

INTERVIEW: Jessica Backhaus

Posted on March 11, 2014 by fotoinfinitum



Jessica Backhaus provides an incredible amount of visual chemistry between natural light and the objects she encounters, producing a contemporary twist to still life. Her work often reflects the simplicity of a day gone past, visual poetry within fleeting moments captured behind a lens.

Here is my interview with Jessica, where we talk about her recent inclusion in an all women photography book, her love of objects, the problem with social media, her mentorship with legendary photographer, Gisele Freund, as well as Jessica's new personal evolution with her upcoming work.

Now, I look back at these years and they have been the most incredible gift. Last year in the fall, Kunsthalle in Erfurt, Germany, dedicated a show with Gisele's work and my work. It was a really beautiful show and it would have been nice for you to see it.

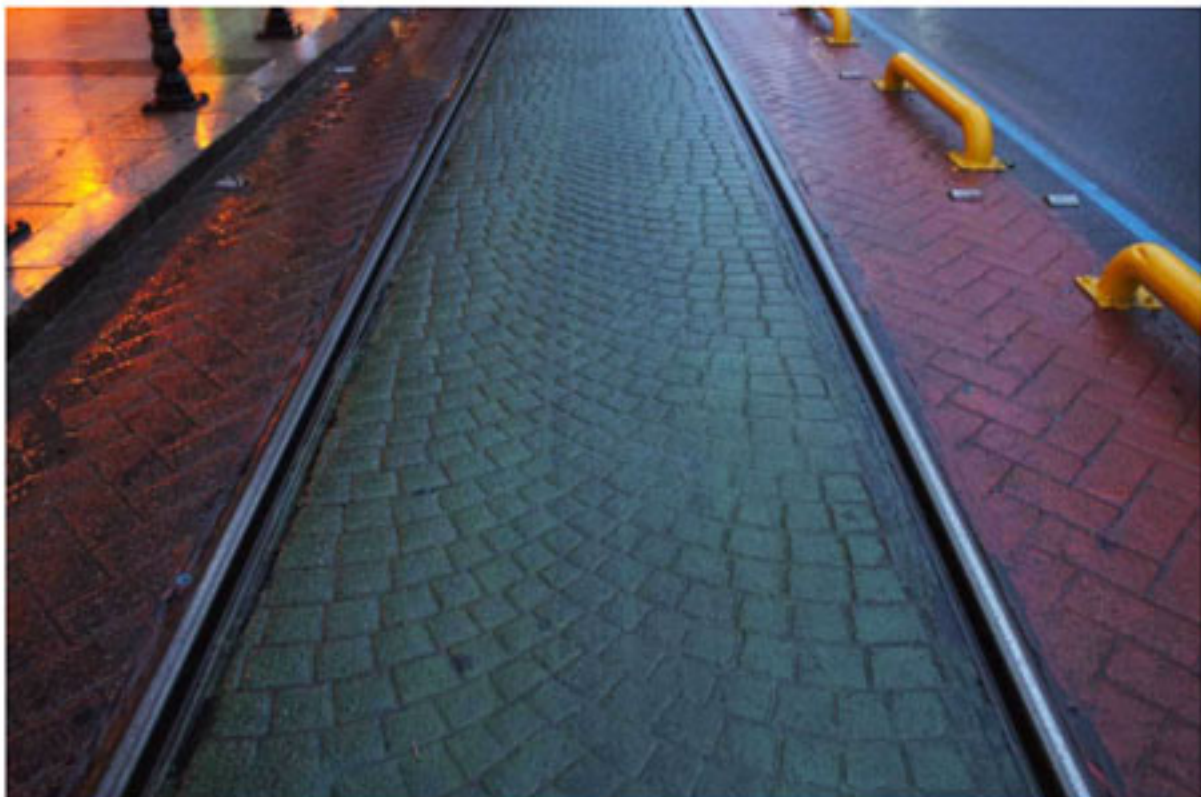
Yes, I would have loved that.

Gisele was incredible. She was a very educated and intelligent woman. She created legendary portraits and did journalistic work as well. She did reportage, and for the majority of the time she was able to write the text that runs along with the reportage. She was very fluent in at least three or four languages.

Which are all still great qualities to have today being a woman photographer.

That's true. I love the whole journey because in the end it's not really just a profession from nine to five, I think it's more a life you choose to live. The work, you choose to integrate in your life, and your life is integrated in the work. So, it's a long road, and you need a lot of patience. It's challenging, like I guess in any other creative field.

I think the key is to really have a passion and really see it. It [the work] has to feel like a necessity. That is what you have to do. Now a days I recognize when I give workshops, or when I have students, that everything they want is instant success and stardom. They want to have the gallery show right away, they want to have the big show right away, and then the museum on top of it. They're unaware that it really takes years. I mean sometimes, if you're lucky, it doesn't take years. There is always the wonderful exception where by some miracle it goes much faster for them, but in the general way, it really is a long commitment — a long investment that you have to do.



A New Road (from the series Once Still and Forever), 2011.

Yes, that's one of the greatest (and saddest) things about art, it takes a long time to succeed but you're still building your craft along the way.

You've just got to keep working. Even when you're established, you think everything is easy, and you think your phone is ringing non stop and your art is wanted everywhere. That is not true either. No. You really have to work hard, and keep at it. You should always challenge yourself, and not get influenced too much by the art world or what other people want you to do. You've just got to stick with what you believe in and what you want to work on.

Very well said. What are some of your inspirations today?

Oh I have many. This month I'm doing a workshop in Milan and one of the parts is that I speak and lecture about all my inspirations. I think there is so much incredible work out there. To name a few, it's not only photography, as you probably can imagine. I'm inspired by installation art, video art, I love film. I'm definitely a film person.

Here are Jessica's favorite inspirational artists:

Agnes Martin, Dana Lixenberg, Olafur Eliasson, Wolfgang Tillmans, Yayoi Kusama, Peter Puklus, Lucas Blalock, Luigi Ghirri, David Claerbout, Marina Abramovic, Roe Ethridge, Cuny Janssen, Gabriel Orozco, Peter Fraser, Masao Yamamoto, Arno Fischer, Bruce Wrighton, Stephen Gill, Robert Frank, Adam Bartos, Gerhard Richter, Louise Bourgeois, William Eggleston, Rineke Dijkstra, Sophie Calle, Yto Barrada, Matthias Weischer, Luc Tuymans, Roni Horn, Cy Twombly, Saul Leiter, Helen Frankenthaler, Nicolas de Stael, Steve McQueen, James Turrell, and Pierre Huyghes.

What are your photographic goals lately? Do you have any upcoming projects?

I have three things that I have on my mind that I'm about to start working on. One project is something I think it will be much more of a long term project that I want to do in Chile, in Valparaíso. I went there last year for the first time and I was really mesmerized by this city, the harbor city, and I find it very interesting. So I'm thinking of developing a project there where again, for the first time, I will take the challenge on and take pictures of people again.



Dorota (from the series *Jesus and the Cherries*), 2003.

That would be great!

I want to mix my still life and interiors with portraits again. And then, I want to start a project in the spring in my hometown. I was born in Cuxhaven, Germany at the north sea, but I only spent three days there in my life. Recently my mother and her partner, moved into a new apartment. In there old house I found all these old objects from when I was ten years old to a teenager. So I'm coming across these old objects, some I've kept, some of course I got rid of, but I kind of thought it would be nice to do something where I was born, and see what I can find there. I would like to combine these old objects from the past with some objects I've been collecting in the present, to create my own still life for the first time. I don't know if it will work, I don't know if I'm going to like the result, but I definitely think I want to give it a try. I'm also interested in doing some moving images, some videos. I've started doing some experimental stuff, but it would have to be very simple subjects that I'd want to film. I need to do more and get more skilled.



Eternity (from the series What Still Remains), 2008.

It would be wonderful to see your shift from still life to video.

Mhm. I think it's time. I think its good to stay true to yourself regardless of the art form you express yourself in. I would like to take new turns and evolve in a new direction. I'm interested in various art forms. Now we have access to so many possibilities. I'm looking forward to unknown territories. Nothing is concrete at the moment, but that's all part of the journey.

Lastly, I know you've already given some great points, but do you have any advice for the next generation of photographers?

When I started, because it's such a long road, you don't really have a guarantee. You simply don't know how it all turns out. I remember my mother saying at one point, you have to have the skin like a flower. You know, you have to be so vulnerable and so transparent and delicate so that you can open yourself up to the world, and you can be sensitive, and you can create your art, but at the same time of having this really thin skin, you have to have the skin of an elephant to support and deal with all the rejection you're going to get.

I love that!

It's this fine line, a challenge of keeping at it. Even if there are moments you think, what am I going to do? Will someone ever really care about my work? I believe you really got to keep at it. I want to believe that good work gets recognized and to the public. You have to be dedicated and really work hard. You can't expect that your galleries, or your publisher will do all the work for you once you're established, because that's not realistic. It's a collaboration. When it's a collaboration, everybody does their part. If you want something you've just got to go out and get it.

Well, I want to thank you so much Jessica. I feel so happy to have spoken with you.

I'm glad and thank you so much for including me! I wish you all the best!

JB: It's funny that you mention March being Women's History Month, because as I said to you — I think in America it's going to come out in April — next month this book published by Prestel, they chose fifty-five women photographers who are relevant to the beginning of photography up until now, to contemporary photography. It's definitely something, if you're interested in that subject matter, you should look into.

ML: Yes! And you're going to be included in the book, correct?

JB: Yes, I have the fortunate honor to be included. I am definitely very happy about that, it's great.

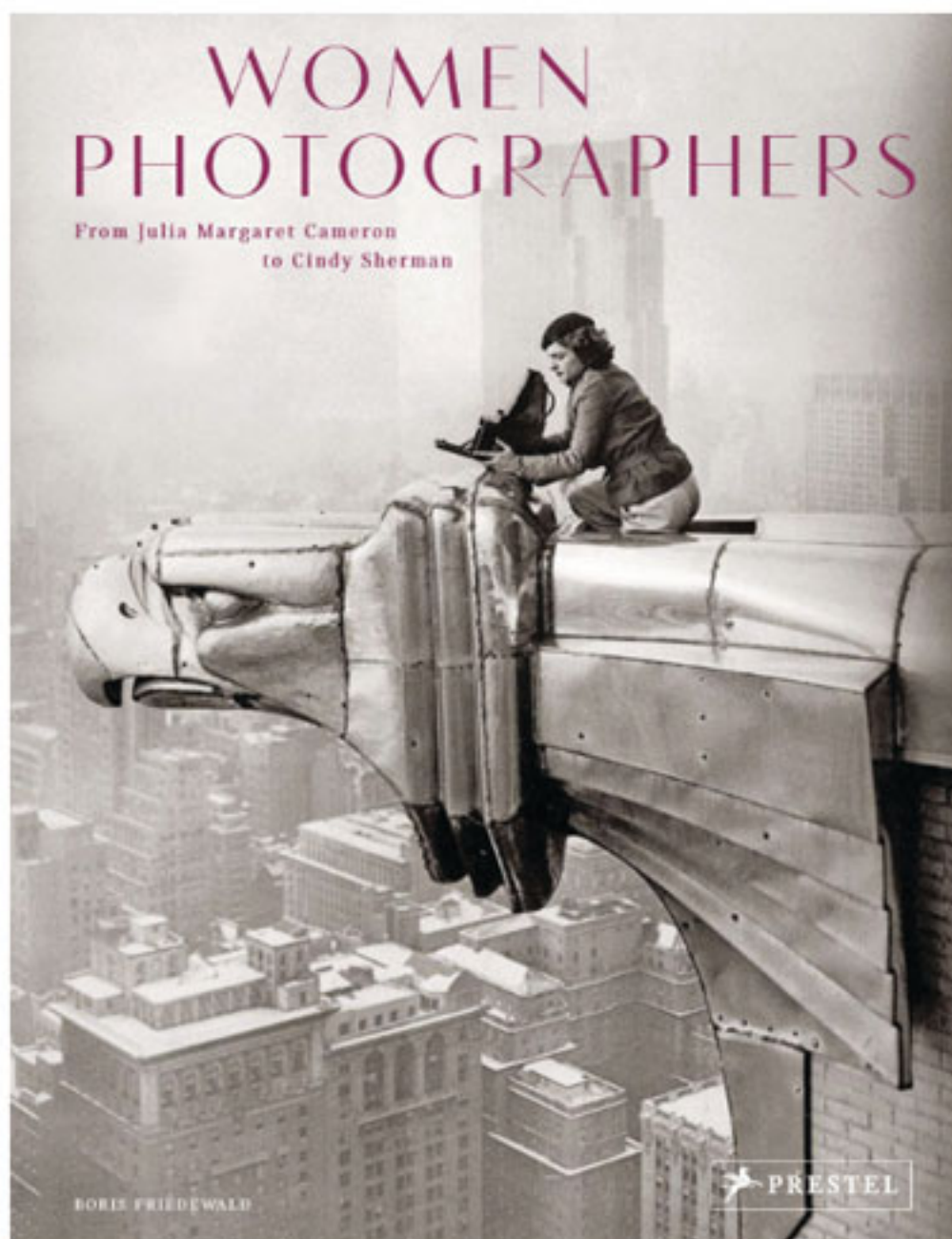


image via randomhouse.de

I would like to know about your early childhood. I know your parents were involved in theater, your mom being an actress, and your father was a theatre director. What was it like being surrounded by creativity at such an early age?

I can honestly say it was fantastic! [laughs] It really was! For me, being a child was always very colorful and very much alive. In our house people came, other artists, painters, musicians, and you know, it was the 70's, the beginning of the 80's, and everything was just possible. People were mingling, and I definitely enjoyed after school I went into the theater every time. Apart from when I was doing homework, I was watching various acts and rehearsals on stage — the lighting, the set design, for me it was very exciting.

Later on as a teenager, my mother and myself moved to Berlin when my parents divorced. Her partner then had a photo agency where I spent my teenage years in an archive of millions of photographs. I was spending all day long, looking, searching for portraits, reportage, films I liked, and I think somehow by growing up in these two environments, I decided when I was about seventeen or eighteen, I wanted to become a photographer. Also, because I found myself in the position where I was always looking, you know, observing. I was always behind rather than in front, and I think somehow there, the dream, the desire, was born to become a photographer.

That's great! You had the opportunity to take in your surroundings early on.

Yeah it was very good! But then again, I have a friend who is a doctor who kind of always wanted to be a photographer and he said 'Oh you had it easy! You had parents who were artists, of course they'll support you! You had it easy to make that choice,' and I said, that's so wrong because first off, *you* need to be the one to decide what you want to do. If your parents wanted you to become a doctor, or lawyer, and you went for it, well, you're responsible for it. You have the possibility and the choice. In the end I think it's just about the amount of will power and passion to want something that badly. So yes, it [witnessing theater] helped me, but when I think about it, my mother — she is my biggest critic. She was suspicious if I could survive being a photographer.

It's interesting because from a packed theater house, your work is typically devoid of people.

Well that's interesting too, because I mean I watched in the theater how everything was on set. Everything was arranged, and then later on when I was living in New York, I assisted for five years for various photographers. I worked a lot with fashion photographers, some interior photographers, too. When I was working with them everything was about lighting. I mean sometimes, up to almost one, two trucks full of lighting. And it's interesting then how even though my school was working with so much lighting equipment, in the end, I chose not to have any artificial lighting, just work with available light. I completely went the opposite way from what I was developing in.



Honey (from the series One Day In November), 2008.

I find that so interesting because you photograph things, like Honey and a room with a pinned up Marlon Brando on the wall, and glassware. I can't help but wonder about your relationship with objects.

I think after I did my first project, Jesus and the Cherries, the only project where I did portraits, and that was a beautiful experience my first project, for many reasons. But afterwards I did feel, I don't know. I needed a break. I wanted to have the freedom to take pictures whenever I can and wherever I can. I didn't want to be limited to one particular country or region. I think it was a natural development that I began having relationships with interiors, in particular with still lifes, with objects. I think that even though the human being is absent, you can feel so much through the absence. It's almost like humanity is present.



Marlon Brando (from the series What Still Remains), 2006.

Yeah exactly. Even though there is no physical presence in the photograph, you still get the essence of life there. Definitely.

Yes, and I love still lifes. I get asked a lot if I make any arrangements, or if I find these things and then put them together, and up until now at least, the answer is no. I don't touch anything. What I choose of course is my framing and composition, but that's pretty much it.

Do you photograph alone?

Most of the time I'm alone. I don't really work with any big team. I don't have a big studio manager. I'm working with people, like my publisher, my galleries, and my lab. When I was living in New York for fourteen years, I did all my color printing, my own contact sheets, all on my own. And now, since I moved back to Berlin, I work with a printer, but I'm just doing the judging. I'm not physically in the dark room anymore like I used to be, otherwise I really try to do everything on my own. I really like the whole process.



Magnetawan (from the series One Day In November), 2006.

I love that though! Your manner of photographing reminds me so much of Lee Friedlander. How he photographed tremendously alone, and he found himself within his photographs. I think that is beautiful.

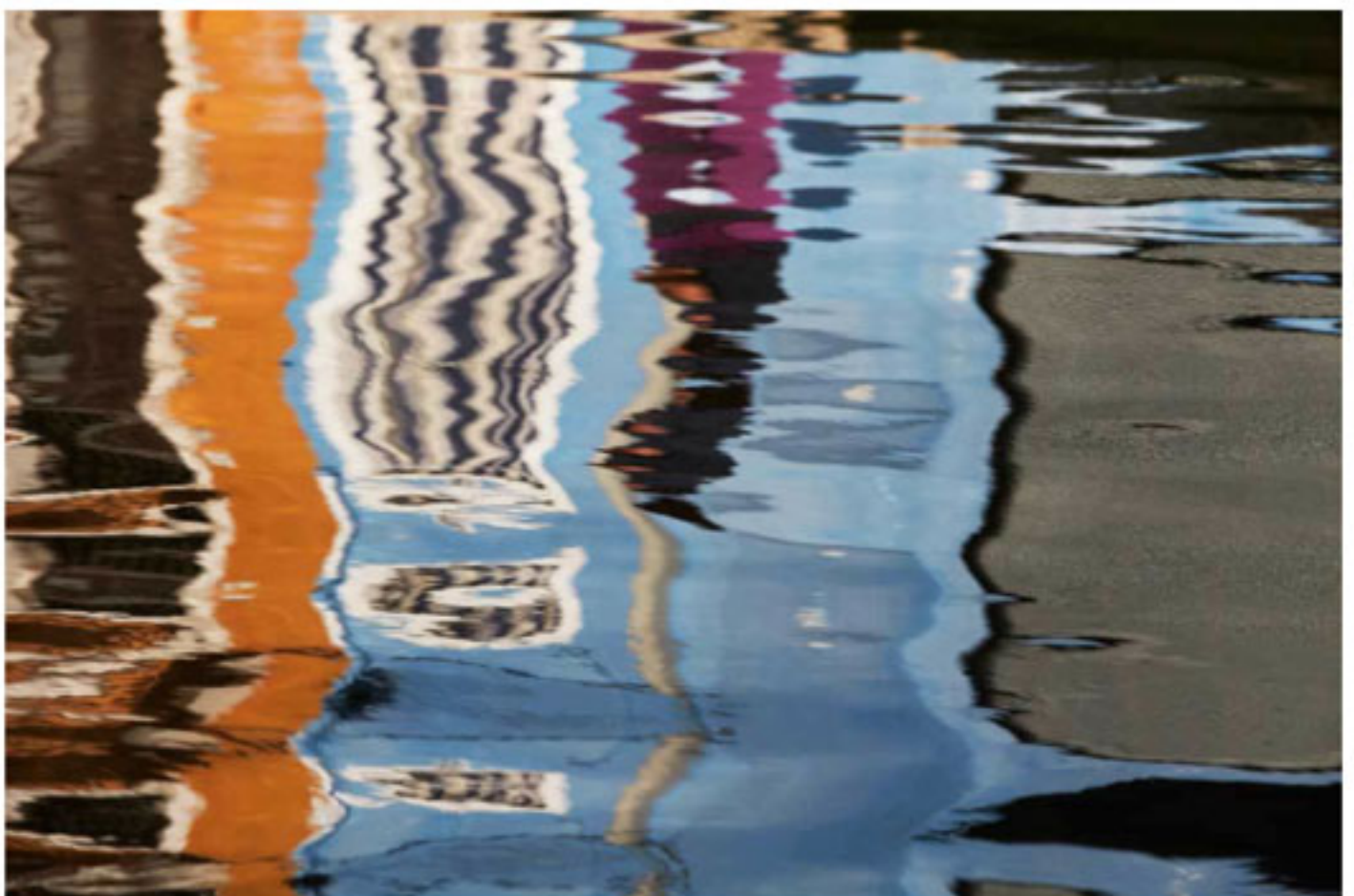
Yes, yes. I think it's important to be alone. There's this wonderful book that I really worship. It's a book from the painter, Agnes Martin. She published a book about her writings. She wrote about topics such as what it means to be an artist, about beauty, about loneliness, all these different subject matters.

“ I suggest to artists that you take every opportunity of being alone, that you give up having pets and unnecessary companions. You will find the fear that we have been taught is not just one fear but many different fears. When you discover what they are they will be overcome. Most people have never been alone enough to feel these fears. But even without the experience of them they dread them. I suggest that people who like to be alone, who walk alone will perhaps be serious workers in the art field.

– Agnes Martin

Yeah. I mean now a days, it feels like no one wants to be alone. With things like Instagram, people want to feel connected. We're in a constant of sharing.

I get asked often 'Why aren't you on Instagram? Why aren't you on Facebook?' I simply can't. I'm already fully engaged in the world that I don't feel the necessity for me to have this constant connection for every step, every move, every picture I take. In the end I find that social media can be very distracting.



What would you say is your key process when you compose an image?

Oh it depends, before I used to shoot mainly analogue. I was using a Pentax 67, and my favorite was the Mamiya 645. I love these two cameras, and of course it was still film, and you had not that many frames on a roll of film. It was a much different process. And now with digital, of course, you can shoot as many pictures as you want, but even then I guess it really depends on the subject matter that I come across. Sometimes for example, in one of my books *What Still Remains*, the image *Once Upon A Time*, it's a floor — this linoleum floor with a scratch in it. Sometimes I try to see if it works best horizontally or as a vertical image, but most of the time, instantly you feel this image has to be vertical. Most of the time I shoot my first frame and then, because I'm so happy that I found something that attracts my eye and I think it's good, I still can't let go so I take a few more frames just because I have the anxiety of not getting it. And when I do my editing most of the time I come back to the first image, the good one, or it's the last one when I know I'm about to let go and I've got to concentrate and really get it now. I never take that many, but more or less, it's usually the first frame or the last frame that I end up using for my final edit. You can dance a little bit around it to see what else you can do, but I feel it's never as strong or good as the first vision you had.



Once Upon A Time (from the series *What Still Remains*), 2007.

You had one of the most incredible mentorships with legendary, Gisele Freund.

Yes, that was a blessing.

Do you share any connections with Gisele as to what it means to be a woman photographer?

Well I think it's a bit difficult to put any comparison in her life being a woman — being a photographer — and my life now, because there are generations in-between us. In her time everything was different. Photography was different. The life itself, the conditions in which she was living and most of the world at the time, she had a really challenging life. That was still at a time when of course her parents at the beginning didn't want her to study. A woman, having a profession? Doing something with her life? No. It's rather you have children, you stay behind and cook. So she was already a rebel, and she didn't want any of it.

The world I am in, everything has changed so much, and I think, thank god it has evolved a little bit now that women are artists, they are directing films, even though it's still more dominated by men. But more and more now, women break free and start to get noticed, and get their own place within the art world, or in general in society. When I met her she was 84 and I was 22, and of course it was fascinating being able to talk to her, and then becoming very close to her. We became friends. She was my mentor, and she was like my grandmother. We talked a lot! Not only just about photography, but about life itself. Gisele was a very brave woman, and her courage is still inspiring me.



Glasses (from the series One Day In November), 2008.