

"We are such stuff /As dreams are made on; and our little life/Is rounded with a sleep."

—William Shakespeare (*The Tempest* Act 4, scene 1)

The Stuff of Dreams—If you didn't know or care to know how Susan Burnstine arrived at her photographs you would still be drawn to them on the *prima facie* strength of their imagery: cryptic narrative, intimacy of place, ambient mood—reflective, brooding, ominous, or melancholic. In sum, they resonate with a latent tension of immediacy and memory. I'm impressed in part because I am rarely drawn to this introspective style of photography, preferring instead the unscripted encounters of the camera with real-life subjects and local narratives that are especially the province of the photojournalist: they capture the extraordinary in the ordinary, uncover the poignant in the prosaic. Photojournalism spans the Parisian street scenes of Henri Cartier-Bresson to the vast Midwestern landscapes of Art Sinsabaugh. Of course there is no hierarchy of styles in photography any more than in painting. That said, I confess that I come to photography with something of the Modernist, reductive view of art making advanced by Clement Greenberg—i.e., that it works best when it exploits what is most germane to the nature of the medium. I would maintain (and point for support to subsequent painting and pluralist genres since the 1960s) that Greenberg's aesthetic still holds, but his view of the nature of a medium was too narrow, being too literal and formalist. He defined the medium for painting—for him the primary referent—in terms of the "ineluctable flatness" of the canvas support and, consequently, a flat, two-dimensional image undiluted by illusion or any other inference of three-dimensional objects. It would be just as narrow to define the photographic medium simply, or even principally, in terms of the lens's unique descriptive-narrative function, which displaced the primacy of that role for painting.

Burnstine's recent body of work, then, is more about probing the subjective than capturing the subject. It is autobiographical, an account of her coming to terms, through her photographs, with chronic nightmares she endured in her childhood, and intense dreams she continues to experience as an adult. The trilogy *Within Shadows* "explores the fleeting moments between dreaming and waking—the blurred seconds in which imagination and reality collide" (artist statement). Burnstine's prints transform this "curious synthesis of magic and reality" into "portals to the unknown...pathways that seemed to bridge the gap between real and unreal, life and death...now, it is through my dreams that I truly see." The subjects—usually a solitary figure in a park, on a winding road, beachfront, or bridge, an opening in the woods, an interior—are recognizable but out of focus, a blurring that conveys one or another of three Jungian, dreamlike states of mind explored in the relevant series of photos that comprise her *Shadows* trilogy: *On Waking Dreams* (dreaming/subconscious), *Between* (sleeping/unconscious), and *Flight* (waking/conscious).

For all the introspection, Burnstine's solitary subjects very rarely (e.g. *Suspend*—okay maybe *Clearance*, too) wander into the lyrical fantasy genres that often attach to such highly personal scrutiny of the self, too often yielding impressionistic vignettes of foggy shores and misty forest settings that evoke some Middle-earth of halflings, orcs, and elves, or at best transform a woodland setting into an outtake from a Gothic romance, à la *Wuthering Heights* or *Woman in White* (Wilkie Collins meets Andrew Lloyd Webber).

But if Burnstine's veiled images look to the Surrealist strain of Modernism, her image making also ties her indirectly to the late Modern, formalist tenet (shared in common by the Surrealists, though coming from a different rationale) about the purity of the medium, insofar as that led to a shift in focus from the subject to the process. Or as sociologist and cultural critic Daniel Bell (no fan

of the avant-garde) framed it in the 1970s, "a preoccupation not with the content or form (i.e., style and genre), but with the medium of art itself...[such preoccupations] are expressions of the self, rather than formal explorations." But it can be both, as in this case. Burnstine's photographic process hinges on twenty-one homemade, medium format cameras and lenses which she herself made, using "plastic vintage camera parts and random household objects." These "toy cameras" are central to her method and the technical source for its effects, especially as Burnstine eschews any post-processing techniques.

Arguably one could achieve the same or similar effects simply by using Photoshop, with the viewer (and the print) none the wiser or worse off for not knowing. But the often chance visual effects of Burnstine's unpredictable plastic cameras provide her with a surrealist lens that relies on instinct and intuition—"the same tools that are key when attempting to interpret dreams"—rather than on Photoshop. It is a lens that senses the lonely figure on the *Bridge to Nowhere*, or captures *Glide*'s young girl cavorting in low tide near an aging ocean pier that recedes out to sea in ungainly grace, beneath a vast canopy of dotting dark clouds and dazzling twilight. This is the stuff of dreams.

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Susan Burnstine, *Within These Walls*, archival pigment ink print, 16" x 16", 2009