What's the overriding message in images like *The Blue Bedroom* from the *Memories and Nightmare* series?

The Blue Bedroom is about the child experiencing / watching the lives of his parents – as children we have access to our parent's lives, if we're lucky we share them for many hours of the day, but the adults are experiencing those hours in a very different way to the children. You know that moment, years later, when

you realise your parents had been talking about you, or that they must have just had an argument but they pretended they hadn't? So the child sees his parents getting ready to go out for the evening, he watches from the doorway and we're not sure if the parents realise he is there. The parents inhabit the adult world where they may be happy and in love, they may be arguing, perhaps she is thinking of leaving – see the suitcase on top of the wardrobe? Years later, the child might suddenly understand what he was witnessing. The inspiration for the image was a intimate statement of my friend Sarah-Jane's earliest memory of watching her father pick out ties through her bedroom door.

How has your work developed and changed over the years?

It's changed enormously. I learnt the craft through assisting commercial photographers – mostly doing editorial work for newspapers and magazines, which led to regular work shooting food for supplements and so on. Then, I began to investigate more journalistic projects as I wanted to "do more" with my work if I could, which led to some trips to Botswana, Guatemala and the Thai-Burmese border, and from those experiences I was able to get more commissioned travel work. So my work is very mixed – I love to take pictures of all different kinds, but I like to think my fine art work is where I produce my best images, or at least the ones which mean the most to me personally.

What photographers influence you the most and why?

Stephen Shore for his sensibility and gentle approach to great vistas and minutiae. Joel Sternfeld for his sense of narrative, especially his book *On This Site*, which gives me the shivers (in a good way) Taryn Simon – pure genius – I challenge anyone not to be in awe of her *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, Sally Mann's stunningly beautiful images of her children in *Immediate Family*, and Mark Power's *Shipping Forecast* for its gathering of disparate images under a eerily familiar theme.

Do you feel it's difficult to be innovative in today's image-centred world?

I was talking to a photographer friend just yesterday about that very question, and we felt that the problem is not image-saturation but "issues-saturation". He is a photojournalist, and although he takes amazing photographs, it's harder and harder to get them "out there", so it's increasingly difficult for him to highlight those stories he wants to tell people about. I found that was very much the case when I was shooting and writing my journalistic work, which is partly why I chose to concentrate on fine art over the past few years. It's almost impossible to be innovative; everything's been done, probably lots of times, by people more talented than me, so I'm not sure that's something I try to do. I think what I'm trying to do is tell stories which have meaning for me, and interpret them in a way which resonates.

Where do you feel photography is going?

Photography has never been better, and there's no shortage of enthusiasm for image-making. Charities like Fotokids in Guatemala are using photography to help people in numerous ways all over the world. On the other hand, professional photography has taken a massive nosedive and continues to slide ever faster into a place where making a living taking photographs is extremely difficult. The recession has slashed budgets for commissioned photography, the growth of image libraries, especially royalty-free has devalued the worth of images, so it's tough, and I can't see it getting better, certainly not soon. That said, the London art market is catching up with New York and beginning to see photography on a par with painting, sculpture and so on. There are huge changes happening at an incredibly fast pace. I hope that if / when we get out of recession there's still a place for creativity and it hasn't been squashed by the need for "pile them high sell them cheap."

For further information on Isa Silva visit www.isasilvaphotography.com and for Lottie Davies visit www.lottediedavies.com.

Cherie Federico