

ART ABOVE REALITY, NYC

Interview Questions for Dina Goldstein (Photographer)

What was your career path in becoming a full time photographer?

Why do you take photos? What do you think makes a memorable photograph?

I've been a photographer for 25 years now. I started out quite young and worked very hard in my 20's and 30's to create a career for myself. I was a photojournalist and traveled to war torn regions. I freelanced, shooting covers and feature stories for magazines. I also photographed some cheeky ads with some brilliant art directors. Alongside I created my own projects usually concentrated on the study of sub cultures within society, I termed the work Photoanthropology. These images were documentary, photojournalistic.

In 2009 I released my tableau series Fallen Princesses, which was an internet success and brought recognition to my personal work. I went on to realize more ambitious projects like In The Dollhouse in 2012, and Gods Of Suburbia in 2014. I am now fully concentrated on producing my own producing large scale conceptual series and have become a full time artist.

Now that you know a bit about me **WHY DO I TAKE PHOTOS?**

Photography has been part of my life for so long that it is deeply ingrained in my being. However there has been a shift for me. These days I don't TAKE photos I MAKE them. This means that the process is completely different. Also the messaging is integral to the complete package. Photography has always been a powerful tool of storytelling and communication. Photography incites nostalgia, provides evidence and for those that truly love it, it is magic !

Why is Dorothea Lange's Migrant Mother, 1936, so memorable and revered?

The photograph is authentic, it touches you, makes you empathetic, educates you. You want to look at it again and again because there are details that you may have missed. We ingest so many images per day, but the truly memorable images have something to say.

Also there is the ascetic element. Images that are crafted well and offer nuanced perspectives and processes.

How does black and white vs. color play into your work?

I started out shooting black and white as a means of documenting people and events in a classic way. There is a grit and nostalgic element that b/w offers and this is still relevant today. With my tableau series I use color to create a mood and form a palatable image, one that has a deeper message attached. My lean towards Pop Surrealism has altered my visual language, which is defined by intense color, narratives, use of symbolism, dark humor and subversive messaging. My work analyzes the human condition; interpreting new and clichéd notions of beauty, gender, sex and religion through the lens of pop culture.

Who are some of your favorite classic photographers, and how did they influence you?

I started out most inspired by woman like Diane Arbus , Margaret Bourke White and Dorthea Lang who were pioneers in my industry. Similar to their direction I was driven to create images of people that were intimate and revealing.

What technology/software/camera gear do you use to keep focused on what you do best, as you photograph?

I use several cameras for different purposes. I have a Fuji Medium format rangefinder film camera that I travel with (it's like an old friend), A D800 Full frame and a Hasselblad digital medium format for my large scale work.

Over the years I have collected many White Lightning self contained strobes which work very well on location. I have a variety of accessories but use all sorts of unconventional materials when I'm lighting.

The "Fallen Princesses" series has quickly become my favorite work after seeing your portfolio; can you explain the moment that inspired this work?

Jordan, my daughter, was three at the time and was just starting to get into the 'Princess phase'. Princesses were everywhere and I too was getting introduced to them. (I grew up in Israel in the early 70's , and was not exposed to Disney at all).

Just around the same time my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. The two events collided and made me wonder what a Princesses would look like if she had to battle a disease, struggle financially or deal with aging. I began to imagine what could happen to the Princesses later in life and after the happily ever after. Naturally they would have to deal with challenges that all modern woman face.

My first idea was Rapunzel going through chemo and loosing her precious hair . I began to loosely sketch and came up with ideas for the rest of the images. With a very limited budget and a lot of volunteer help, I shot the series over two years 2007-2009.

MORE: Contemporary woman today look very different than the typical Fairy tale Princesses. We are working with our partners to fulfill our financial responsibilities as well as taking care of the household. At work we are competitive and since we are no longer focused on equality in the work place we can now concentrate on being the best period! We are so busy and time seems to pass so quickly. If we get a moment to read a book or go for a walk.. that's a treat! On weddings, birthdays, anniversaries, mother's day we may have 'a fairy tale moment' but that doesn't last very long and you know that normal life is just around the corner.

Disney, not the original of the Fairy Tales, created the 'happily ever' after motif. I don't want to send out a negative message just a realistic one.

My main message is that this world is so complex and everyone has his or her own challenges to deal with. What might seem 'perfect' on the outside is most likely not.

Most people have to deal with difficult issues sometime in their lives and no one is exempt. I have friends that are wealthy but still have many difficulties in their lives...so money isn't always a cure. I have friends that are beautiful but can't seem to get it together, so beauty isn't always the answer. I have friends that are very scholarly but make unwise decisions in their personal lives...so aptitude does not always guide.

While reading your bio I got to learn more about the newest work "Gods of Suburbia" and see the photos and I'm intrigued as well about this idea. Can you explain this project further?

As a cultural critic of sorts I am interested generating a rational conversation about religion and what role it plays in modern society.

By placing each supernatural character in a real life environment I attempt to humanize them, and explore more practical issues. Lakshmi , The Hindu goddess of beauty and wealth is a perfect example of how woman today shoulder the responsibilities of home and work and Ganesha, the remover of obstacles, easily recognizable by his elephant head and human body, embodies my personal experience as an immigrant to Canada. With Satan I question what counts as fair within society today, and Xenu scrutinizes those that interfere with free thinking.

So there is a central message that splits of into many parts.

Among your works, which one is your favorite? Why?

This is always a hard question to answer because I like many of my pieces and all for different reasons. They are like my children and It's hard to choose and favor. Some that are special to me are Snowy, Rapunzel- Fallen Princesses, Margaret - Trackrecord, Haircut - In The Dollhouse, Satan and Last Supper- Gods Of Suburbia.

There is a great sense of pride when I look at what I achieved with some of these pieces.

How do you let the controversy of the subject matter inspire you?

Good art creates conversation and discussion so I'm really pleased that my work continuously sparks controversy. There have been discussion groups on the web that go on for miles about Fallen Princesses' Not so little Red. The issue revolves around how and if fast food has contributed to her obesity. Many overweight people argue that the two are not connected and battle it out to make their point. They claim that I'm stereotyping.

Jasmine was another much discussed piece. Some accused me of placing the Middle Eastern Princess as a terrorist. My intention was to display her strength and courage. She is a warrior, fighting on the front lines.

In my In The Dollhouse series Ken finds his authentic self and comes out as gay, while Barbie has a breakdown. I take this beloved American iconic couple and turn their pink, orderly world around to examine the perils of 'perfection'.

Gods Of Suburbia is my most philosophical body of work, where I humanize religious characters, place them within modernity, and examine religion as an anachronistic ideal. This of course is also the most controversial of my work to date. There has been a call to action from Hindu leader Rajan Zed who calls this work inappropriate and offensive to Hindu followers.

Exactly what it is you want to say with your projects, and how do you actually get your photographs to do that?

Photography as an art form transcends cultural borders and has the ability for quick communication. Within one frame or a series I attempt to create a narrative that relays as much information as a book or movie. This is always my challenge. Sometimes the message is delivered quickly and makes an instant impression and other times the image requires further research and deeper involvement.

I am thrilled that my visual storytelling has been recognized for its 'metaphorical and ironical messages' and in turn has sparked much conversation and written commentary from academics, editors and bloggers around the world. The work welcomes interpretation and discussion.

What do you want your viewers to take away from your work?

What's important for me is that the viewer understands my messaging. It can happen right away or over time with a little bit of investigation and study.