

DREAM TRUTHS

SUSAN BURNSTINE



Seward Highway, 3:18PM.
Near Anchorage, Alaska, 2015

Susan Burnstine is an award winning fine art photographer based out of Los Angeles, USA. Her first monograph, *Within Shadows*, published by Charta Editions, earned the gold award at the Prix De La Photographie, Paris (Px3) in the Professional Fine Art Books category and went on to garner much critical acclaim. In her work, Susan creates a space that might lie in the foothills of the real but roots itself in the phantasmal world of her dreams.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUSAN BURNSTINE / TEXT BY CHANDAN GOMES



Lost in Mississippi, 2012

Through what one might call the conspiracy of chance, I happened to read *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, right before I encountered Susan Burnstine's photographs. In the fabled world of Tlön, as conceived by Borges, ideas manifest themselves in the physical world aided by imagination. He writes, "The metaphysicians of Tlön are not looking for truth or even an approximation to it; they are after a kind of amazement. They consider metaphysics a branch of fantastic literature."

Photographs for long have been central to many metaphysical discourses for their alleged allegiance to reality.

Susan's work is deeply personal and is rooted in memories of her childhood—she has suffered from night terrors since the age of four. As an attempt to help her cope with these nightmares, her mother encouraged her to draw her dreams. This immensely helped Susan in overcoming some of her fears and controlling these nightmares.

However, when Susan's mother passed away, her nightmares came back to haunt her. "I decided to work out the effects of the night terrors by photographing my dreams and nightmares, because photography was my main source of creativity at that point," said Burnstine in an interview with Jonathan Blaustein of aPhotoEditor.com

Burnstine's photographs are ethereal and often dramatic. They also have an impressionistic quality to them, which does not come as a surprise—when Susan was six, she visited the Chicago Art Institute with her mother, where she got inspired by the Impressionists and decided to become a painter. It is this early love for painting that enriches her photography. Works like Andrew Wyeth's painting *Christina's World* and Edward Steichen's photographs *The Pond—Moonlight* and *The Flatiron* have shaped her artistic sensibilities.

Shot in black and white, Susan's photographs are not merely a straightforward depiction of her dreams; but also a reflection on their nature and the tense but intimate relationship they share with her memories. They are delicate, veiled; they reveal and conceal at the same time, like a secret, which can be shared with everyone, but understood only by a select few, who are patient and empathic enough to receive it. Her photographs belong in that twilight zone between wakefulness and sleep, fact and memory, time and timelessness.

While going through her different bodies of work, I was reminded of something Marcel Proust wrote: "The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." What she photographs is the everyday, the mundane—cityscapes, foot over bridges, playgrounds, subway stations—but how she photographs these, separates her from the rest.

Burnstine endeavours to portray her dreamscapes entirely in-camera, rather than relying on post processing techniques. Her tryst with conventional cameras was short-lived as she found it difficult to photograph her dreams using them. She then started experimenting with the Dianas and the Holgas. As she delved deeper into them, she started modifying these cameras; however, the photographs she made still

looked like the regular toy camera images. Burnstine soon realised that through her photographs, she wanted to establish a way of seeing that was unique and intricate. To achieve this, her father, a former engineer and inventor, advised her to make her own camera and lens. Since then, she has created twenty-one handmade film cameras and lenses. The cameras are primarily made out of plastic, vintage camera parts, and random household objects, with single-element lenses molded from plastic and rubber. Since these cameras that she builds are made from found objects, they are unpredictable and have numerous optical limitations. But Susan ensured that these weaknesses transformed into strengths, leading her to create two formidable bodies of work—*Within Shadows* and *Absence of Being*.

Within Shadows was conceived like a trilogy and contains three chapters—*On Waking Dreams*, *Between* and *Flight*. These chapters deal with the three states of the mind—the subconscious, the unconscious and the conscious. The photographs offer both a mirror and a window into Burnstine's many worlds that find an anchor in her longing to preserve memories. The photographs have a transient quality to them and build an ideation of time that is shape shifting, porous. *Within Shadows* took the form of a monograph in 2011 and went on to garner much critical acclaim.

Absence of Being, her latest body of work, was created in the aftermath of her father's death, who suffered from a massive stroke in June 2009 that left him paralysed. Her photographs are an ode to his exemplary will to survive against all odds. They also beg the question whether death is a phenomenon external to life or an event in it? How does one understand presence in absence? And what happens to memories, which cease to exist for the person you shared them with—do they then fade away or transform into stories that have no beginnings and endings?

Susan Burnstine's work is lucid, intuitive, layered, and open to interpretation. But despite its musings with metaphysics, it also has an epistemic quality to it—it reflects on the inevitability of loss in the face of our mortality and the permanence of pain, even though suffering can be and usually is short lived. |

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— Marcel Proust



The Long Road Home



Breakwater Light
Rockport, Maine, 2013

