



Shelley Wildeman

OVERLAYS

by Lara Wheeler



Shelley Wildeman offers her viewers a unique glimpse into the passage of time through her photo-based art of public spaces. By combining documentary photography with the graphic arts, Wildeman has created a unique aesthetic that she uses to depict people's interactions with their surroundings.

A self-described 'urbanite' who enjoys the act of people-watching, Wildeman began her study of public spaces and human presence on a visit to South Beach, Miami, where she initially intended to document the beach's art-deco lifeguard stations. Instead, she says she became more interested in what was going on around the stations: "You have to really stop for a while and become part of the landscape to go into that zone. I became a voyeur. The beach is a particularly interesting public space because we have permission to stare at people in a way we don't elsewhere," says Wildeman. This experience inspired Wildeman to pursue a new artistic direction in her work to allow her viewers to feel more a part of the changing scene.

Wildeman deliberately selects public locations of social or cultural relevance to provoke feelings of nostalgia. In her recent work, Wildeman takes a number of hand held photographs of a single space over time, and assembles them one on top of each other, in order to create a single image that represents moments in time. "The experience of the single documentary instant is multiplied, amplifying the viewer's feeling of being in that place at that time," says Wildeman. It's an effect that she stumbled on in the process of composing a triptych. "I was layering my shots with levels of transparency just to line them up, and I noticed what a wonderful and effective way of presenting several moments of the same scene. So I scrapped the triptych!" Experimenting with photographic layers helped to develop Wildeman's emerging aesthetic.

Experimentation is what first led Wildeman to begin integrating photography and photographic processes into her art. Educated as a graphic designer, Wildeman says it took her a number of



years before she began photographing. “It was when I realized that photography can be whatever you want,” Wildeman says. “You can shoot with a fancy camera, or you can use a pinhole, or a toy camera or your iPhone or whatever. It was liberating.” Wildeman is receptive towards various photography techniques, and advocates the use of new media innovations, as well as historical processes. Although she began shooting with digital a few years ago, Wildeman continues to use film as well: “My upcoming series is being shot on black and white film and will then be scanned and manipulated. I still love traditional photography, and I hate this idea that everything digital is somehow always better. It does make some things easier, but these are all tools in the end,” says Wildeman.

Her series, *Overlay*, is an example of combining conventional and modern techniques within the same work. After selecting four photos, Wildeman will scan any images that were shot in film and adjust for colour, rotation, and exposure before building her layered file: “I make sure the shots line up perfectly in one spot- usually a central item- but I don’t insist that the whole shot aligns perfectly throughout. This gives it a nice feeling of motion,” she adds. She reduces each image into one of the four colours used in the printing process; magenta, cyan, yellow, or black: “When layered, the common elements in the scene, such as buildings and sidewalks are in full naturalistic colour, and the people become these ephemeral figures floating through the scene,” says Wildeman.

Wildeman works outside of the spatial confines of the printed photographic image in order to make viewers aware of her process: “They can see right away that the image is made up of several shots,” she says.

“Then once they see that they can spend time with the scene, rather than get caught up in how it’s done.” The sequential alteration of overlaid images is deliberately arranged to create a surreal final image: “We’ve all seen those out of register pictures in the newspaper. The surreal aspect comes out of the execution. I’m really depicting how temporary our time here is.”

While an element of surrealism pervades Wildeman’s work, she says that documentary photography forms the basis of her art: “I think of my work as basically documentary, I’m just documenting more than one moment in time.” Within her work, the traditional photographic objective of documentation is combined with modernist aesthetic influences, such as Man Ray: “When I was a teenager, I saw a documentary about Man Ray and was pretty much hooked after that. He’s still my favourite.” Wildeman credits Ray with elevating the status of photography into the art world.

Wildeman continues to take inspiration from other photographers as well, especially the German photographers of recent years, like Thomas Demand, Axel Hutte, and Candida Höfer, whose work explores similar themes as Wildeman’s, including observations of places and the passage of time. Wildeman also admires Italian photographer, Massimo Vitali, whose work also shares a number of themes with hers. She explores similar topics through different techniques and processes, yielding images that are related, but visually distinct.



Wildman’s observations of human interaction with public spaces and exploration of traditional and emerging photographic processes, allow her to examine the elemental components of photography, while simultaneously exploring the mutability that emerging technology offers. Her desire to present surrealism alongside the documentation of layered events, leads to an experience that is recognizable, unique and surpasses a static photograph: “I’m hoping to make the viewer

feel like they’re right there, sitting on a park bench watching the scene change before them, imagining what all those folks are up to, where they’re going.” Wildeman supplies everything needed to share with her an immersion in another world.

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