

S u s a n B u r n s t i n e

Los Angeles, California



Glide



In Passage



Bridge To Nowhere



Crossing the Bridge

Briefly describe this body of work. As a child, I suffered from vivid nightmares that led me to equate sleep with mortality, which frequently made it difficult for me 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, be it human, animal or from the natural world, have made a profound impact on me. With this series, I wanted to find a way to portray these types of dream-like visions, but entirely in-camera, rather than with post processing manipulations. To this end, I created a stable of homemade, plastic lenses and mounted them on homemade cameras. These cameras tend to leak like sieves and offer nothing more than a few shutter speeds and one f-stop. Learning to overcome their extensive limitations has required me to rely on instinct and intuition—the same tools key for attempting to understand dreams.

Who was the most significant person or what was the most significant event that was responsible for you becoming a photographer? 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. I was eight when she encouraged me to take photographs and she was the first to say there was something promising in my silly snapshots. When I was fourteen, she encouraged me to accept an after-school job as an assistant to a top commercial/occasion photographer in Chicago, where I learned the essentials of the business. By 21, I became burned-out on the world of commercial photography and left that job to pursue other interests. But my mom never stopped telling me how much she loved my pictures. When she died eight years ago, I became drawn to the camera she and my father had given me for my 12th birthday—my trusty Canon A-1. I started shooting incessantly again, but I told no one. And every time I clicked that shutter, it was as if I heard her cheering me on.

Why did you choose photography versus another means of expression? I fell in love with painting early on. But the pinnacle of my painting success occurred when I won first place for my rendition of a gun-slinging cowboy, wearing purple chaps and lassoing a green and white dairy cow, in Mrs. Millan's kindergarten class. It was all downhill from there. I've also always loved writing and I worked in that field professionally for some time. I have immense respect for the craft, but I never attained the great satisfaction photography gives me. When I look at the world through a lens (homemade or otherwise), I'm like a kid in a candy store who can't stop herself from excitedly grasping at everything I see. It's as if I've been given a license to visualize and express my own personal utopian or nightmarish existence through that lens—all for the price of a roll of film and some chemicals. Can't beat that.

What is the most insightful or meaningful compliment, criticism, or advice that you've received about your work? I took a class with Keith Carter about a year ago. I told him that I had had some success in a few creative professions (including my first incarnation as a photographer). With each one, though, I had become disillu-

sioned by the business side of that particular art form, got burned out and moved on to pursue other interests. Keith looked through my portfolio and said with certainty, "Well, don't burn out this time". Whenever I start to doubt my work, I try to remember his words of encouragement.

How does where you live most influence your photography? I live in Los Angeles, which is populated largely by transients from all over the world. Many of the people here seem to live solitary existences. [They] yearn for more and are uncertain if they'll remain or move on. This omnipresent question of whether to move forward or go back is a consistent theme in my work. Also, the principal industry in Los Angeles revolves around manufacturing dreams and illusions, and for many, this ultimately begs the question of what is real in such a surreal existence—yet another theme in my work.

Besides being a photographer, what have some of your other jobs been? Are you presently a full-time photographer, or do you have another job in order to earn a living? I've been all over the map in the entertain-

ment industry, doing everything from production assistant work, to assisting directors and screenwriters, to screenwriting, to script consulting. I was even a stand-up comic for years. Currently, I'm a professional photographer and freelance feature writer for *Black & White Photography* magazine (UK).

If you were to make a "soundtrack" to be played to accompany the viewing your photographs, whose music would you choose to put on it? When I shoot or when I view my work, I always hear the same thing—silence—layered with the faint hint of a droning, soft wind, muffled sporadic sounds such as a muted heartbeat, the surf hitting the sand, distant trains passing, children playing and subtle wind chimes mixed with violins and fading harmonic voices. I've always imagined this is what I would hear, walking down the hallway to heaven, yet it also reminds me of the sounds I hear when awaking from a dream. It's difficult to select one particular musician or song that recreates this sound, but it might be interesting to hear Yo-Yo Ma and Philip Glass reinterpret a Hildegard von Bingen chant as a mere hum amid the echo of wind.



Blue's Nose