

SUSAN BURNSTINE

Most photographers find inspiration in the physical world surrounding them. Susan Burnstine initially found inspiration in her dreams—benign and otherwise. “As a child, I suffered from severe nightmares that frequently stayed with me for days,” she says. “Often, I would see an image or symbol in my waking life but would not know if it was something real or from my dreams. Over the years, I’ve found that there can often be a very thin line between my dream life and my waking life.”

But despite having first picked up a camera at the early age of eight, Burnstine, who grew up in Chicago, only began exploring that thin line several years ago. Apprenticed to a successful portrait photographer at 14, she found herself disillusioned with the business side of the medium at 21, moved to Los Angeles, and spent years working in film and live entertainment before returning to photography in her mid-30s. She quickly re-established herself commercially while also re-connecting with her creative visual instincts, first with plastic toy cameras, then with homemade cameras and lenses constructed from discarded toys, household items, and the like.

The technical limitations of these homemade cameras (most feature a single aperture and only one or two shutter speeds) yield a quality of light quite different from conventional cameras. Once Burnstine had learned to harness this light to her satisfaction, she began to ponder what she wanted her dreamlike, soft-focus



photographs to say—only to realize her subconscious had been saying it for her all along. The idea of photographing one’s dreams invites comparison to the early Surrealists, especially filmmakers like Luis Buñuel, but Burnstine tends to resist the linkage. “Buñuel’s take on Surrealism was often based on the irrational. My dream-based images have a rational interpretation and are based more on Jungian dream interpretation.”

The figures in *On Waking Dreams*—the series that first earned her notice—are seen mainly in silhouette and at a distance, lending them more of a symbolic than individual presence. According to Burnstine, the silhouette is about solitude and the struggle of being alone in the conscious and unconscious human condition. There’s a more direct engagement with people as individuals in the *Between* series (from which all the images in this layout are derived). Although

our view of them is still obscured by blur, silhouetting, textures, etc., we are invited to identify with them on a more emotional and personal level.

The mood in Burnstine’s imagery also resists easy categorization. It often borders on the melancholy, but not oppressively so. “The content of the image always dictates the tone,” she says. “I never outwardly direct what comes out from a subject or an event. I can only react by clicking the shutter at a moment that speaks to me. It’s my way in life and in art to always try to find the balance between positive and negative. I suspect that’s why the images never become overly dark, and why their interpretation tends to be open-ended.”

Often, the figures in Burnstine’s photographs are framed in corridor-like settings—staircases, bridges, roads and the like (as in the image *Return*), evoking a sense of being in transit, whether physical or spiritual. Frequently, they’re moving towards or coming from an area of light. “My work is often about the question, choice and/or decision to move forward or backward in the physical and spiritual realm,” Burnstine admits.

While the photographer’s first series was based on her own conscious and unconscious world, it frequently applied to mass consciousness of dreams and metaphors. “The *Between* series, on the other hand, is a self-portrait about a difficult time in my life, based on emotions that can be interpreted as positive or negative depending on one’s perspective. One series is about looking at the world from the outside in. The

other is about looking at the world from the inside out.”

But regardless of the direction in which Burnstine orients the visual emphasis, her imagery is ultimately about charting a path toward spiritual and emotional liberation. While still probing the metaphysical implications of her subconscious, she doesn’t rule out more conceptual exploration in the future.

“I don’t like to put limits on directions and subject matter,” she says. “The emotional content determines the direction for each individual image. It’s hard to say where that will lead me with the next series, since I like to work in a manner that precludes predetermined limitations or expectations.”
—Dean Brierly

■ PRINT INFORMATION

All images are printed in sizes 12x12 or 16x16 inches in limited editions of either 15 or 25 (plus a total of 5 artist proofs). Images are individually printed by the artist, using Ultrachrome K3 inks on archival, acid-free, 100 percent rag, fine art paper and hand coated with Giclee varnish for ultimate UV protection. Prices for 12x12 start at \$750; 16x16 start at \$1,000. Prices increase as editions sell.

■ CONTACT INFORMATION

—John Cleary Gallery
Houston, Texas
—Kevin Longino Fine Photographs
Greenwich, Connecticut
—Soulcather Studio
Santa Fe, New Mexico
—Susan Spiritus Gallery
Newport Beach, California



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RETURN



TRANSIT



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