

‘For better or for worse, the destiny of the photographer is bound up with destinies of a machine.’

Dorothea Lange

B: 1895 / **N:** American / **G:** Documentary

Taken during the Great Depression, Dorothea Lange’s photograph shows us the way west, yet the land of opportunity remains unseen and is clearly still some way ahead. Moreover, one senses that as Lange stood in the middle of this long silver road, she was also reflecting on the future of photography at a time of immense social and technological change.

During her lifetime, Lange saw cameras evolve from something slow and cumbersome into something fast and portable. With that change, Lange experienced first hand how the advances of the ‘machine’ opened up a new world of creative possibilities for the photographer – something we’re experiencing again today with the introduction of digital and camera phones.

This dependence on the camera, however, means that photographers are creatively cursed, because every image they make must be a negotiation between man and machine; the photographer takes charge of seeing, and the camera (for the most part) takes charge of recording. This state of compromise has caused photographers to develop a somewhat prickly relationship with their tool of trade. For better or for worse, it’s one of love and hate, of respect and resentment.

*The Road West,
New Mexico, 1938*



‘Photos don’t get better when they’re bigger.’

Hellen van Meene



Untitled (#0334),
St Petersburg, Russia, 2008

B: 1972 / **N:** Dutch / **G:** Portraiture

Size has a profound impact on how we relate to photographs. After everything is done, the same photograph can be printed so small that it fits into a wallet or so big that it fills an entire wall. How, then, do photographers know how big or small to print their pictures? Hellen van Meene reminds us that a photograph’s size is an extension of its concept.

Influenced by the ‘quietness’ of Dutch painting, van Meene uses natural light and domestic settings to photograph adolescent girls who appear lost in thought. She then prints her photographs small (around 28 centimetres/11 inches) because she wants to draw us in, she wants us to physically stand closer, she wants us to have a private encounter so that we feel the introspection of her subjects. If her photographs were larger, we would interact with them very differently. We would need to stand back, it would be hard to take everything in all at once and the viewing experience would likely be shared with others; the physical photographs themselves would conflict with the subject matter and the meaning or mood the photographer is trying to convey.

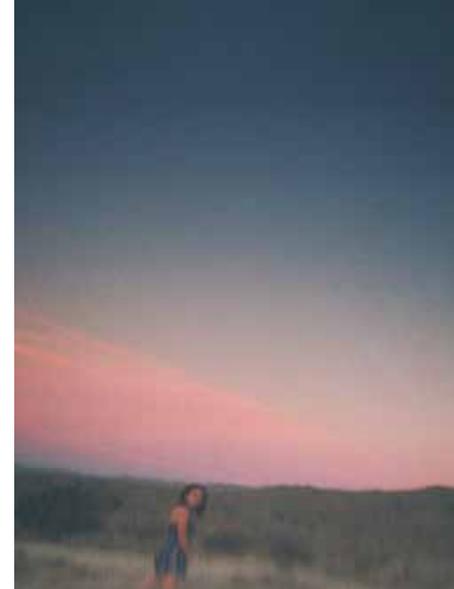
'It's way more important to know how to take a picture than to use a camera.'

Olivia Bee

B: 1994 / **N:** American / **G:** Reportage, fashion

Her currency is the beauty of imperfection, the rawness of blur, the fogginess of grain and the energy of an off-kilter composition. In that visual hinterland between clarity and confusion, Olivia Bee captures the emotional spectrum of youth; those ups and downs, that vagabond spirit and the mental and physical growing pains we have all experienced at one point or another.

These are human qualities that are hard to express through photography if everything is 'correct'. The problem, however, is that cameras are perfectionists. Everything about their design and function is intended to help the user create 'perfect pictures' and new technology constantly sells us improved image quality. That's why, like so many emerging photographers, Bee prefers to work with the emotiveness of film rather than the exactitude of digital. In so doing, she embraces risk and challenges the notion that good photography should be technically flawless photography.



ABOVE LEFT:
California Mirage, 2015

ABOVE RIGHT:
Gold Rush, 2014

RIGHT:
Tuesday, Turnip and Dan, 2015

‘Photographing a moment helps me move on from it, but keep it for ever.’



Briley and Leslie (Love in All Our Colors), 2016

What does it feel like, for you, to take a picture of someone you love?

It feels like an extension of that love. When I take someone's photograph, our entire past together is present. Trust makes pictures. But there's also this thing of not romanticizing the love I experience with others through photography. These are real people, real relationships, not characters, not content.

When I look at your pictures of young people on the cusp of adulthood, I feel like photography is as much about letting go of something as it is about preserving a memory. Is that something you're conscious of when shooting?

I think that's definitely something I am conscious of when I'm editing; once I start to see the patterns my current work is following, the path it is taking, I'm able to see the letting go and the preservation. But when I am taking pictures, I just follow my instincts and see where they lead. I often don't know where they are leading until I see them all together, working towards some common emotional world.

When I released my book, *Kids in Love*, it came with an intense sense of mourning. When friends around the world were calling me or emailing me saying they were stoked to have my book in their hands, I felt excited, of course, but also an intense loss of the photos I had held so close for so long, and inherently, my youth, which I had held so close for so long. I had to let go of how I had preserved it. It was a beautiful feeling, holding it close, then giving it away. It was essential for my own growth as an artist and as a person.

Photographing a moment helps me move on from it, but keep it for ever.

As a photographer who records everyday moments, you must often find yourself torn between being an active participant and a separated observer. How does photography/the camera affect your sense of the 'here



Untitled, from the series
'Excellences & Perfections', 2015
[Instagram Upload, 1 June 2014]

'How do we consume images or how do they consume us?'

Amalia Ulman

B: 1989 / **N:** Argentinian-Spanish / **G:** Self portraiture, installation, digital media

Using her existing Instagram account (@amaliaulman), Amalia Ulman began acting out the tragic story of a fictitious alter ego. Through the images on her feed, we saw Ulman supposedly break up with her boyfriend, move to LA, find a sugar daddy, undergo cosmetic surgery and become suicidal before finding salvation in the arms of a good man. Unaware that this was all an elaborately scripted performance, followers liked and commented on Ulman's pictures, apparently revelling in her spiralling descent into a state of narcissistic desperation.

Ulman's work reveals a disturbing truth about how the majority of people use and consume photography. By taking selfies and sharing them online, photography has given us what we all yearn for: an identity. Only, the identity it has given us isn't ours. To a greater or lesser extent, it is a made-up character, someone we have created to be 'liked', envied and, in extreme cases, bought by brands. It means that, as a communication tool, photography is more powerful than ever because it has turned us all into marketers – and the product being sold is ourselves.

‘Photography creates a desire.’

Alison Jackson

B: 1970 / **N:** British / **G:** Portraiture

Alison Jackson presents a comically absurd alternative reality to the already comically absurd alternative reality of celebrity culture. Using lookalikes, Jackson stages fictitious scenarios that push the ‘image’ of a particular celebrity to the extreme. What’s most revealing, however, is that her pictures continue to hold a strange allure, even when we know they are fake. It’s as if we want, or need, to keep believing in what we are seeing.

For Jackson, photographs are like a drug to which society has become addicted. In terms of celebrities, they offer tasters into the lives of people who, for most of us, will only ever exist as images. This emotional bond that we develop with strangers through their image highlights the unique power of photographs; photographs give us something while at the same time give us nothing. It’s a classic case of being offered a taste – or more accurately, a trace – of something we want but can never have.



Wills Tries Crown on Kate, 2011



'It feels like my body has disappeared and I have become a part of the picture, a part of the camera.'

Esther Teichmann



B: 1980 / **N:** German-American / **G:** Fine art

Esther Teichmann's photographs present a vaporous lost world in which people exist in a state of mental and physical inertia surrounded by exotic flora and enveloping caves. As we peer through the musky colour palettes, familiar objects such as shells, rocks and water take on more carnal connotations. It all feels like the fleeting recollections of a deep sleep or a glimpse into our own unfathomable psyche, a place our conscious mind chooses to suppress.

To create such an immersive world in pictures, Teichmann adopts a more visceral, rather than cerebral, process. In the same way that a pianist doesn't consciously think about which keys to press next, a photographer doesn't consciously think about every single adjustment they make to the camera or set-up. By allowing her mind to leave the conscious state, a state where logical thoughts override her instinctual responses, Teichmann becomes unrestricted by her physical self and the otherness of the instrument.

Untitled, from the series 'Heavy the Sea', 2012/2017

‘Photography is the easiest art, which perhaps makes it the hardest.’

Lisette Model

B: 1901 / **N:** Austrian-American / **G:** Street

Let there be no doubt about it, photography is easy. Anyone can take a photo. Anyone can take a good photo. Anyone can take a great photo. That's if we assume, as most of the population does, that a great photo should be in focus, well exposed and show a pretty subject. Lisette Model, however, didn't subscribe to that definition of 'great'. Her gritty street photographs taken in the 1940s were direct and in close, depicting working-class and destitute subjects that polite society of the time preferred to overlook. With full and characterful compositions that captured tender, expressive and socially pointed New York moments, Model achieved the hardest thing of all with the easiest of arts. She showed how a medium so adept at recording the surface of society can, in fact, be used to reveal the humanity of what lies beneath.



Sailor and Girl, Sammy's Bar, 1940

‘If you always use the same “signature” style, you end up putting too much of yourself there, while covering up the subject itself.’

Laia Abril

B: 1986 / **N:** Spanish / **G:** Fine art

For many photographers, particularly those working commercially, establishing a signature style is vital. It forms their brand and when that brand becomes so recognized, shoots become as much about the photographer as the subject. That, to put it bluntly, is great for business. However, in less commercial areas of photography, such as fine art, some photographers think about style very differently. And for Laia Abril, developing an overt signature style is something she purposefully avoids.

Here are three images from three different series by Abril. We could easily be looking at the work of three photographers: from one series to the next, Abril has adopted an entirely different style. Rather than put her stamp on the work, she is intentionally trying to remove herself. In so doing, her photographic ‘ego’ doesn’t interfere with her intended message. Instead, this helps the viewer to see past the photographer and focus on the work’s thematic concerns. And it’s in Abril’s thematic concerns where she is consistent because, as a whole, her work offers a probing insight into the important issues of female identity, sexuality and misogyny.



TOP:
Untitled, from the series
'Femme Love', 2009

CENTRE:
Untitled, from the series
'Tediousphilia', 2013

BOTTOM:
Untitled, from the series
'On Abortion', 2015

‘As a brown person, as a brown artist, your work is political. Whether you like it or not.’

Wendy Red Star

B: 1981 / **N:** American / **G:** Fine art

Wendy Red Star makes work about her Native American ancestors, the Crow, and how they have been represented in the past by 19th-century colonial photographers and more recently on TV and in Hollywood films. Here Red Star constructs a scene that places her in nature, yet the humorously artificial set-up references the ridiculous notion so often played out in mainstream media that Native Americans belong to the wild more so than to humanity.

Rather than being overtly political, Red Star sees her work as simply reflecting on who she is and the facets of her own cultural identity. It's no different to any other photographer making work informed by who they are. The issue is, however, that photography's long-established history would have us believe that it's an art form predominantly practised and appreciated by white people. They have become the default image makers so anyone outside of that status quo, no matter what their work may be about, is, to a certain extent, regarded as unusual or 'political'. And this is not solely an issue for non-white artists. You could easily substitute the word 'brown' in Red Star's statement for 'lesbian', 'Muslim', 'disabled' or even 'female'. Yet one thing you could not substitute it for is 'white', 'straight' or 'male'.



Spring, from the series
'Four Seasons', 2006

‘What I offer as an artist doesn’t lie in solely craft or visual acrobatics; it’s in the context I create for individual images.’



Fence Repair #2,
from the series 'Lago',
2014

What makes you stop and photograph something? Is the act brought on by a conscious reasoning or more of an instinctive feeling about a tyre, a brick, a fence?

I usually give myself a destination when I go out shooting. I pick a place on the map and I start driving. Most of the time the end point on the map serves as an arbitrary location, however, just to get me out the door to start looking at the world. There may be some logic to why I choose a place, but I know that what I see along the way will probably be the most interesting part of the trip. It's often the case that I don't even make it to where I was headed. This Ouija Board method of working is the only way I know how to keep the image-making process one of discovery and surprise, without limiting the things I look at to a predetermined agenda. Anytime I've tried to work from a purely rational place, the photographs end up looking like lifeless illustrations. So in that sense, I'm guided by an instinctive feeling when I'm making photographs, but this feeling is always informed, to some degree, by the larger programme.

As you get further into shooting a series, and have a better idea of how it's forming, do you find that 'instinctive feeling' gives way to 'conscious reasoning' more often?

Somewhat, yes, but I try to make an effort not to intellectualize what I'm doing too much while I'm gathering raw material. Conscious reasoning comes into play to a larger degree when I'm piecing a book or exhibition together. But even then, I try to allow plenty of room for irrational choices. Rational thought will serve you well in forming thoughts about the work after it's finished (writing artist statements and grant proposals, or giving lectures), but can be a hindrance to finding new and surprising ways into a subject when you're still in production mode.

On the one hand your pictures appear like 'evidence', yet on the other, they seem to hold no obligation to 'truth', no more or less so than a memory does. I'm curious to know your stance on interfering with the objects and scenes you encounter.

I have no problem at all with the idea of manipulating a scene to benefit the picture. I don't consider what I do to be beholden at all to documentary integrity. My photographs are clear and uninflected in order to capitalize on what we expect from that sort of photograph, but that's as far as my relationship to documentary photography goes. That being said, returning to the first two questions, anytime I've tried to arrange things in a scene, it usually doesn't work. I leave the realm of instinct and move into an illustrative mode when I start playing around with things. There were a couple of images in 'Lago' that required some intervention, but it's something I try to stay away from most of the time.

Can you tell us a bit about your process in terms of shooting and editing?

I typically start a project with very broad strokes, which makes editing nearly impossible at that stage. It can literally be a year or two before things start to crystallize and I can see the material for what it might be beyond a bunch of pictures that I like. (I'm going through this process right now with some new work.) 'Lago' is the first project that I ever started editing prior to the completion of shooting, but even then I didn't start editing until after three years of shooting. I started working on the book during the last three months of making pictures. That worked out okay, but it's funny what having a glimpse of the outcome will do to your shooting. I had to catch myself a number of times when I went out with a mental checklist of things to find and photograph. That approach never works for me, for the aforementioned reasons.



Couple Central Park Zoo, After
Garry Winogrand, from the series
'Pictures of Paper', 2008

'A photograph is never
the same the second
time you look at it.'

Vik Muniz

B: 1961 / **N:** Brazilian / **G:** Fine art

On turning the page you probably saw (or recalled) a Garry Winogrand photograph before almost instantly realizing something was up. Leaning in to inspect the picture further, maybe you then noticed that this 'Winogrand photograph' is, in fact, layers of cut-up card. And maybe you then realized something else, perhaps the most obvious thing of all: this is neither a Winogrand photograph nor layers of card. Like every other image in this book, it's just ink dots on a page.

With his series 'Pictures of Paper', Vik Muniz makes us aware that photographs are not as unchanging as we think. Depending on our physical distance, we can perceive a photograph as a singular entity or a universe of pixels or paper fibres. On repeated viewings, our eyes never take the exact same path around a photograph, meaning that we constantly receive the information in a different order. Time also plays its part. If you were to look at a photograph of your childhood self now and compare it to when it was taken, in what ways would your history make you regard it differently? For Muniz, photographs are fascinating, not because they can't tell stories, but because they have too many stories to tell.