

# Tyler Wood Gallery

Mestrich, Qiana, *Dodge & Burn*, January 27th, 2014.  
<http://dodgeburn.blogspot.com/2014/01/photographer-interview-janna-ireland.html>

## **Where are you from and where do live/work now?**

I was born and raised in Philadelphia. I'm living in Brooklyn right now.

## **What drew you to photography?**

My dad is a photographer. When I was really young (four or five) I asked him to teach me to use his cameras because I was curious about what he did. I lost interest pretty quickly then, but became serious about photography as a teenager.

## **You just completed your MFA degree. Do you have any post-MFA thoughts/advice you'd like to share for those thinking of pursuing this degree?**

Do lots of research. Talk to peers who have been accepted to MFA programs. Talk to your former teachers. Think about what is most important to you (good funding vs. good faculty vs. good location vs. good reputation, etc.). Look at work being made by students coming out of programs you're interested in.

Some people are ready for grad school right out of college; I was not one of those people. My work improved a great deal in the years between my graduating from college and beginning to apply for grad school, which meant that my applications were stronger and I had more choices when it came time to actually pick a program. Also, I was completely burned out by the end of my senior year of college; I needed the break to recharge and get into a position to appreciate being in school again.

## **Your MFA thesis work *The Spotless Mirror* was inspired in part by the connection of painting to photography. Did this inform the work initially or did you come to realize this while making the series?**

I figured it out after I'd already made a few photographs, but then I didn't really know what to do with that information! I didn't feel that I was educated enough about painting to deal with it in a meaningful way. After *Altars to Southern California*, which eventually turned into *The Spotless Mirror*, I took a break from the work and did a few other projects while I thought things through. I spent a lot of time looking at paintings (mostly at LACMA, the Getty Center, and the Norton Simon) and did a lot of reading. I didn't want to remake paintings, I wanted to learn their language and use it to tell my own story.

**Your photographic work is also performative as you are playing a character and yet unlike the work of say Cindy Sherman, you don't radically change your appearance. Isn't role play a kind of self portraiture?**

I don't think of the portraits in *The Spotless Mirror* as self portraits. Yes, I am in them, but they don't have a lot to do with who I am. Maybe the woman in the photographs could be my sister, or a self from an alternate universe. I didn't disguise myself because the work is so much about being visible, and looking like someone else would defeat the purpose. In the past, I did work that I definitely consider self portraiture (such as *Night Season* and *Around the House*), but my face was almost always hidden somehow. I couldn't get comfortable playing myself! Now I can, but I need a break from photographing myself for the moment.

The portraits in *The Spotless Mirror* were a way of performing in private. I've always been interested in performance, but actually doing it in front of other people is very difficult for me. I was terrifically shy as a kid; up until I was about 16 I would cry if I had to do a presentation in front of a class. I'd be just sick with fear at the idea of being looked at and of people hearing my voice. I've come a long way since then, but I'm still pretty self-contained.

**In "Husband and Wife," you juxtapose a photo of the fantastical you with a portrait of a white man. Both are clearly in the same room, but not in the same frame. What is this work trying to say (if anything) about interracial relationships?**

The man in the portrait is my husband. I never want my work to be prescriptive, so I'm not trying to get you to think anything specific about interracial relationships, but the decision to include his portrait wasn't apolitical, either. It was something I thought about a lot before I did it. I wanted to make a piece that could serve as a link between my real life and the fantasy life in *The Spotless Mirror*. Joe and I are playing characters in our portraits, but we are a real married couple, and the work was shot in a house owned by his family. I knew that the inclusion of his portrait would raise questions about the economics of my character living in that house.

I didn't want either character to appear to be an accessory to the other. I thought that the separate portraits would help establish them as both having individual identities and being equally important parts of a unit. Because the portraits are in separate frames, I can play with the physical relationship between them. They can be hung an inch apart or 100 feet apart. The two portraits comprise one finished work, but because of its structure the work always has the potential to change.

**What questions or decisions informed your editing process for this series?**

Before grad school, I'd never had a studio. Just being able to pin work up on the walls and live with it for a while made me a better editor. I have an easier time letting go of things after I've been staring at them for a while. My first question is always "does this work?" My second question is "does it really work, or were you lying to yourself the first time?" It can take a while to be able to answer that second question truthfully.

I try to be a ruthless editor--no picture that does not serve the project as a whole should be included. It can be painful to give up on something you've put a lot of work into, but if a picture is good enough, it can have a life outside of the body of work it was originally intended for.

### **Are there any photographers whose work you couldn't live without?**

I met Carrie Mae Weems at a seminar in LA, and was so starstruck I could barely get a sentence out. I can't imagine that my work would exist without hers. The photo books I look at most often are of pictures by Mark Steinmetz, August Sander, F. Holland Day, and Chris Verene. I love to look at portraits. I spend a lot of time on Tumblr, and it's become essential for me to have that steady stream of exciting work to look at.

### **What are three things that help you sustain your art practice?**

A lot of it is pure stubbornness, coupled with a deep-seated belief that hard work is its own reward. The longer I do it, the more wasteful it seems to quit. And the work brings me joy and personal satisfaction.

Every January first, I write out a list of goals for the coming year. I try to come up with goals that are both realistic and actually challenging, and build on them every year. So if I achieve a goal one year, I'll try to top it the next. Without specific, short-term goals in mind, I think I would lose track of my long-term goals.

A few years ago, one of my goals was to stop comparing myself to other people. It was very easy for me to fall into the trap of thinking "I've been working just as long as so-and-so, why have they achieved so much more than I have?" I found that kind of thinking very distracting, and I realized that there are probably people who think the same thing about me. And I know how hard I've worked! Why should I fail to acknowledge that anyone who's doing "better" than I am has been out there hustling just as hard? And why should I be anything but happy for them? Not worrying about other people has freed up a lot of energy to put into my own work. It's as though I've put blinders on.

### **Tell us about the new work you're doing in South Carolina and why you choose to make work that is personally connected to your own life experiences.**

My new project is called Lee County. I wanted to make work that was about my life without actually being about me. About six years ago, my parents left Philly and moved to Bishopville, South Carolina, which is where my father grew up. After my dad was born, his parents split up, then married other people and had more children. My dad was raised by his mother's parents. I grew up very close to my dad's mother's family, but I often felt outside of it... like I was late to the party and wearing the wrong clothes. I didn't meet anyone from my dad's father's family until I was 15.

I'm trying to sort out my relationship to my family, and it seemed like Bishopville was the place to start. I'm also really curious about my dad's relationship to the town, and about the new life he and my mom have started there. I'm still working out exactly what I want to say, and how I'll say it. I can only get down there about every two months, so it's slow going, but it's an exciting challenge.