

A Conversation with Denny Moers

Diana L. Johnson

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DJ: Can we begin with an obvious question? What made you decide to become a photographer?

DM: I grew up in Los Angeles, and all of my friends were involved in creating art at an incredibly early age--either as musicians, painters, film makers or whatever. My turn came when I was given a camera on my thirteenth birthday. I can still remember the first picture I made. I took a photograph of a broom in an alleyway down the street. You know, today I could probably make a good picture out of that negative. After the boom, I never stopped making photographs, so that now I can honestly say that photography is the closest thing I have to a religion.

DJ: You approach this "religion" in a rather unique way. For most of us, photography like printmaking suggests the creation of multiple originals, but you have chosen to ignore this potential. Why have you concentrated on the photographic monoprint, and what does it mean to you?

DM: In some ways, I feel that simply by being a photographer I am working with materials that inherently incorporate the notion of multiples. If I had chosen to be a painter, I would always be thinking in terms of the singular object, but in using photographic materials I don't think of my works as being apart from the traditions of photography, and that includes the concept of multiple prints.

DJ: But you do regard each photographic print, whether yours or someone else's as essentially a unique object, since the developing and printing process and the possible variations in papers and other elements have the potential to make the differences subtle or substantial in individual cases?

DM: Yes, and here I tend to side with those dealers and collectors who try to educate the public to see the unique qualities of each individual print even if the photographer can and does make a hundred versions of the same image. I think that the greatest photographers did try to work on one print at a time, and when you see examples of the same image together you realize how distinct the prints can be.

DJ: You didn't decide to emphasize the idea of the monoprint to make some kind of conscious statement about photography? You simply accepted this way of working in photography because of the interest it held for you?

DM: That's right. It actually came from how I could best use my energy in working, and also, quite frankly, from my attention span. It's very difficult for me to stay in the darkroom and

keep working hour after hour, year after year. I have to think of each print separately. I can't just produce an endless series of similar pictures.

DJ: Fortunately for us you don't. What about the process itself? To most viewers, it must look as if you've used a whole palette of watercolors or paints. What do you actually do--where does the color come from?

DM: I do have a palette of colors, but by that I mean there's a range of tonalities that I like to work with, more or less my internal color scheme. It's a long way from the black and white prints most of us started out making.

DJ: Like a magician, you seem reluctant to reveal your secrets. Can you be specific about the process? What technical means did you use in creating the earliest works? Describe what you did initially, and then let's talk about how or whether the process has changed through time, so that what you do now might be considered a refinement or development of the earlier experimentation.

Dm: That makes sense because the process involved in the earliest work is the foundation for the later work. I still use essentially the same techniques. I photograph with black and white film and use basic developing techniques. Before I start to make an individual print, I've looked at black and white contact sheets to select the image. I also develop the print, a traditional silver chloride print, very much like any other photographer. Where it shifts is after the use of the developer and before the print is fixed. At that point, I run the print through a modified stop-bath, simply to get the pH balance I want. I squeegee off the excess water and place the print onto a sheet of glass under a bank of standard incandescent lights. Then I start to fog the print. Fogging is the action of light striking the paper and shifting the tonal balance--all the colors you see in a final print are inherent in the paper itself. To stop the print from turning darker as the incandescent light is absorbed by the paper, I simply *paint* selectively with fixer, and that acts as an immediate stop to the fogging process. Over the course of an hour or so, I build up through fogging and *painting* with fixer a relationship of tones that I want, which is a purely intuitive decision, I make sure that the rest of the print is fixed, and that the sheet is processed as archivally as possible. While I've occasionally added a touch of watercolor to a finished print, this has never been very significant.

In work since about 1984, I've also been breaking down the standard rectangular borders created by the easel in the typical printing process. Instead of "accepting" the standard border, I've been painting the developer onto the paper to create borders however and wherever I want them. Another major change that I have made to the basic process is to selectively tone the silver prints with certain permanent metal toners, such as gold chloride, selenium and sulfide. These toners react chemically with the silver crystals and create a whole new range of colors-- from the reddish-brown of selenium to the deep brown of sulfide to the blue-gray and midnight blue and even pale red tones of the gold chloride. The result of this work is difficult to pre-visualize, and often it's not until the print is completely dry that I can see what I've done. In the most recent work, I feel the notion of the monoprint is more or less absolute, since I'm unable to duplicate the emotion and form of any previous print.

DJ: In many of your works you deal with fragments of architecture or architectural elements, but you treat these “subjects” almost as abstracted landscapes, and this sense of restructured or recreated reality is heightened by just the use of color you’ve described. How do you see your images relating to the physical site from which they are derived? When you are out looking for possibilities, what makes you say “aha, this is a natural for me!”--especially when you know you are going to manipulate the image during the printing process and this will remove the final work even further from what’s in front of you?

Dm: The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke said in describing the angels in his *Duino Elegies* that he was trying to “make invisible the visible.” I try to make invisible what’s in front of me-- to see right through it, to make it disappear, so that I can see something else, something different. For that reason, I find the act of photographing to be the most difficult stage of the whole creative process for me, because I feel so blind to potential subjects. You know I went to the Alhambra in Granada, Spain to photograph, and I was all excited. It was a big trip, but all I could see after two days was this one pictures--in the men’s room! That’s how it is for me all too often. In the act of looking through the viewfinder, I perceive harmonies in form, like a composer scoring a certain group of notes together in music. This recognition of formal harmony, filtered through a sense of all the previous pictures that I have made and seen, is what initiates a particular picture for me.

DJ: Why did you feel the need to travel-- to go to Italy, Turkey, and Yugoslavia, for example? Much of your early work was photographed in buildings in Providence and around New England, but then you seemed to want to move outside of these points of reference. What did these trips do for you?

DM: Well, it started with a trip to Mexico in 1981. I was wandering around looking for architectural details, particularly in the churches and public buildings, and they were filled with extraordinary subject matter that simply hadn’t been available to me in this country. The frescoes, tapestries and other images created in a different time and place opened up a whole new world. I could feel the animated quality in those images, and almost physically sense their history. They became stories for me to draw upon and I consider my interpretations to be extremely personal and imaginative in nature. I have no interest in knowing what the original stories were that those earlier artists were telling because the stories being told to me now include not only their original conception, but what’s happened in the centuries in between, all the fragmented forms created by centuries of decay.

DJ: But the images have always been tied to architecture in one way or another. That’s always had a consistent appeal.

DM: Yes, because architecture at its best represents pureness of form and the kind of harmony I cherish. I feel confident in that kind of environment.

DJ: When you first started working, you did some nudes, and they were very abstracted and rather architectonic, with wonderful legs that looked like pillars. They were not terrible different from what you were doing then with architecture. It seems as if the closest you’ve come to portraying the human figure after those early nudes has been photographing works, such as the frescoes or ruined statues, which happen to include representations of the

human form. Does the human form per se have specific interest for you? Have you every been tempted to do a "classic" nude, whatever that means?

DM: I certainly love the human form-- it's remarkable, and I feel I'm actually infatuated with it, but I find that photographing the human figure directly is extremely difficult. I can't seem to achieve what I want, and that's kept me from working more directly through the years. I have a go at it every so often. I have a picture in my head that I know I will continue to push towards, and that I'll probably succeed in making to my satisfaction. I recently attempted some nudes set in a desertscape, and I'll keep plugging away at these until I get something as strong as my other work. On the other hand, when I look at the figures in the frescoes and paintings, I often feel that even in these cases I am really photographing the human form directly. And when I do photograph it directly, I don't notice much of a difference from when I'm photographing the frescoes and paintings. When I was printing for Aaron Siskind in the early eighties, I used to talk with him about the lack of the human figure in his work, and I know he felt that he did deal with it his own way. I can understand that.

DJ: That's wonderful, and it explains so much about both your work and Aaron's. If we turn to some very different images, more recent work, particularly the construction sites, they seem to suggest destruction and cataclysm. They are very dramatic works. Is this how you feel about them? Where did they come from?

DM: They were a total surprise to me when I first created them in 1988 or early '89. I was shocked by them, by the sort of fury in some of them, by the cataclysmic qualities that couldn't be denied. It took me quite some time to understand that they were a much more direct response than most of my photographs in the past had been to things that were going on around me-- the turmoil in my personal life at the time and the terrible stories about the destruction of the environment. They were almost a physical response to the onslaught of stories in newspapers and other media suggesting that the natural environment was dying. I began to understand that something had changed in my world, probably equivalent to a child growing up a couple of decades ago with the realization that there was the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. I felt and still feel my future has been changed by this fact, and it disturbs me greatly. I even stopped reading newspapers for a while. I think the pictures came out of this change in my thinking.

DJ: Even taking into consideration your strong concerns about the environment, your work would not normally be described as being either "politically correct." to use a current term, or instantly "readable." You are not presenting an obvious political or social message or creating images that seem to relate very specifically to current events or concerns.

DM: No, I guess I've always felt the nature of art to be other than that. If one's social and political needs coincide with one's artistic needs resulting in the creation of a particular kind of art, that's fine, but it's not that way for me. I can certainly understand how art and politics have been intertwined both currently and in the past, but I also understand how completely separate they can be. I think the integrity of the picture should always be the primary consideration. For the kind of work I want to do, the imaginative and the intellectual sources are simply not political in nature. I want to be able to go back to my work years later and still find some sense of mystery, so that I can wonder about where the images might have come

from. When there's a specific political message at the center of the work, I think the kind of mystery that is central to art can be lost.

DJ: You're clearly very comfortable with your own approach to art-making.

DM: You know, the simplest definition of "art" that I've ever come up with is energy transferred from one source to another or from one individual to another. For that energy to maintain itself I feel it has to have some mystery to it, just like life does. Since I see this mystery being lost in purely political art, I am concerned that such art won't have much staying power. I guess I believe art has a poetic foundation.

DJ: Speaking of poetry, your most recent landscapes have a softness and subtlety that contrasts with the drama of the earlier construction site images. The colors are really very beautiful, and the pictures are very different from what we've been calling the cataclysmic landscapes. Does this signal some kind of change in your feelings? What's happening, or do you know yet?

DM: Well, I know that I'm going to struggle against pessimism, and I'm going to struggle against the oppressive feeling of the skies in those darker pictures. I very much believe in revealing beauty when you can, and if I have the ability to make these new images as well as the darker pictures and they're both honest, then I will. I have no qualms about making something beautiful as long as the beauty is enigmatic and sublime.

DJ: Almost as if you're attempting to move people despite themselves. It's interesting that you have consistently given titles to your images that are literary, often quite poetic. What do you consider the major influences upon your work, whether from photography, literature, music or other forms of expression which you value?

DM: Music above all others. I've never worked for more than thirty seconds in the darkroom without having music on. I'm scared to death in there alone, you know. I listen to different kinds of music when I'm making different kinds of pictures. What is most important to me about music, however, is the fact that music is pure abstraction. Music is simply abstract wave patterns entering our ears and yet its power is undeniable, and this constantly renews my faith in abstraction and the power of abstraction in the visual arts. Of course, poetry is also very important to me because I used to write poems years ago and sitting at the typewriter with a blank sheet of paper is incredibly similar to opening up a box of paper in the darkroom. Those sheets of sensitized photographic paper must incorporate all the concerns that I have about art, just as the piece of typing paper must incorporate everything for the poet. And when I read a great poem-- so many of them are written in open verse form-- I realize that the structure of how the poem appears on the page is very much what I look for in attempting to get the right balance in a picture. I learned about the notion of an "open field" from the poet Robert Duncan, and I translated this idea into my own work in the form of an "open field" of sensitized paper. This concept was very liberating.

DJ: Have you ever tried to illustrate a poem you were thinking about? Has the connection every been that direct?

DM: I guess I did early on. I used to photograph these obscure pictures in children's books, often including the words written next to the illustrations. I was looking at the forms of the words and the shapes that they made. I'll probably continue to do this.

DJ: What about photography? What photographers do you admire, or who may have influenced you?

DM: I have some favorite photographers whose work always excites me. Aaron Siskind, of course, Stieglitz and Cartier-Bresson-- probably Cartier-Bresson more than anyone.

DJ: That's interesting, because a lot of people would think of Cartier-Bresson as a quasi-documentary photographer, which seems so contrary to what you are doing. What is it about his work or what do you see in his work that makes you feel this way?

DM: The best of his pictures are great studies in form. He choreographs form into these wonderful dances, incorporating whatever subject matter he's chosen, often people. He really understands how certain shapes and forms come together in a particular time and space, and he seemed to develop this into a concept, so that the harmonies he created could be transferred to the viewer very easily. I am trying to capture these moments of harmony, this dance, even though my work is very different from his.

DJ: Are there any contemporary photographers you particularly admire?

DM: I'm afraid that no one comes instantly to mind in photography, although the early work of the Starn twins is wonderful. The contemporary artist who has had the most impact on my is Anselm Kiefer. When I saw some of his photographic monoprints in a show at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York about five years ago, I realized that he was exploring the possibilities of photographic materials in ways that I hadn't conceived of as possible. I could then see more clearly the enormous potential that a sheet of photographic paper could have for me as well. You think you've reached the limit of your parameters and then something explodes them wide open-- and you can go on again.