



FLÂNEUR

SHELLEY WILDEMAN

BY MEHREEN SHAHID

Capturing time in a bottle may not be possible, but Shelley Wildeman is capable of saving it in an image. Roaming the streets of cities she visits or those of downtown Toronto, where she lives, Wildeman searches for scenes in the dynamic urban sight line.

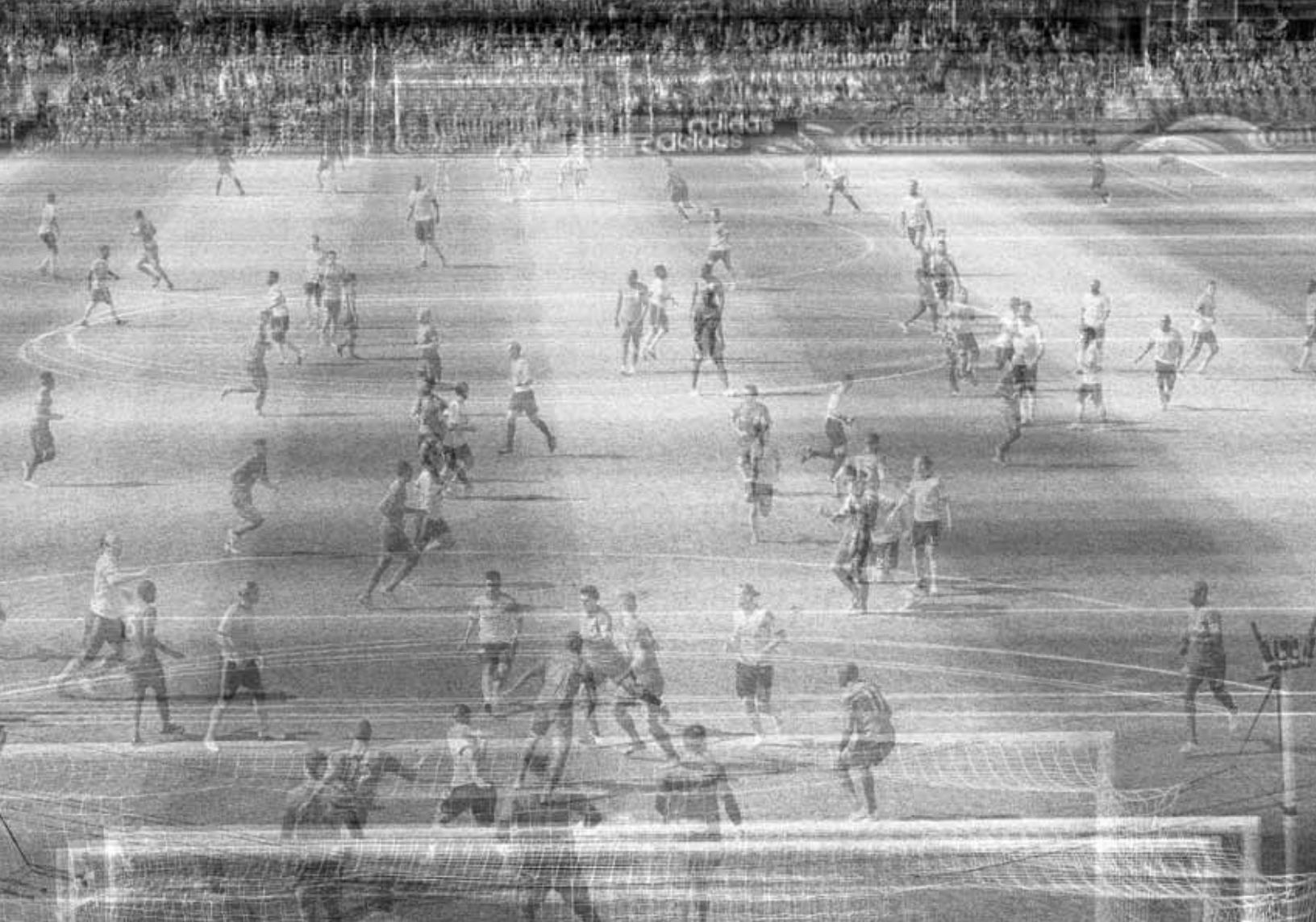
"I grew up in a small city and was pretty bored. Going anywhere where there was action was more interesting to me," says Wildeman. Moving to Toronto after turning 18, she became an urban creature. Wildeman explains that urban spaces filled with roaming people are her happy place. "I like the safety in numbers concept... That there's a lot going on," she says. "I guess Harbourfront is my favourite spot in Toronto, and it's been good for my work. It's got great sight lines and a great range of people."

Wildeman watches people moving through and occupying public or somewhat private spaces. She enjoys just sitting and watching, not doing anything else: being a flâneur, a stroller, someone who observes urban life in an unhurried way.

The intention of Wildeman's work is not to focus on specific people, but if someone walks into the view, she thinks that's great. The ghostlike appearance of people in her photography reinforces that people occupy space for only a short time. She states, "I'm not focused on their psychology or emotion. I'm not trying to get into the heads of people in the frame. It's just about urban life and themes."

Once a scene strikes her, Wildeman promptly goes to work capturing it through the eyes of a voyeur. "I shoot a number of frames, maybe 10 to 20, handheld," she says. "Although, I've come back to places to photograph scenes intentionally, I find that spur-of-the-moment works out better. For instance, I may come back to a place to find there's a big dumpster or some new construction in my view."

Sometimes Wildeman shoots a scene against her better judgement. For example, she was at a Toronto Football Club game when her partner commented that the game was the perfect subject matter for her. She resisted at first: "I made a



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face and said, ‘There aren’t enough people in the scene.’ Then I realized I needed to just shoot the scene and think about it later. So I did, and it worked out great.” Wildeman believes “Toronto Football Club vs. Kansas City, Toronto, 2015” works well because she used her zoom lens, which foreshortened the field. Wildeman is drawn to the piece’s graphic quality: “The shadows are strong. I think it’s one you can really spend time with; your eye can move around from player to player.”

After a successful day of shooting, Wildeman imports her images into Photoshop. Picking what she believes are the strongest five or more shots, Wildeman strips them of colour and layers them into one file. Then she dodges and burns the images. She explains, “I only recently started shooting digital. I loved my old film camera and didn’t want to give it up, but digital makes so much sense for what I do because having a good selection of shots to choose from is a great start before I make my montages.”

Using black and white doesn’t take away from the uniqueness of the work, she says. Wildeman’s use of monochrome is actually a natural evolution for her: “I’ve been working on [people living through public space] for the last few years. I did versions of it in colour, but when I was first shooting, feedback led me to realize that the subject matter was what interested me, and I decided to develop that idea. I experimented with colour, but

it’s pretty jarring, so I went with black and white: it’s softer.”

The lack of colour gives the series an old-timey feeling, making it a natural fit with Wildeman’s themes of passing of time and nostalgia. They also connect to the time when photography was proving itself as an art form: in early to mid-twentieth century.

“I wanted it to look impressionistic and I think it helps the scene kind of pull together, because they are all quite disparate; I’m indoors and outdoors, so it pulls the series together. I hope it helps the viewer focus on what I’m trying to capture: the people. I hope it brings those ideas closer to the surface.”

Wildeman hopes her work makes viewers feel the passing of time and recognize the brevity of people’s presence in spaces. In other words, Wildeman wants “people to feel like they are the flâneur.”