

MEDIUMFORMAT

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INTERVIEW:
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An Interview: Michael Massaia

Olaf Sztaba

Could you please tell us a story from your youth which would reveal the young Michael Massaia?

I suppose when I was younger, I possessed a contrary mixture of wanting to desperately engage the world, while trying to create substantial distance from the world. I couldn't balance that when I was younger and still don't know now, but it always puts me in the position of an observer, of what might be, or ultimately, what could have been. Perhaps I knew at a young age that things were not going to be as I wanted them to be, and as a result I created a more tolerable world that was probably based on fantasy and unrequited hope.

What was the most difficult part of your journey to becoming a photographer?

Engaging people and trying to create an un-compromised vision from conception to the final print. Also, managing huge amounts of failure, both technical and personal.

Do you have one image which is especially important to you, which paved the way for your later work?

I think so. “West Side Sunrise” from my “Deep in a Dream – Central Park 1” series. The images laid the groundwork, from a technical point of view, for a good deal of my other series. It was the image where a film developing technique, a printing technique, and a camera technique really came together. I felt it was one of the first prints I made that was completely uncompromised.

Your work has such a strong underpinning in the art of painting. Which painters had the most influence on the way you craft your photographs?

The first gallery I was represented by was OK Harris in New York City. It was also my favourite gallery when I was younger. The founder and director of the gallery was Ivan Karp. He championed many of the early Photo Realist painters in the early 1970s. One of the painters was Ralph Goings. His work had a very strong impact on me. He would capture everyday scenes (strong Americana, small town diners, etc.). He was an amazing technical painter, but more importantly, the work had such a strong undercurrent of spirit that glorified and romanticized the mundane. He was the perfect example of an artist who had the perfect balance of technical prowess, unique vision, and an earnest soul.



Westside Sunrise - 2009
Gold Toned Gelatin Silver Print

Could you please share your process of coming up with ideas? What was the most unexpected visual discovery you have ever made?

My process of coming up with ideas is pretty straightforward. I try to think of subject matter that is multifaceted. The idea cannot be one-dimensional. It hopefully plays off different emotions at different times. I have to feel a true and genuine connection to the subject matter. If the subject matter checks all those boxes, then I will make small drawings of how I would like the final prints and series to come out. After all that is done, I'll begin the grunt work of creating the body of work. That grunt work is simply the process of physically chasing (what I hope to be) the original idea.

I haven't made many "unexpected" visual discoveries. I try not to leave any part of the process to chance. I'm fairly stubborn when it comes to what I want out of the idea.



Glen Span Arch - 2017
Split Toned & Tinted Gelatin Silver Print



You concentrate on locations and places which are usually busy with human activity such as hotel lobbies, amusement parks or playgrounds. After studying your frames, it appears the most important subject in your photos – people – are missing from your frame. This absence of life in a very lively locations is what makes your photographs so alluring, almost hypnotic, mysterious, even uncomfortable. The absence of people has as much importance as their presence. Could you elaborate on this?

The absence of people is important in many of my series, but what makes the absence profound is that it's a recent absence. The most exciting subject matter to me is hours after everyone has gone – just enough time to allow for the physical presence to vacate, but the presence and spirit is still everywhere. The depiction of a recent isolation is profound. Everything seems to be heightened in these moments; the inanimate becomes a living breathing thing.

Oddly enough, the one series that did focus on people (Deep in a Dream – Sheep Meadow), showed people who were completely detached from their environment. In this series, with the absence of everything in the surrounding NYC environment, except the people, is what made it very exciting. The isolation was still there, and it's almost as though the people became the heightened landscape objects that I normally try to depict when people aren't present.

"THE MOST EXCITING SUBJECT MATTER TO ME IS HOURS AFTER EVERYONE HAS GONE - JUST ENOUGH TIME TO ALLOW FOR THE PHYSICAL PRESENCE TO VACATE, BUT THE PRESENCE AND SPIRIT IS STILL EVERYWHERE."



Off Season - 2021
Split Toned & Tinted Gelatin Silver Print



Crystal Sands Motel - 2020
Split Toned & Tinted Gelatin Silver Print

Two words “AFTER” and “ABSENCE” come up quite often when viewing your work. Is there a certain feeling or memory that you experience when visiting your shooting locations? Does this emotional aspect have anything to do with your decision to photograph?

I think so. “After” and “Absence” is probably where I feel most at home, and I suppose the comfort that has come from “After” and “Absence” has probably created my best memories. I guess I’m always chasing the memory, and unlike the present, memories can be modified to fit almost anything you’d like.

You shot your work before the pandemic, yet such isolation and absence transcend so many places now. Given the pandemic, would you say that your work has gained another, quite unexpected psychological layer? Have you wondered about it?

Yes, I've thought about it. In some ways, I think for a time, the pandemic removed some of the romance from isolation. It tarnished it a bit. Regardless, I continued to work throughout it and desperately tried to find that romantic spirit in the darkest moments of the pandemic, that only exists in isolation. I was very excited to find that spirit in my "Afterlife-3" series, which I worked on through all stages of the pandemic.

The Great White Pre-Storm - 2020
Split Toned & Tinted Gelatin Silver Print





The Star Jet - 2009
Split Toned & Tinted Gelatin Silver Print



The Funtown Pier-Post Hurricane Sandy - 2012
Split Toned Gelatin Silver Print

Composition is what ties the elements together and makes this a fascinating photograph. What is the starting point of a great composition?

What is the first building block in the process of crafting a great frame?

For me, it's the photograph that has equal parts graphic and emotional potency which allows the viewer to experience it in their own way. You simply know when it's right, and it's right for me when the subject matter intersects perfectly with the original idea.

What is one location that you photographed but its visual impact was so huge that it posed a challenge to combine into one cohesive frame?

In my original "Afterlife – New Jersey Shore" series, the post-Hurricane Sandy images were very hard to make visual sense of, because the amount of destruction was unbelievable. It was very challenging to capture the images in a way that was not exploitive, but graphically beautiful (and even romantic). Hopefully I was able to do that.

"... AND IT'S RIGHT FOR ME WHEN THE SUBJECT MATTER INTERSECTS PERFECTLY WITH THE ORIGINAL IDEA."



The Casino Pier-Post Hurricane Sandy - 2012
Toned Gelatin Silver Print

Most of your photographs are taken at a certain time, before the sunrise, and you also have your own favourite months for photography. Could you please tell us more?

My favourite months to photograph are April through June, and January through February. Those months are my favourite for a variety of reasons including weather, lighting, temperature, and crowd size. January through February is a great time because of the shorter days and the smaller crowd sizes. My favourite lighting will always be about a half hour to one hour before sunrise. You're able to create night images without the technical limitations that you have to deal with in the earlier, darker hours of the night. Creating "night" images/prints with a long tonal scale of mid-tones is very important to my final prints.

Do you have a technique or photographic a common truth which you subscribed to at the beginning of your career but have now rejected?

Not really. Chasing down, and ultimately being able produce an original idea, in an un-compromised fashion, was and still is my goal.

What are the characteristics or traits of a great print?

Dimension is the most important trait. This is something, I feel, that is lacking in most digital prints.

"CHASING DOWN, AND ULTIMATELY BEING ABLE PRODUCE AN ORIGINAL IDEA, IN AN UN-COMPROMISED FASHION, WAS AND STILL IS MY GOAL."



How much work goes into your platinum prints? What is the process? How was your process refined over the years?

These days I predominantly make gelatin silver prints. I feel I forced the platinum/palladium printing process as far as I could take it. I was making platinum prints as large as 44"x60." I was doing pin registration, multiple coatings, custom sizing, colourized contact negatives, etc., but I was never completely satisfied with the results. Then I started making platinum/palladium prints on fixed out gelatin silver paper and other glossy surfaced paper (like treated mylar) to create a more dimensional print with better dark, mid-tone separation. These results were exciting, but the tones were still too brown for my liking. I somewhat resolved this by gold toning the platinum prints, but I still wasn't completely satisfied.

As time went on, I started moving towards silver printing. I now create gelatin silver contact prints up to 44" x 60." I first make a series of coloured internegatives (from the original in-camera negative) using different output devices such as imagesetter, pigment printer, etc. to create the negatives used for the contact printing process. The negatives are made on solid white polyester and are registered and contact printed in large vertical vacuum frames. I use large banks of LED light sources for exposing, and I control the variable contrast of the paper by using large coloured gels. Most of my prints are exposed multiple times with different coloured lighting, which allows me to create split-contrast prints.

I process all my prints in large open trays, and will selectively tone them using gold, selenium, sepia, and iron. I work alone, and do not outsource any of my process.

The reason I still print like this is because of the results. There is a dimensional tonal quality that I feel can only be obtained through this process. I've never been able to separate print-making from photography. Neither one makes sense without the other. I've spent upwards of 100 hours on one print.



Eaglevale Arch Looking North - 2017
Split Toned & Tinted Gelatin Silver Print

As you become a better printer, has it influenced the way you capture your image?

Yes. When you become a better printer, you know what doesn't work. This makes everything more efficient.

With so many digital cameras today, what led you to use large and medium format?

Large format film photography simply creates the best results for my work.



First Spring - 2020
Iron Toned & Tinted Gelatin Silver Print



You work with a special, custom-made camera view camera build by Mike Walker. Please tell us more about it.

Sure. Mike Walker makes ABS mould injected plastic view cameras. Unlike folding field cameras, his cameras are extremely rigid, lightweight, and packable. He recently built a 5"x7" camera for me that is my favourite camera. I had him remove some of the movements that would traditionally be on a view camera. This camera was predominately created for low light work. Using a folding view camera with a tone of movements in low light can be insanely frustrating. Mike's cameras are so rigid, and just perfect for what I need.

What is your favourite focal length and why?

I tend to favour slightly wide-angle lenses for most of my film formats.

My favourite focal lengths per format are:

- 8"x10" film - 240mm lens
- 5"x7" film - 155mm lens
- 4"x5" film - 120mm lens

For photographers starting out, can you give advice about edition sizing, pricing, and tiered pricing.

I guess my only advice is to do what you think is "right for your work." Don't start trying to think about what a collector or a gallery might want. If you get caught up in all that, you create a "slippery slope." My editions are different depending on the series. With some series, I can see myself printing for years, but with other series, I may only want to print them briefly, hence a smaller edition size. In regard to pricing, I think the most important advice would be to keep everything as consistent as possible.



First Light - 2014
Split Toned & Tinted Gelatin Silver Print



Coat Room Elevator - 2014
Split Toned & Tinted Gelatin Silver Print



Empty Ballroom Stage - 2015
Selenium Toned Gealtin Silver Print

If you could shoot the illustrations in your style to illustrate one book in literature, which book would it be and why?

I'm too possessive of my work and wouldn't want to share it with even the best book. I would not be a good collaborator.

Which photographs and themes are most important to you personally?

Any theme that creates an authentic and earnest emotional response is the most important to me personally.

Where are your next exhibitions?

- Gallery 270 in New Jersey - 2021
- Clampart Gallery in New York City - 2022?
- Gillman Contemporary in Sun Valley, Idaho - 2021
- Obscura Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico - 2022

"I'VE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO SEPARATE PRINTMAKING FROM PHOTOGRAPHY. NEITHER ONE MAKES SENSE WITHOUT THE OTHER."



Endings - 2014
Split Toned & Tinted Gelatin Silver Print

Michael Massaia
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