



NEW ARTIST *DAVID BENJAMIN SHERRY*

BY AMANI OLU

David Benjamin Sherry transforms conventional portraiture and traditional landscape and still life photography into an otherworldly phenomenon. He photographs himself, close friends, lovers, national parks, and ordinary and extraordinary objects in nature to affect recontextualization. Although it may seem unlikely, his entire photographic process is analog. He works with various large- and medium-format cameras, wields body paint, and prints in a darkroom to produce arresting color images that transcend fixed photographic genres. Despite what might read as a criticism of computer-generated imagery and digital manipulation, his laborious methodology is not reactionary. Rather, Sherry desires a heightened spiritual experience and extreme state of psychological consciousness that he believes is only obtainable through photographing real-world moments and working in the darkroom. The process of applying body paint to his subjects and vivid colors to his photographs turns these real-world moments, or “truths,” upside down. These fantastical images function in a magical realist context and embody the fluidity between what is real and what the artist imagines.

Born in Long Island, Sherry moved with his parents to a big farmhouse in Woodstock at the age of five. As a child, he would often play in the woods, where he developed an affinity for nature. Sherry admits, “Nature plays a big role in my work,” which explains his photographs of abstract foliage, psychedelic caves, nature’s mysterious lights, expressionistic swamps, and godlike mountains. Aided by a dynamic palette, Sherry re-presents these already extraordinary landscapes as out-of-this world

environments invulnerable to human interaction. Through chance or by design, his ability to discover meaningful abstractions in nature is unequivocal. *Throwing Darts in Lovers Eyes*, a photograph of a sand dune in White Sands, New Mexico, demonstrates the former. This natural wonder, which began as a fleeting visual curiosity, captured his attention in the darkroom, where he first imagined the dune as the bottom of a pyramid. To complete this abstract pyramid, he photogrammed a triangle over the original photograph. Without the convenience of digital manipulation, Sherry spent months perfecting the composition of the triangle against the bottom of the sand dune. “I wasn’t able to measure or see in the darkroom,” he says, “so I had to make hundreds of them to get the composition right. It took me a year to make.” *Throwing Darts in Lovers Eyes* is a compelling example of how intuition, precocious seeing, and methodological perseverance can beget innovation.

In his portraits, Sherry regularly photographs himself and his “community of eccentric, brilliant people.” These pictures expand on the work of Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, Jack Pierson, and so many others who intimately documented the people in their lives. What is new in his work is his ability to address this subject without literal representation, a staple in this variety of picture making. By painting his subjects in rich colors, he morphs them into mythical, spiritlike figures of epic proportions. *You and Your Frequent C in the Intense City* depicts a couple’s affectionate kiss, *Great Grear of the Technicolor Brotherhood* reflects the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and *You Have Never Been*

in Love Until You’ve Seen the Dawn Rise Behind the Home for the Blind I and II reflect the intricacies of Sherry’s relationship with a former lover. The latter photographs, one of Sherry (I), the other of his ex-lover (II), are individual images made at different times collaged together to create a single portrait. In these two works, each color symbolizes a unique moment in the subject’s life. Accumulatively, these experiences define the subject’s character. Sherry effectively shows their true colors. Each of these carefully constructed portraits is concerned with preserving the artist’s memory. His ethos: “Let’s make a portrait we’ll remember in 50 years.”

Sherry’s work is a fantastical manifestation of a world created in his mind. Here, his anxieties about life—namely, unimpeded death—find balance through the transformation and recontextualization of people, space, and objects. To experience his photographs is similar to finding \$20 on the sidewalk; his pictures are a wonderful surprise, a surge of hope, full of promise, and the necessary response to the monotony (literal representation) that continues to handicap most contemporary art photographers. By combining magical realism and a vibrant palette into his practice, Sherry encourages the viewer to consider new possibilities in photo-based art. This is noteworthy, because the current trend is to use digital manipulation and digitally created images to expand the medium’s indexical properties. Sherry, as he puts it, is “into what’s next,” but his practice reflects a Modernist methodology. This proves that the expansion of photographic practice is not beholden to a set of fashionable ideas or one technology. In short, everything is in.



Opposite page:

David Benjamin Sherry

Throwing Darts in Lovers Eyes II

2009

Chromogenic traditional color print

30 X 40 inches

Courtesy of the artist

This page:

David Benjamin Sherry

You Have Never Been in Love Until You’ve

Seen the Dawn Rise Behind the

Home for the Blind I and II

2010

Chromogenic traditional color print collage

70 X 25 inches

Courtesy of the artist