

The interpretation of dreams

Translating her dreams into art helped B+W contributor **Susan Burnstine** cope with the haunting effects of her nightmares. But she was soon designing her own cameras to visualise her ideas. *Antonia Stemp reports*

All pictures © Susan Burnstine



On the Crest, 2009, from the series Flight



Bridge to Nowhere, 2006, from the series On Waking Dreams

For some little girls many happy hours can be passed by scuffling about in their mother's high heels, or getting lost in a mystery novel. For Susan Burnstine, one of her most memorable pleasures was playing with the cameras that

were an ever-present feature in her childhood. 'My mother loved cheap, dime store cameras. She documented most of my childhood with 126 instamatics, a vintage Polaroid that worked intermittently and an optically unappealing plastic Pentax 110 that was always stuffed at the

bottom of her purse, under various items such as screwdrivers and lotions – this explained the scratches and grime on the lens.'

Hungry to get her hands on her own camera, Burnstine was given her first 'real' camera, a Canon A-1 for her 11th birthday. 'I loved that ▶



Jump, 2007, from the series Between

◀ camera like a kid loves their first puppy,' she remembers. 'I took it everywhere with me.'

Having begun a love affair with photography from such a young age, it is not surprising that Burnstine eventually returned to the medium as an adult, composing a series of fine art photographs that won her much critical

admiration. It's her mother tongue, after all, a language that comes as naturally to her as speaking.

Initially, Burnstine worked the Hollywood circuit working in turn as a stand-up comic, screenwriter and a script consultant. But she soon became tired of this, eventually feeling that

she had burnt out. Turning back to photography, she found success as a portrait, headshot and commercial photographer but still longed for artistic satisfaction.

Then, tragically, when Burnstine was in her thirties, her mother died suddenly. Susan was drawn back to her roots and sought solace in her



Lift, 2009, from the series Flight

beloved Canon A-1. 'I started shooting incessantly again. And every time I clicked that shutter, it was as if I heard my mom cheering me on.'

On Waking Dreams

Since early childhood, Burnstine has suffered debilitating nightmares. These nightmares, she

explains, 'dealt with the issues of life, death and the in-between. And questions that could not be answered in the living world.'

'My mother taught me to draw, paint and even sculpt my dreams as a way to cope with the haunting effects. She believed artistic creation was the best way to cope with the

ongoing effects of trauma. This process stuck with me as an adult.'

After her mother's death, Burnstine began nurturing a project that eventually became the body of work *Within Shadows*, a project consisting of three successive chapters: *On Waking Dreams*, *Between* and *Flight*. ▶



Circuitous, 2006, from the series Waking Dreams

◀ Each chapter visits in turn the concepts of dreaming (the subconscious), sleeping (the unconscious), and waking (the conscious).

Burnstine began exploring her dreams by recalling a fleeting memory, a glanced metaphor, or notions that travelled through her unconscious mind, by seeking them in everyday subjects and translating them on

film. On waking she begins the process of interpretation: 'I journal my dream from the night before, then I climb into my car with my cameras and my dog. I never know exactly where I'm going until I get there. And when I arrive at a place I attempt to capture a significant memory, metaphor or moment from that dream and I snap the shutter.'

The inventor

Burnstine has learnt to rely on instinct and intuition to explore her dreams. The same skills guide her through the technical limitations presented by her homemade camera kit. 'I wanted to photograph my unconscious world as I truly see it and I tried every camera possible, but no conventional camera could



In Passage, 2005, from the series *Waking Dreams*

emulate my vision,' she explains. 'I started shooting with toy cameras but got bored of pre-fab cameras and consistent effects. I started modifying toy cameras to have telephotos, close-ups and so on, but no matter what I did, I ended up with typical, manufactured toy camera shots. So, I ripped the lens off a toy camera and started playing with alternative homemade lenses on

the body. My first lens was adapted from a plastic magnifying glass I stole from a toy science kit. I liked the effects, but wanted a different type of bellows control to create a style that was all my own.'

Her non conventional cameras are certainly a challenge, but Burnstine draws inspiration from her late father: 'My father invented and

built anything he'd think of. If there was something he wanted or needed that didn't exist, he'd just create it. I was raised with the belief that just because it doesn't exist, doesn't mean you can't make it so'.

Fixing up a homemade camera kit suggests a lengthy and expensive process but Burnstine likes to experiment. She clearly has fun with it, ▶



Suspend, 2007, from the series Between

◀ adapting bits and pieces from around her home for her camera designs.

'I mould the single element lenses out of plastic, rubber and garbage bags. The camera bodies are either 100% homemade or some are partially adapted from vintage camera parts, random household objects and homemade parts. Each camera can take between 40 to

60 hours to make. They only have one aperture and typically one to three shutter speeds so I have to carry several with me when I go out to shoot.'

At one point, Burnstine had 21 homemade cameras, each named after a famous musician. Though some have since met an untimely demise, her current favourites are Johnny

Cash, John Lee Hooker and Koko Taylor. Her cameras have become, she says, a part of her family. And they are, in essence, grown-up variations of the handbag cameras from her memory and imagination.

To see more of Susan Burnstine's work visit www.susanburnstine.com



Run, 2008, from the series Flight



At the Edge of Darkness, 2008, from the series Flight

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