

FROM THE DARK, COMES LIGHT

At the age of eight **Susan Burnstine** shot her first roll of film and committed herself to a life of self discovery and image making, the two inextricably linked. Elizabeth Roberts charts her journey and uncovers the drive behind it.

All images © Susan Burnstine



Opposite **Last Light Abiquiu** Above **The Long Road Home**

There has been a lot of talk in recent years about the homogenisation of photography; how modern technology has allowed us to reproduce 'reality'. Of course, much of this is good – we no longer need to be experts, poisoning our lungs and skin with unpleasant chemicals but can become a reasonably competent photographer within hours of purchasing a modern camera or even a smartphone.

So why would anyone turn their

sights back in time to the earliest days of photography and not just emulate but re-invent the camera? It doesn't seem to make sense, unless we look more carefully at that earlier statement that claimed the modern camera can reproduce 'reality'. Suppose you wanted quite the opposite – the representation of unreality and, in the case of *B+W* contributor Susan Burnstine, the representation of dreams.

In the introduction to her new book, *Absence of Being*, Susan speaks about her

early life and how, at the age of four, she began having terrible nightmares. Her mother, however, came up with a solution that she thought might help: 'With incredible foresight, my mother, Natalie, ultimately came up with a means to help me reinterpret my paralyzing unconscious world by creating art after I awoke. I'm not at all clear what I recalled consciously from these dreams, but being a musician and artist, she felt it was important I sketch, draw, paint, hodge-podge (whatever creative means inspired) >



Across the Line

◀ on that day) in an attempt to clarify the emotional resonance from the dream I had the night before. And the process worked.'

It wasn't long before the young Susan discovered photography as her creative medium. She went on to study photography, filmmaking, literature and psychology – a perfect combination it seems for her future role as an artist.

But it wasn't until 1999, following the death of her mother, that she began re-experiencing the night terrors of her childhood. As a way of assuaging her

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daytime fears she began by writing – and by photographing, but with little success in making the kind of images that resonated with her dreams, until she started using toy cameras which began to open up

possibilities. 'Inspiration ultimately came from my father and brother who, aware of my frustration, suggested I create handmade cameras and lenses,' she writes. 'I had already been hacking plastic cameras to create effects they are not capable of such as close-ups and telephoto. So my father suggested I create my own camera, which sounded like an insane idea at first. But being the daughter of a former inventor and engineer, his suggestion grew into a challenge that I became obsessed with solving.'



At the Edge of Darkness

To date, Susan has built 23 handmade film cameras and lenses that are intrinsically unpredictable, unstable and technically extremely challenging. From a creative point of view, this is a fascinating starting point, and combined with the psychological premise at the heart of Susan's work, it is unique.

In her afterword to *Absence of Being*, Chantel Paul correlates Susan's work with that of Julia Margaret Cameron: 'Burnstine's experience of discovering photography echoes that of Cameron's,

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both as self-taught photographers, and the deep connection to their artistic process. Treating the camera as an extension of her psyche, Cameron's poetic portraits of friends and family were steeped in mystery, story telling, and emotion...'

These links are clearly evident in the images that Susan produces through her painstaking and experimental method of creation. But at its core lies what she also shares with Cameron, and that is pre-vision. To metamorphose the intangibility of dreams that, by their nature, are ready to slip away as fast as they can be remembered, into the tangibility of a finished print is a challenge that must have a linear connection throughout the process. Susan writes of an image she took on a rainy day on Brooklyn Bridge: 'As the light began to fade, out of >





Previous spread Left **Around the Bend** Right **In Parting** Above **East Broadway, 7.02am**

◀ the corner of my eye, I saw a small figure of a woman in the distance, and immediately recalled similar forms in silhouette from a dream from the night before. I snapped four shots as she walked towards me. One of them became the first successful image of the series, *Impasse*. What followed was a profound experience that linked Susan with her past: '...it was as if my father was looking down from above and suddenly something made sense. I made two more images. One of which became, *As Above, So Below*. And with that, *Absence of Being* was born.'

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Susan's ability to create work that has its core in her emotional life is a mark of her being an artist. Unconcerned with commercial success, she struggled for many years to make images that were meaningful to her and, ultimately,

meaningful to her audience. Inevitably such talent was discovered and she now exhibits worldwide and her work is held in many prestigious private and public collections both in the USA and Canada, and she is represented by galleries across the world.

This new book, *Absence of Being*, offers us an intimate journey, accompanying her through the creative process that she has configured to lay the ghosts of her inner life: 'I continue to journal my dreams as I awake then reimagine them on to film as my own means of therapy. I have woven this process



Bixby Bridge, 3.36am

into the pages that follow by reprinting six excerpts from my dream journals: each appears on the page preceding the image it inspired. These unique pairings are the end result of the coping mechanism my mother taught me, which has allowed me to alter the darkness of my reality by reimagining my visions with light.'

The forceful creative drive behind this work is not likely to go away. If Freud's theory of creativity is correct – that creativity is a defence mechanism protecting against neurosis, which also has the benefit of

being enjoyed by others – Susan's work will continue to grow and develop in the years to come. An artist, who uses photography as her medium, and who remains true to her commitment, however complex the process, is a rare and special being. And Susan is one.

To see more of Susan's work visit susanburnstine.com *Absence of Being* by Susan Burnstine is published in hardback by Damiani at £35.

