

# *ahorn magazine*

**Interview with: Jocelyn Lee**  
**04/27/2011**



*Your book "Nowhere but Here" collects images from your series "Portraits" but also a few pictures from your work "The Physical world". In the last part there is another series in which you tried to catch the last moments of your mother's life.*

*How did the book originate? Could you tell us something more about the relationship between these series?*

The Book began as a review of nearly 15 years of work. While my primary interest portraiture, I occasionally make landscape images as a way to describe the physical environment within which we live. My portraits tend to focus on the internal lives of people and the landscapes function as a backdrop or stage set on which personal lives unfold. .

The second part of the book is called “Last Light” and deals specifically with the last year of my mother’s life. During this time I made portraits of my dying mother and our family. I also made landscapes of the blooming and passing of the flowers and trees around my mother’s home during the final seasons of her life. The difference here is that the landscape photographs were made with a pinhole camera at very long exposures- p to several hours in some cases. This body of work is a meditation on time, mortality, and my attempt to pause the stampeding progress of both.

*Sharon Olds, an established American poet, wrote the foreword of your book “Nowhere but Here”. Could you tell us something about this collaboration? Are there any connections between your work and her poetry?*

I have always been drawn to Sharon Olds' poetry. The themes are often domestic and familiar—children, husband, lover, sex, aging, birth, death, home—but they are described in an unsentimental and often raw way. Her work is frank, unapologetic and human. It looks with clear-eyed honesty at the place, from which we all come— our homes, our families, our bodies. This is both inspiring and a great relief to me

I'd have to say that these are the same themes that motivate my work, and I certainly try to be direct and honest in the way I photograph. My work is essentially familiar and seems to originate from the immediate sensual world (the world of the home and interpersonal experiences), rather than from an intellectual or political one. I usually begin with issues that have to do with the body—the fact that our bodies are the first point of connection between ourselves and the world around us---and then cycle out from there. I always photograph subjects I want to understand better—for example my mother’s illness. I am very compulsive once I find a subject and my process can be seen as an obsession to see more clearly the thing that I don't yet understand

Once I decide on a subject, I go out and find the people or events that help me study it more closely (unless it is already in my home, in which case I don't have far to go). This can be something as specific as “hunting”, (which I have photographed for years—bear, moose, deer and bowhead whale hunts to name a few), or as abstract as “sexuality in older age”. My methods will vary in terms of how I make the pictures, but the origin is always personal fascination

*With your photography, you are able to create a special moment between you and your subjects, and this is clearly visible in your images. When you photograph, the only important thing seems to be living "that" particular moment and being "there". I think this could be the main reason why you chose the title “Nowhere but Here*

It made me think about “Hic et Nunc”, a Latin motto that means “here and now”. Talking about the “here and now”: how important is the moment of taking a photograph compared to the act of seeing the final, physical image?

Thank you. The relationship I have with my subjects is very important to me. The time it takes to make the picture (which is long), and the dynamic that develops during the shoot is a significant part of the process and meaning of the pictures. There is a lot of respect coming from my side of the camera towards my subject. I've always taken issue with the interpretation that a photograph is a "stolen moment" stolen by one human being (the photographer) from another (the subject). I understand that premise and that way of making pictures (the stalking, secretive photographer- often used by journalists), and I want to be clear that I think it's a valid way of making pictures, but it is not what I'm interested in. I'm interested in the relationship and what happens when two people spend a long time in a room together, intensely conscious of one another. Something changes. Expressions change. Facades drop. Boredom happens. Humility happens. Other states get revealed.

The final image is an amalgamation of my psychological interests and what my subjects end up generously revealing to me, and in so doing, the camera. It is hard to quantify. Sometimes I know I have a good picture before I look at the contact sheets, but more often than not I am surprised by what I see on the contact sheets, and I use that surprise to inform my choices. I remember someone saying to me very early on in my career as a photographer, "no surprise for the photographer, no surprise for the viewer", and I believe that is true. I will often leave many versions of an image up on my studio wall for days or weeks and the ones that get "tired" get taken down. Those that keep speaking, keep surprising, are the ones I select. Really strong photographs can never be owned or fully understood formally, narratively, or intellectually. They resonate outside the edges of the frame, and continue to speak over time. That ineffable quality is what I am looking for during the editing process; I hope I am present enough to recognize it when it is there. Sometimes this knowledge or awareness has to hit you obliquely. You can't study or edit the photographs "head on" so to speak. In other words, we have to get out of our own way. As I age, one of the biggest concerns I have is to avoid repeating myself formally, narratively or conceptually. It is not so easy to do. I am always looking for ways to refresh my process and let the medium speak to me again in new ways. The pinholes were one such effort

*In most of your portraits, you photograph people naked or almost naked. How do you face with the problem or the relationship with nudity? Was it complicated to photograph people without clothes?*

I think you can tell from all I've said that I'm driven by existential themes in my work—our bodies in space and time, our internal thoughts, our basic relationship to others, death, aging, sexuality, family, etc.—and it just seems that these issues can be addressed more honestly when people take their clothes off. That sounds strange, but taking our clothes off is a literal and metaphoric state of openness. It is hard to be naked in front of others. It is hard to be seen naked. It is brave in an essential way. The flaws we imagine are so much more visible when we are naked—and this goes for psychological flaws as well as physical. So nudity is important to me. Nakedness

*You usually photograph people that you know, for example your family components and friends, but also strangers. Which differences have you noticed in their attitude towards you as a photographer? Do they react differently in front of your camera?*

No. I can't say they do. You would think they would act differently, but basically I don't think they do. Many of the familiar people I photograph (family or friends) still take time to adjust to being photographed. If someone I photograph is enormously comfortable being photographed, I probably wouldn't be interested in photographing them. Again, I'm interested in vulnerability, and what arises from it. Of course, being naked is usually awkward for the average person, so that threshold always needs to be overcome or negotiated, and therein lies the psychological tension and the photographic material. Each shoot has its sensitive moments, and each subject has to evolve to a place of comfort in the shoot--or more accurately, a state of comfortable acceptance of the innate awkwardness of such an exchange.

*Do your subjects usually see their photograph/s? Do they recognize themselves in your images? How do they face with their portrayed nudity?*

It's about half and half. Some people see the pictures, and others don't. I'm always happy to share them. Surprisingly, some people don't care to. I'm surprised by that. I'd say more often than not people find the work intense. I think they are surprised by the image that I capture. I wouldn't say that they don't recognize themselves, but I would say they are surprised. I think many of them like it. It's empowering in some way, though I wouldn't say they think they look beautiful or idealized either. I feel strongly like we (the subject and I) are creating a third person, some blend of my interest in them and what they uniquely bring to the experience of being photographed. I don't think I am a documentary photographer at all. I don't think I am capturing some truth about these individuals. I think I'm mining emotional states of being that feel familiar to all of us, expressed in the specificity of this one individual in a particular time and place.

*You also work on editorial assignments. How much does this kind of work diverge from your personal one? Is it possible to preserve the personal view in a work that has been assigned?*

In the best of cases it doesn't diverge. The worst scenarios are when the editor of a particular assignment doesn't have the same edit or perspective on the shoot that I have. That doesn't happen that often, but when it does it is very discouraging. For the most part the magazines I've worked for seem to be very sophisticated in terms of their choice of photographer. When they hire me, I feel they really know what my strengths are and are very trusting in terms of my vision. I wouldn't do it otherwise. It would be too stressful.

*Has the teaching experience been important to you? Do your students sometimes surprise you with their work?*

As hard as teaching is, it has proven to be very important to me. It is important in two ways: helping to articulate why I love photography; and helping to empower younger artists to speak through this medium that is essentially a mirror onto the world. Photography is remarkably powerful in that it speaks so quickly. It is unlike painting, sculpture or music, which requires years of training before you can utter an original sentence. Entry into photography is so fast, since it relies on such an accessible mechanical process. Because of this young artists can start to say things that matter to them, and perhaps to others, with relative speed. The camera is also a recording device that is controlled by the subjectivity of its operator, so it offers insight into the artist's perspective on the world. In other words, it speaks your mind whether you want it to or not. It is the opposite of objective. I love this about the medium. It is impossible NOT to see the photographer's vision in the contact sheets. If you are corny, the photographs are corny. If you are afraid, generally the photographs are tentative. If you are brave and curious, then the photographs are fresh....and so forth. I quickly learn the students' boundaries and potentials when looking at their work

So, for the smart, creative young artist, photography can be very fertile. For those who are ready speak through this medium, it can be very exciting