

INTERVIEW :: DINA GOLDSTEIN

What is your inspiration?

Storytelling has always been central in all of my work past and present. Documentary photography allowed me to create and share the stories of Palestinians in Gaza, gamblers at the racetrack, East Indian blueberry farmers in B.C, Dog Show dogs, Bodybuilding State championships and teenagers dirty dancing at a Bar Mitzvah.

My recent work, 2007-2015, is inspired by my two daughters Jordan, 10 and Zoe, 6. My series examine and critique pop culture. By utilizing recognizable, iconic figures; like Disney Princesses, Barbie and Ken, and the iconography of religion, I attempt to bring attention and to inspire insight to the human condition.

What is your style?

I am a large-scale tableau photographer, shooting through the lens of Pop Surrealism. The term "pop surrealism" was coined by The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum for its 1998 exhibit of the same name. The exhibit featured work by over seventy artists, including Gregory Crewdson, Mariko Mori, Ashley Bickerton, Art Spiegelman, Tony Oursler, and Cindy Sherman, and was memorialized in the 1999 book of the same name.

Surrealism mines dreams and the unconscious, while popular culture is concerned with surface and commonplaces. This art practice often has a sense of humor - sometimes the humor is colourful, joyful, and sometimes dark, mischievous and sarcastic. This lean towards Pop Surrealism has altered my visual language, which is defined by 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.

What is photography for you?

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.

How do you define your productions?

My initial ideas are mostly instinctual, and inspired from the subconscious. When I see potential in an idea I take the time to study and review the subject. I try to come up with rough concepts for each piece before the start of production. I want a clear 'big picture' so I can continue with a vivid vision with a semi practical budget. My first priority is to find the right person to portray the lead character of the piece. This process can happen quickly or may take months or even years. I tend to do a lot of street casting and/or work with local actors and performers. The circumstances are always different but somehow seem to work out at the end. I am working with tiny budgets and each time have to find a way to bring people on board and get them excited about something that doesn't exist yet. Sometimes I loosely draw out my concepts or work with a storyboard artist (as I did for *In The Dollhouse*). I assemble my crew and consult with my creative team; that is made up of makeup & hair artists, costumers and prop builders. Local craftsman and artists fabricate many of the costumes and props. I methodically scout out locations, as these will become permanent backdrops for my conceptualized scenarios. There is usually a lot of red tape that has to be dealt with in preparation, (all this keeps the studio interns busy on the computer and phones).

Many of my set ups involve elaborate sets with crews largely made-up of photography and art students, as well as volunteers from all walks of life. To prepare for the shoots I shift focus to the tiny details. The collection of furniture and knick knacks, which I hand pick, play an important role in the telling of the story.

Prior to the shoot day I meet with the actors to discuss character and give them some clear direction.

I usually photograph 2 images over a weekend. I review the shoot and the files and make decisions for post adjustments. I may have to reshoot or add an element that will help shape and complete the image.

I work with a dynamo post team, that despite my limited budgets and huge ambitions, can make anything possible!

How did the idea to change the "happily ever after"?

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.

Fairy Tales were originally written as parables, Disney 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.

Why did you decide to change the stories of Disney?

My mother was diagnosed with Breast Cancer and at the time that my 3 yr. old, Jordan was exposed to the Disney Princesses culture. We read books and watched movies which my daughter really loved...not necessarily because of the Princess characters but because of the dramatic stories and ugly witches.

I started thinking that these Disney Princesses really didn't have to deal with issues like Cancer, Addiction and War. Ultimately there was a happily ever after and besides we really never followed their life past their youth.

I began to do some research which lead to my fascination with the origins of Fairy tales. I explored the original brothers Grimm's, Hans Christian Andersen stories and found that they have very dark and sometimes gruesome aspects, not always concluded by a happy ending. Disney of course made some changes and created the happy ending.

I imagined Disney's perfect Princesses juxtaposed with real issues that were affecting women around me, such as illness, addiction and self-image issues.I dreamt up different stories, environments and back-stories for each Princess and the project was conceived.

What do you tell your children about the magic of fairy tales?

My daughters know and love all of the fairytales but usually in the original version; which is a parable meant to teach important lessons. I raise them to ask many questions and I attempt to give them advice, which will ready them for this most complicated world that we live in.

Fallen Princesses went viral on the Internet, was written about extensively, what was the reason of it's huge success?

This was a big surprise for me. I posted the series on JPG magazine just to get some feedback from my peers. It was then taken and posted on several sites. From there it went viral and the response was overwhelming. I was inundated with letters and media requests.

I was touched with the personal notes written by all sorts of people telling me how my work affected them in a profound way.

Our world is full of images that are created by ad agencies. These images portray the perfect couple, perfect homes, and perfect children. People are relieved to see real issues discussed in art. I think that my images portray the truth about life and its complexities. That everyone deals with challenges and that although this earth is so full of beauty there is also darkness that enters our lives once in a while. It is good to recognize this and find the humour in it all, even if it's Dark Humor.

How did you conceive In The Dollhouse?

In the Dollhouse was a natural continuation of a similar concept inspired by my daughters.

The work is a ten part sequential series that unfolds within a few days in the life of Barbie and Ken. For this I built a 4 room, life size dollhouse set. Barbie is the idealized woman. More than any other childhood construct, Barbie encapsulates the concept that Beauty is Power and thus is key to a happy life. However, when Ken, Barbie's handsome but dissatisfied husband, pursues happiness, by expressing his own individuality; the value of beauty as a trait unto itself is exposed as the cheap, plastic facsimile that it is. My Ken finally exposes his true authentic self. He has been enslaved by social expectations and has not found the courage to 'come out' and reveal himself to the world. Barbie discovers him with another male doll and that is how it all begins to unravel. Grief drives Barbie to a mental breakdown.

It is difficult to take 'marriage' as a concept and discuss it because everyone experiences it differently. There are so many expectations of marriage and so much fantasy that is built around it ...this is why it often does not work. For two people to stay together they must accept each other completely. I think that this doesn't happen very often and that most married couples keep secrets from each other. We get married, buy a house, fill it with beautiful things and expect life to run smoothly forever after...often not the case. Life is full of complexities that we have to maneuver through constantly.

Do you feel you are making a single statement with all the photos within Gods Of Suburbia, or are you making individual statements with each?

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

I read in to your photographs a sense of frustration with and pessimism about how religion is playing out in modern Western society. Do you have any positive/optimistic thoughts about the place of religion in life today?

I believe that religion often unites communities and give many a purpose/answers/ for their existence. The stringent rules of most religions instruct those that tend to stray from 'good' behavior to act morally; this is comforting to me as an observer of human nature! The separation of religion and state throughout the Western world has allowed more and more people to live a secular lifestyle without judgment. However despite the forces of technology, science and medical breakthroughs, fundamentalism and puritanical faith is on the rise. Thousands of years of religious warfare have proven to be divisive and brutal. I do often question why have ancient doctrines been excused from scrutiny, rational thinking and scientific evidence? Is this sustainable going forward?

Do you think that will change the situation of violence in the world?

The current state of humanity is very discouraging. Violence and war are a result of human kind's increasing greed. The global economic inequality is divisive and will continue to drive a wedge between the rich and the poor. Violence will increase as people are marginalized and mental health is not addressed.

What actually you want to show young people?

Anyone can make something of themselves! Young people must be prepared to work hard and make sacrifices to achieve their goals. It takes many years to develop your craft and then you must find inspiration to create work that is meaningful and will connect with others. People will try to discourage you, only listen to the ones that offer constructive advice. You will have good times and less better days, but you have to keep going with a real or imagined optimism.

Who do you admire?

All sorts of artists and thinkers that are not held back and speak their minds inspire me.

Women that most impress me are the ones that share personal stories in order to make a real difference in the world.

-Women working around the world to promote gender equality.

-Women who have come from modest backgrounds and have made something of themselves.

-Women who balance their work life and dedicate themselves equally to their family and community.

How do you define success?

Family + Friends + a warm home + good food + doing what you love

What is the challenge in every photo shoot?

Balancing the technical with the inspired content and messaging.