

## The Alternative Photography of Michael McCarthy



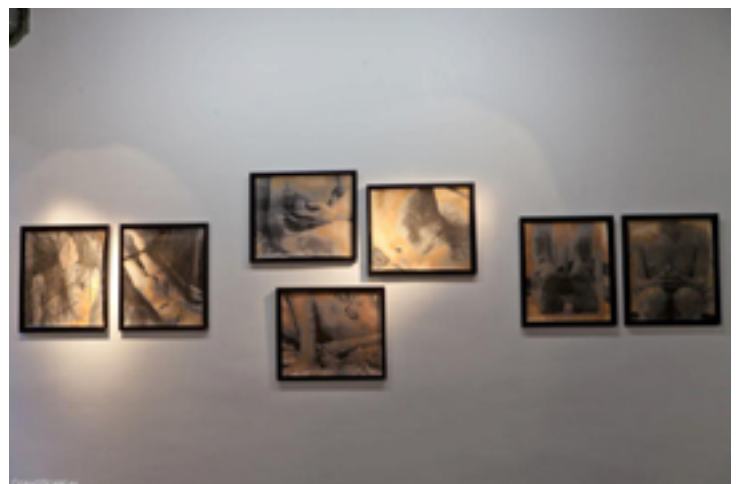
For his exhibition *Human Form* at Galerie Duboys in the Marais in Paris, you will find the physical, psychological and alternative visions of American artist Michael McCarthy. We join him in this gallery for an interview/guided visit of his photographic work which he continues to develop (and which is enriched) by his travels.

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***We are in the gallery today viewing the current exhibition entitled *Human Form*, which revolves around the theme of the body—and often it's your body which is presented. Why this subject?***

I believe the body is the center of our existence. There's nothing, no thought, no spirituality—without the body. It's the place where all our experiences are centered—pleasure, suffering and so on. Our bodies are all, one day, going to fail us. The body is the great problem for all living beings.

Post modernism has played an important role and shown us the impact of the media on the creation of personal identity in the modern world. Where I believe post-modernism has failed is in its refusal to explore what is behind this notion of image—which is our body and its limited nature. It's, of course, interesting to raise questions about the truthfulness of our identities, how they are to some degree undoubtedly constructed from society and from the influence of the media which surround us. But behind all this is an undeniable reality: we are mortal. As my mother once said: the greatest cause of death is birth! And this idea of mortality doesn't leave anyone indifferent.



***Working on this subject in your art work—does this offer relief?***

I wouldn't say that it creates a relief...but rather that it's a means to reflect on this question of mortality. But it's more than a morbid curiosity; for me there is something really heroic and courageous in human nature, in the idea of our battle against mortality, continuing to push the boulder up the mountain like Sisyphus.



**How did the Human Form exhibition come about?**

The gallery directors (Dominique Ballé Calix and Thierry Diers) had the idea to do an exhibition, in the beginning, focused on the idea of black and white and they were interested in work that dealt with the figure. The video installation artist Frédérique Chauveaux walked into the gallery one day to show some of her videos—and the directors immediately fell in love with her work. One week later it was my turn: I came to

present my work and the directors immediately saw the connection between my work and Frédérique's. It all happened very fast and now, a few months later, the work is installed in the gallery!

**It's not the first time you exhibit in France?**

No, but it's the first time in a gallery of this standing—very elegant, perfectly situated in the Marais, with a real team that is dedicated to their mission.... Before I was always looking for a new place to show—as is the case with so many artists today—in universities, in art schools and in art centers.

**Yes, because you are also a professor...**

Yes, I've been teaching for nearly 20 years—mostly in the American system. After having finished my Master of Fine Arts in photography at Tyler School of Art in the US, I taught in Philadelphia for several years before returning to Europe. I spent four years in Italy and then two in Greece where I taught photography as well as other art subjects to international (mostly American) university students. Then, about four years ago, we came back to Paris and since this time I've been teaching photo in different schools, a bit sporadically for now.



**You speak of family influences, especially your mother. In what ways does your parent's influence appear in your photography work?**

It's interesting...I always think more about my mother as the main influence on my art work but it's true that for my father sports always played a central role in his life and in his relations to me and my two older brothers. We were always playing one sport or another growing up.

**Sport is also centered on the idea of the body, after all.**

Exactly! From the beginning, playing soccer or baseball—I always loved to run around, be outside in nature. When I started making photos it was normal that I should have chosen, in part, to focus on the question of the body. In terms of the influence of my mother, she certainly played an important and central role. She was the one passionately interested in the idea of beauty wherever she could find it. She was the one who brought me to see the exhibits of Picasso and Van Gogh and others in New York.

Besides this, she only began her university studies when I was about ten years old. She specialized in psychology (and later became a psychologist) and therefore, growing up, we were always talking about psychology. And this is a subject that has always interested me since. My "Anti-Portraits" series is, above all, a study in psychology. I chose this title as a reaction against the tradition of photo portraiture where the goal seems always to be to make flattering pictures of the subject and to focus primarily on the appearance of the subject. The vanity of subjects always frustrated me and therefore I wanted to play with this tradition and try to show the emotional and psychological side, the inner world, while downplaying the notion of conventional beauty and physical appearance.

To escape the pressure of my subjects and their desire to always have flattering pictures, I decided to be my own subject so I would have maximum freedom to follow any direction I wished, including some of the very emotionally dark images in the show. I've always been interested in the idea of a photography being linked to the real world. It fascinates me how strong that link can be when we look at photos. I try, in pulling myself away from a more recognizable reality, to introduce the idea of different possibilities, different realities. Reality isn't only what we see but also our emotions, our psychology—which are always in evolution.



**You are known, in part, for your work with alternative photography. What does this mean for you?**

There isn't just one reality in the world and therefore, there isn't just one photography either. For the last ten or fifteen years, I have the impression that photography has been dominated by an approach which favors precision,





color, and the digital. I think we need other voices in the world of artistic photography besides the German or Northern school (with the Bechers, Thomas Struth, Gursky, Rineke Dijkstra and others). For me, alternative photography is a means to go beyond a photography that functions primarily as a re-transcription of the world. Those who work in alternative photo are often accused of wanting only to make pretty pictures. It's true that this tendency does exist among many who work in the alternative photo mode. For me, it's not enough to transform a black and white image into a cyanotype or gum bichromate print. I undertake countless tests and experiments, including work with digital photography, to find a combination of techniques and processes which, put together with specific subjects and ideas, give something new that corresponds with my way of seeing and experiencing the world around me.

**What are these techniques?**

This series in blue, entitled "Whatever is closest is most mysterious" (from a David Hockney quote) are cyanotypes, one of the oldest photo processes. And yet they started as digital im-

ages. I like sometimes combining digital images with the older processes where I prepare the emulsions myself from various powdered chemicals which I then paint onto a support. This hand made quality transforms and hides the neutral and sterile quality of digital imagery. Next, the creation of negatives using a low quality printer adds an element of mystery to the final image. For the other two series—"Bodies" and "Anti-Portraits"—these photos began with shooting black and white film. The whole process is a bit long but at the end I have a new negative but on paper instead of film. Once I have this negative, I begin the work of transforming the negative using pencils, pens, razors, an eraser and many others! Just now in Paris, Joel Peter Witkin has an exhibit of his work at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. During the 80s and 90s he was at the center of a small movement in the fine art photo world that helped re-launch one part of this tradition of alternative photography. When I was a student in the 80s the big influence in photo departments at American universities and art schools was still Ansel Adams. The negative was something sacred, one never risked damaging it! Witkin's work, along with the Starn Twins, opened a path in photography that had rarely been explored for decades. This appealed to me as I tend to identify more with painters. I love photography, but I like to add something and to see the hand of the artist in the work.

**I like your idea that the shooting of the photograph is only the beginning of a photo. Could you explain your style of working with the negative?**

There are at least two different



approaches in this exhibition. In the "Bodies" and "Anti-Portraits" series, the images are made from paper negatives. There are several steps: I begin with a black and white negative, I make a small print, then a contact print of this to reverse it to a negative, I then need to prepare the negative to be able to use it in an enlarger. It's at this moment that the play starts: I crumple, tear, scratch and draw upon the negative to create a new image that incorporates new marks along with the original photographic image. It's clear that my experiences working with etching,

begun when I was working on my Master of Fine Arts, had a big influence on this work. When I make these prints, I proceed in stages just as I would with etching. If I'm not happy with the effect I can return to the paper negative to rework it or if I'm really not happy, I can go back to the original film negative and start again from the beginning. Once I'm happy with the print, I begin the finishing touches with all sorts of different toners—classic ones like sepia and selenium, tea and coffee—but also with unconventional chemicals that I found after many experiments that can give colors like the yellow-oranges of the Bodies series.

For the cyanotypes of the series "Whatever is closest is most mysterious," it's a little different. I taught in Greece for two years and didn't have a great set of equipment—but I had lots of sun! Cyanotypes don't need a conventional black and white darkroom. Prints are made with ultraviolet light—of which the sun is the best source. One of the qualities of cyanotypes and other non-silver processes that rely on ultraviolet light that I like best is that much of the work can actually be done outdoors in sunlight. However, all these processes won't work as enlargements as with conventional black and white or color photography. That is, you need a negative that is the same size as the final print. When Hockney mentioned his idea that whatever is closest is most mysterious, he was talking about the cubist work of Picasso. He suggests that cubism is a movement related to realism, not abstraction, and that when one is very close to something or someone we don't see them clearly (we can have the impression of seeing two noses or three eyes). I wanted this series to show faces much bigger than normal to give them weight, a feeling of heaviness. To get this large negative without a large format printer I had to do some handy work and I reconstructed the large image from many small negatives. This approach gives a recognizable but imperfect image which captured nicely the feeling of living on a Greek island when the



tourists are no longer visiting, when the boats connecting the island to the mainland become rarer and rarer, and the cold, heavy winds begin to blow. We felt very isolated in Winter, communications with the exterior world seemed rare and less substantive, almost indistinct and I see these cyanotypes like imperfect, static-filled transmissions arriving from a great distance.

***You speak of the notion of identity revealed through gesture. Could you explain this idea?***

Yes, the idea of gestures and body language interest me especially because of the influence of my mother and all our discussions of psychology. It's fascinating to try to decipher without words and from an examination of gesture. In fact, gestures, with respect to psychology, function as a sort of archaeology. I'd say that by different means, gestures, like the ruins I saw everywhere when I lived in Italy and in Greece, are little signs, barely visible, that offer us a deeper, alternative meaning. The "Bodies" series was surely influenced by my stay in Italy where, everywhere in the cities one sees the equivalent of historic levels in the buildings—a window or a door that is filled in with bricks from another, more recent historical period. The marks that we see



on the walls, the wearing down of marble in a staircase—these are the small details we can try to decode which speak of the past and of the passage of time. Gesture and body language, everyone knows, can reveal a meaning that would be hidden if we only looked at a smiling face. In a certain way, my work is a bit like an archaeologist's—there's also the role of a psychologist and still other elements—but archaeology, with its decoding, seems very important in the work of an artist. We try to decode the signs that are incomplete, only partially comprehensible, in the world around us. In the end, the work of an artist might simply be a representation of a world we believe we understand well in such a way as to show it at once familiar and yet unknown, new and strange.

***Will you continue to work on this theme of the body?***

This subject returns often in my work. The "Anti-Portraits" series dates from 2003-04 but since then I haven't returned to this precise idea of portraits. The "Bodies" series was made

especially from 2007 to 2010 but I'm beginning again to make new images in this direction. The question of the body, which is at once the center of all that is positive in our lives but also that which will abandon us one day—this question remains an on-going preoccupation for me.

***Are there other themes?***

My work, developing now for nearly 30 years, has revolved around investigations of the body and of landscapes (urban as well as natural). The work on landscapes is often made with pinhole cameras. When I use pinhole cameras I'm forced to slow down and look at the world with more attention—and especially from a different perspective—which is a bit the goal of all my work. Pinhole, for me, is a tool comparable to cyanotypes, to paper negatives. In the totality of my work, there's always an existential interest. The individual is at the center of my work, the individual who confronts life, who navigates in a world that is sometimes strange and unknown, sometimes dangerous and sometimes magnificent.



***Interview by Liv Gudmundson***

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