

Rita Bernstein

Interview by Laura Valenti Jelen

How long have you been photographing seriously? What drew you to photography?

I began to photograph in earnest in the early 1990's, a point in my life when I had recently left my career as a civil rights lawyer and had two young children to whom I was tethered. Initially, I intended to make the kinds of pictures any doting mother would but, in fact, the transition from office to home was difficult for me, and that truth quickly showed up in my photographs. I explored the sorrows as well the sweetness of family life and, more generally, the ambivalence that shadows intimate relationships. In watching my own children, I was reminded of the conflicts and restlessness that pervaded my own youth.

Tell us about your transition from the world of civil rights law to the art world. Does your past career inform your current art making in any way?

I have always been very interested in people and how they relate to one another, both of which are core issues in civil rights law. Lawyers, however, tend to be very left-brained which is a way of thinking that gets in the way of making art.

What is your vision for your work? What do you hope to convey with your imagery?

I am fascinated by how complicated people are, and how mysterious. And how difficult it is to really understand another person's experience. All of that is mixed up in my work.

The work is very emotional and personal - can you talk about the emotions the work brings up for you?

We each live to some extent in our own private interior world. I am

drawn to pictures which offer a glimpse into these intimate and enigmatic moments.

I work intuitively, usually discovering rather than orchestrating my pictures, and gravitating toward situations that are evocative of my own memories, fears, and longings. I tend not to know precisely what I am looking for until I find it, which sometimes causes me to lose heart when I go through long dry spells.

Apart from photography, what are some of your other passions? Do your other passions inspire your photography?

I've been a long distance runner for more than 35 years. I take a camera and a notebook with me in a fanny pack and I use both frequently (I seem to see, and think, more acutely when I'm running). *Ghost of Summer* in Gallery Four on my website is a recent picture taken on my run. I also read a lot, including poetry -- I was an English major in college -- and that seems to feed my photography. I find poetry particularly satisfying because it has both an abstract and a musical quality that most fiction lacks, as well as leaving

more space for the reader's imagination. It also typically makes the reader work harder. Some of my favorite poets are: C.D. Wright, Jane Kenyon, Ruth Stone, and Sharon Olds.

I know you photograph your children - how do they feel about being photographed? How do you work with them to create the images?

I have photographed my daughter very frequently over the years, but I never really viewed the pictures as specifically about her (nor did she) or about my gaze as



THE LAST TIME BY RITA BERNSTEIN



GARDEN BY RITA BERNSTEIN



BLACK BIRD BY RITA BERNSTEIN

“parent.” Rather, I am exploring memories, and emotions, of my own childhood. The most valuable thing about photographing one's family, of course, is the incredible access: when the light is just right, there they are. So it can be very intuitive and spontaneous.

Over the years, I have continued occasionally to photograph children, but it is no longer my intention to examine childhood specifically. Rather, the uninhibited behavior of young people is a rich clue to the interior life generally; with awkwardness and eloquence, children practice the same complex psychological and social dramas with which we continue to struggle as adults. I was entranced

“...children practice the same complex psychological and social dramas with which we continue to struggle as adults”

equally by their grace and their missteps; they would falter and make midcourse corrections, and they almost never gave up.

Tell us about your process and the first time you tried the technique with your images - was it love at first sight?

I am hand applying silver emulsion (liquid light) to handmade paper. The process is very fickle, unpredictable, and frustrating. Sometimes I can spend a whole week in the darkroom and not get a single keeper. So it definitely wasn't love at first sight! But I had been searching for some time for a process that was sympathetic to my imagery. In both my pictures and my prints, I am courting the imperfect, the messy, the raw, and the vulnerable. Also, I have never gotten the knack of digital negatives and, with this process, I am able to use my own medium format film in my enlarger. The wet darkroom is still a happy and creative place for me.

How do you present your work in galleries? I know the prints are small - can you talk



JOANNA, AGE 16 BY RITA BERNSTEIN



WITNESS BY RITA BERNSTEIN

about the aesthetic choices you make in presentation?

Because the “object” quality of my prints is so important to me, I try to present the work so that its tactile, three dimensional aspects are apparent and accessible to the viewer. I have also recently made a limited edition artist book, which seems like an appealing format for presenting my work.

Can you tell us more about your book? I'd love to hear about your process in creating it.

I'm a book lover, and have collected art books for years. I wanted to make a limited edition artist book that had an intimacy and handmade quality that was similar to my prints. The University of the Arts, which is part of my community here in Philadelphia, has a wonderful Book Arts program and I worked with a friend there who did the letter press cover and binding for my book. The edition is small -- just twelve books -- and contains eleven images (there's a preview and more information on my site: www.ritabernstein.com/book/book.htm)

You've had two solo shows in 2010 - what's next for you?

Making new work! Two solo shows in a row had me squirreled away in the darkroom for months. I'm ready to go out and look around again. ♣

Rita Bernstein was born in Brooklyn, New York and was educated at Barnard College of Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania Law School. After 14 years as a civil rights attorney, she gave up the practice of law to focus most of her time on photography. Her work is represented by Gallery 339 (Philadelphia); Galerie BMG (Woodstock, NY); Dolby Chadwick Gallery (San Francisco); the John Cleary Gallery (Houston); and KlompChing Gallery (Brooklyn). Her pictures are included in numerous public and private collections, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Woodmere Art Museum; and the Johnson and Johnson World Headquarters Collection. Her



CHANGELING BY RITA BERNSTEIN

photographs have been shown in many exhibitions, including at the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the Griffin Museum; the Noyes Museum of Art; Fleisher Art Memorial; the University of Pennsylvania; Moore College of Art and Design; and the University of the Arts. Among other honors, she has received fellowships in support of her work from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts

and the Independence Foundation; a grant from the Leeway Foundation; and honorable mention awards from the Photo Review, the Ruttenberg Arts Foundation, the Silver Eye Center for Photography, and the Santa Fe Center for Photography, Bernstein currently lives in Philadelphia.

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