

Dreamwalker



Circuitous. From the "On Waking Dreams" series.



The Approach. From the "On Waking Dreams" series.

photographs and text by Susan Burnstine

As a child, I suffered from vivid night mares that led me to equate sleep with mortality, which frequently made it difficult to differentiate between the two. To this day, I will recall images and not know whether they came from something experienced in reality or dreams. In particular, metaphors concerning transitions and transformations of the spirit, whether they're human, animal, or from other parts of the natural world, have made a profound impact on me.

I'm frequently asked why I would go to such a great extent to make my own cameras and lenses rather than simply shooting digital and creating the effects I want in Photoshop. For me, it's simple. I want to recreate how I see the world through my eyes in an authentic manner. Conventional, prefabricated cameras simply cannot emulate my vision.

A few years ago, I spent many months shooting and modifying toy cameras such as Dianas and Holgas. The dreamy, surreal, Pictorialist style these cameras can create spoke to me initially. But within a short time, I became frustrated with their rudimentary limitations. So I attempted to modify these cameras to achieve basic mechanical effects they otherwise "couldn't" do well, by tearing them apart, piece-by-piece, and modifying them until they were able to shoot close ups, telephoto, etc. Dismantling these cheap, simple cameras and putting them back together provided me with the valuable lesson in how a camera works from the inside out. It was the best photography lesson I ever received. But I quickly grew bored by the regimented style of plastic lenses, and desperately wanted to find my own blurry fingerprint and a signature style.

I realized there wasn't a factory-made camera



Lost. From the “Between” series.

or lens available that could achieve the exact look I envisioned, so I talked to my brother, Keith, about my predicament. He frequently originates or re-devises components for his musical instruments—a talent passed down to both of us from our father, who is happiest when building or inventing. Keith suggested that I build the lens I envisioned. A few days later, I “procured” a shabby, plastic magnifying glass from a toy science kit belonging to an unsuspecting child; it subsequently became the principal component for my first homemade lens.


In the spring of 2005, I began building my own homemade plastic lenses and mounting them on modified vintage cameras. Months later, I started making my own homemade cameras and lenses, primarily out of broken toys, random household objects, and vintage camera parts. Much like Dianas and Holgas, my homemade cameras tended to leak like sieves and offered nothing more than a few shutter speeds and one

f-stop. Their technical limitations made them frequently unpredictable and challenging. In learning to overcome these handicaps I have had to rely on instinct and intuition—the same tools that, in fact, are essential for interpreting dreams.

For months I shot obsessively with my homemade cameras. But, while I mastered the technical development and look I desired, I didn’t really know what I wanted to express or say. That is when it hit me: dreams. When I stood back and looked at my growing body of work, I realized there had been a theme all along.

I’ve spent most of my life analyzing my unconscious world and constantly asking myself,

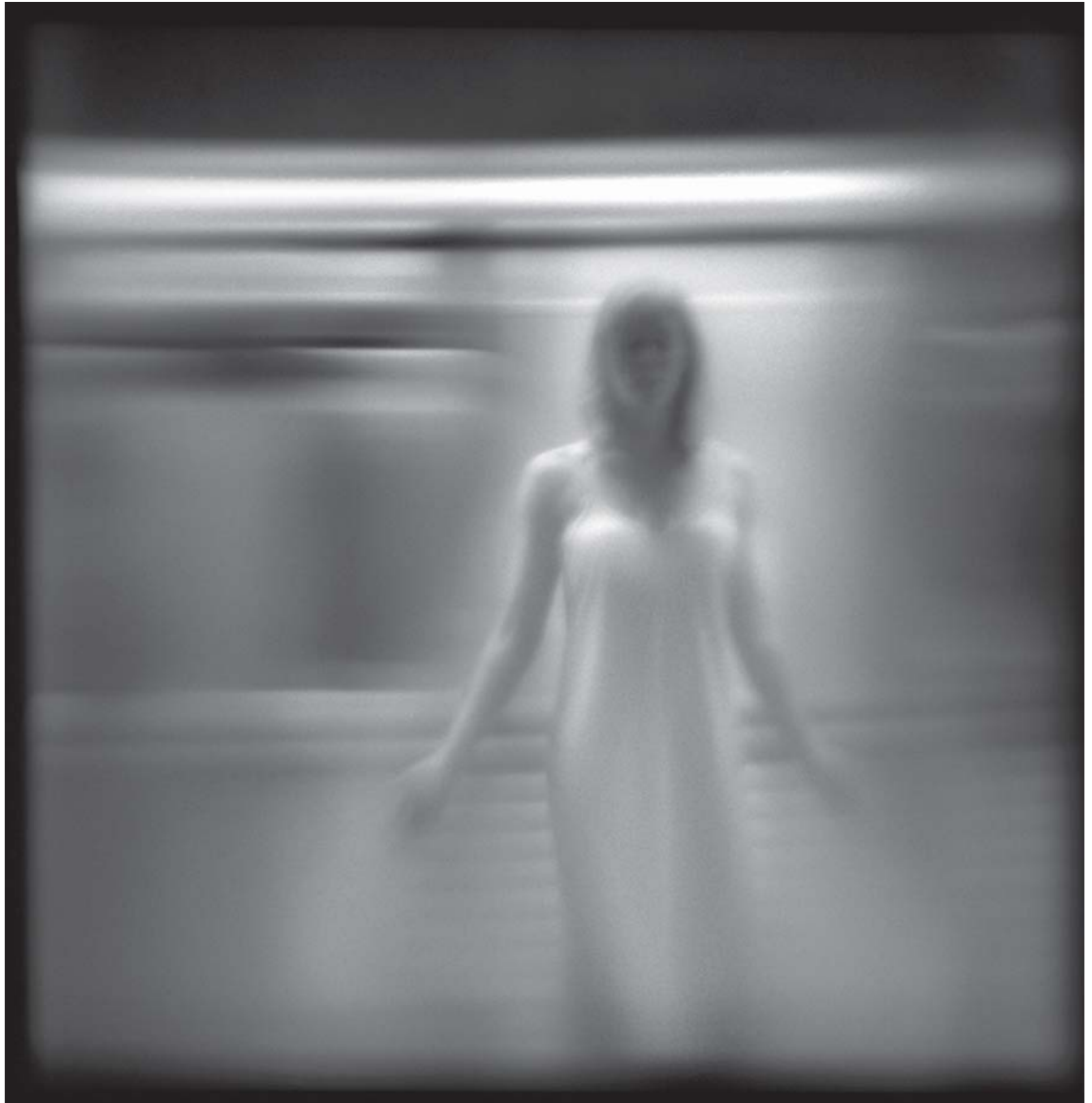
“What’s *real*—waking life or dreams?” So I wrote my dreams down—and then went out and shot them. More often than not, I had a strong sense of where to go to capture the image I dreamed. But when I didn’t, I’d walk around different locations in Los Angeles until I found the symbol or metaphor I was searching for. The results of that two-year exercise can be seen in my series, *On Waking Dreams*.

My most recent homemade series, *Between*, was shot in the same style, yet it’s radically different in emotional content than the previous work. For this series, I delved into the world between consciousness and dreaming and explored the eternal state of living and dying that exists during the faint seconds between now and then, in that space that floats just above the shadows of reality. As in life, these images reveal that things are never as simple as black and white. What matters is what lies between. 

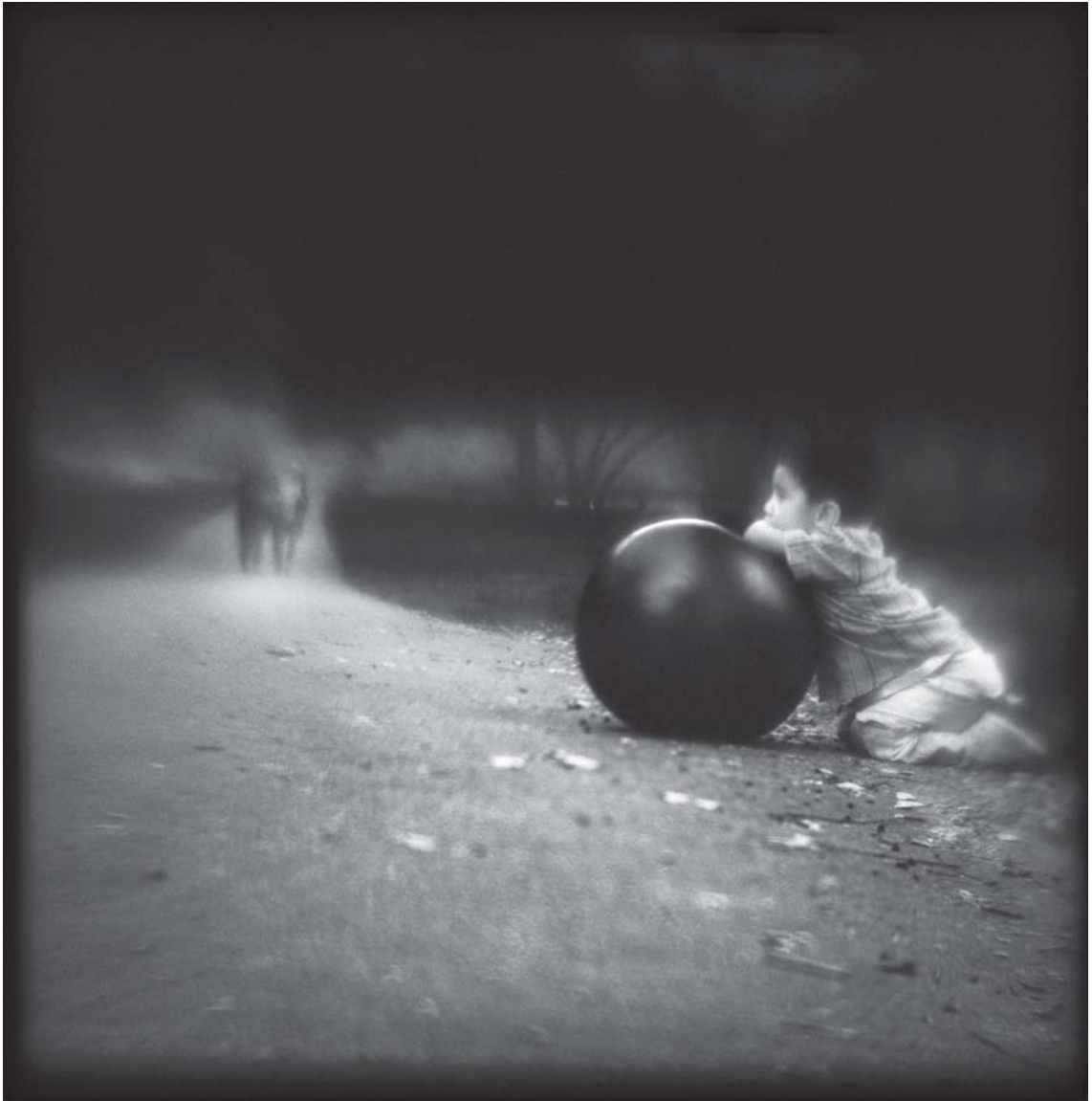
portfolio continued on following pages



Crossing the Bridge. From the "On Waking Dreams" series.



Flow. From the "Between" series.



When. From the "On Waking Dreams" series.

Susan Burnstine is represented by: Soulcatcher Studios, Santa Fe, NM.; Susan Spiritus Gallery, Newport Beach, CA.; Wall Space Gallery, Seattle, WA. (solo show March 4 to April 5 2008); Watermark Fine Art Photographs & Books, Houston, TX.