

LIGHT LEAKED

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Interview with Ashley Kauschinger
Monday, August 20, 2012
Jess T. Dugan



Landen, 2011

I am excited to share my interview with Jess T Dugan about the series *Every breath we drew*. This work has an ambiguous mystery that asks questions about identity.

More of Jess's work can be viewed here: <http://www.jessdugan.com/>

Ashley Kauschinger: The candor in *Every breath we drew* is brave and empowering. How did you come to find this bravery within yourself and then to share it in this work?

Jess T. Dugan: I almost don't know how to start answering this question... In many ways, *Every breath we drew* grew naturally out of the color portraits I was making for *Transcendence*, yet in many ways it is radically different. Gender and sexuality have long been topics of exploration in my work as well as in my life. At the beginning of last fall, I was focusing on making portraits of transgender folks on the female-to-male spectrum, which I thought was going to be my subject of focus in graduate school. My work up until that point had brought me to a place where I was focused on the construction, creation, and adoption of masculinity, primarily within the female-to-male community. Of course, my photography has always been heavily intertwined with my identity and personal life, and in this manner, this investigation of masculinity was as much about coming to understand the deliberate construction of my own masculinity as it was about making portraits of other people.

Every breath we drew has been incredibly intimate for me to make. It involves a constant (and rather emotional) checking in with myself, examining my own sense of identity, sexuality, attraction, intimacy, etc. From an intellectual point of view, I wanted to make photographs that explored men and masculinity through an intimate lens. Emotionally, I was exploring my own identity and my own attraction to men and masculinity- a simultaneously simple and complex area where my desire to be/be with overlap. I sought out people whom I felt connected to and asked them to be intimate with me or vulnerable in front of my camera. I invited myself into their bedrooms and asked them to lie down, to look at me in a way that was new for me. I created situations where intimacy could unfold. "Intimacy" is a word I use a lot; though I know it has many interpretations, ranging from sexual to emotional. When I use it, I am referring to that moment when your being connects with the being of someone else in a profound way, whether it be for a second or a lifetime, whether it be on an emotional plane or a physical one. It is a broad term, and I would never attempt to define its parameter, but it has been the word/concept foremost in my mind as I have been making this work.

AK: The portraits in this series require an intimate collaboration with the sitter. How do you build that relationship with your models especially when dealing with such delicate and subtle subject matter?



Elle, 2012

JTD: The images I make definitely require an intimate collaboration. My subjects generally come from my life in some way. I am not big on photographing complete strangers, though it is something I have done before and continue to do from time to time. I prefer to meet someone and make a connection before asking them to pose for me. I often think that finding subjects is a lot like dating. I'm just attracted to certain people, photographically speaking, and something about their energy captures my attention. From that point, it is a matter of building trust, getting to know each other, and ultimately negotiating what kind of photographs I would like to take and what their boundaries and interests are. It's a natural process. I believe very strongly in respecting my subjects at all times, and as such, my photographs are always collaborative. I would never try to push someone past where they are comfortable. I am asking my subjects to engage with me intimately like you would in any other situation; only the mode of relating is through my camera. And as in any relationship, people are willing to go to various depths depending on who they are and their relationship to me.

I also photograph some of the same people repeatedly- Dallas, Korrie, Alex, and many more- and each time I return to them to make a photograph together, we begin from a deeper place of trust and engagement. My process of photographing people is fairly inseparable from my personal life and the development of my (non-photographic) relationships.

AK: Your self-portraits offer a private view into your personal everyday life, but also begin to form an understanding of your identity that builds as the series progresses. Have you thought of this progression as its own series separate from the other portraits that are exploring different individual identities?

JTD: Yes, definitely. It's funny, I don't think of myself as being a photographer who makes a lot of self-portraits, but I actually do. Looking back, I have always photographed myself as a way to document my life, understand my identity, and make sense of my sometimes-complicated (and definitely non-mainstream) world. To me, the self-portraits in *Every breath we drew* are engaging in the same dialogue as the other portraits, raising questions about identity, intimacy, sexuality- as well as shared human experience- but I am aware that they are different than the others. It is, of course, a different process to make work about yourself so directly than it is to make photographs of others (which in many ways are also about my own experience, of course). I am curious to see how the self-portraits evolve over the next two years, and I could definitely see them evolving into a separate project, or a separate aspect of the same project. My body has also changed a lot recently (as a result of intentional weight loss and strength training) and I am curious to see how that development plays out in my work. The self-portraits could also change depending on my personal relationship status. If I entered into a romantic relationship, I imagine that would filter into the work, though in many ways I think the lack of that kind of a relationship has opened up an emotional space for my work to go the direction that it has.



Self-portrait (shower), 2012

AK: You decided to go to Columbia College Chicago to get your MFA in photography and study with Kelli Connell and Dawoud Bey. Can you speak about why you made this decision and how it has benefitted you?

JTD: When I graduated from MassArt in 2007, I knew that I would eventually go back to get my MFA. I took four years off in between, during which time I worked in the museum field to earn a living and aggressively pursued my own art practice and career in Boston. When I started researching graduate programs, I assumed that there would be a “best” school, or an obvious choice for me, but the more I looked into different programs, the more I realized that each school has its own unique philosophy and style. In other words, the whole concept of wanting to go to the “best” grad school kind of dissolved for me. I spent a year looking at programs around the country, and I ultimately decided only to apply to Columbia. There were many things I was drawn to about Columbia, but the main three were the faculty (Dawoud and Kelli specifically), the philosophy of the program (making-oriented as opposed to more conceptual) and the Museum of Contemporary Photography, which is a part of Columbia and where I currently work. I really wanted to find a program where I would have the best, most productive experience possible, and where I would be challenged but also supported, and Columbia has turned out to be exactly that. I have my reservations about grad school as an institution, but ultimately I decided that it is the right step and place for me at this point in my career.

Working with Dawoud and Kelli has been amazing and has hugely impacted my work. They both push and challenge me in their own ways while also being very supportive and encouraging. Dawoud doesn’t let me off easy- in fact, he constantly pushes me to be a better, more rigorous photographer, both technically and conceptually. Kelli has also supported and challenged my work in wonderful ways, and she is always the first one I want to see my new work, especially when I’m feeling unsure or shy about it. She has the remarkable ability to offer critique while being unbelievably supportive and safe.

I really felt that choosing faculty to work with was the most important part of choosing a graduate program, and while the similarities between my work and Dawoud’s and Kelli’s is obvious, they both very clearly encourage me to push myself as far as I can go down my own path, not down theirs or anyone else’s. I am excited to see how my work continues to develop and move forward over the next two years here.

AK: What is your process of self-promotion? How do you create a balance between making work and promoting it?

JTD: This is a big question. I’d say that my four years between undergrad and grad school involved a huge amount of promotion and getting my work out there. I found wonderful gallery representation early on at Gallery Kayafas, and that relationship has played a huge role in my career thus far. I have had three solo shows there and Arlette (the owner) has been incredibly supportive of my career and development as an artist. Now, I am lucky to have representation by multiple galleries in different cities, which is helping me to get my work seen by a wider audience. Having gallery



Erica and Krista, 2012

representation still requires a lot of work and promotion on my end, and I strongly believe that a gallery/artist relationship is like any other relationship- it only works if both parties are engaged, communicative, and working towards the same end or goal. For example, right now I am planning a solo exhibition at the Schneider Gallery in Chicago for this coming September, and I am working with the gallery directors to create a catalogue, coordinate programming such as gallery talks, and generate press. I do not think the responsibility of promotion falls entirely in the hands of the galleries.

In the beginning, I applied for a lot of group shows, but now I am more selective about that. I am shifting my focus to solo shows, museum shows, and curated (as opposed to juried) group shows. I am constantly working on the promotion side of my career, whether by attending conferences and networking, researching grant and exhibition opportunities, or meeting with curators and other photographers, but I also try my best to separate the promotion from the creation. I also maintain a website, and I think this is important. From a museum/curatorial point of view, it is very helpful to me when I can easily access work and information about other photographers. Websites such as Flak Photo, Fraction Mag, and Lenscratch provide great exposure for photographers while also creating a very real sense of community. Ultimately, I think that it is most important to find a way to keep your inspiration and excitement alive in order to make work.

Thank you Jess for taking the time to share an in-depth look at your working process.

This is an abridged interview, to view the interview in its entirety, follow this link: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/101580284/Dugan-LightLeaked>



Self-portrait (bath), 2012