

# Alec Soth's Archived Blog

March 27, 2007

Judy Linn

Filed under: [artists](#) — alecsothblog @ 8:54 pm

I recently came across the work of Judy Linn. She is best known for her photographs of Robert Mapplethorp and Patti Smith (you can see some of these pictures [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). But Linn's more eclectic recent work is worth a look. She currently has a show up at [Feature Inc](#):



Untitled, 2002, by Judy Linn

In an interview with [Index Magazine](#), Feature's director, Hudson, was asked why Linn is the only photographer represented by the gallery:

She comes more from the history of photography She's thankfully not a painter, sculptor, installation artist using photography. That's so exasperating...It's generally so dull and predictable. Admittedly there are a lot of different modes there. There's the diaristic, the technical, the sociological (and so on). But they become codified so quickly that when you look at the work, you merely identify the genre or subject matter and then you don't need to engage it. It's also been killed by the quantity. One of the biggest problems with early 21st-century life (in general) is how the quantity of something diminishes its ability to have power and meaning. It's really hard to fight that.

I can see why Hudson responds to Linn's pictures. They are clearly made by a photographer – not an 'artist using photography'. And the pictures do seem to skirt easy classification (documentary, diaristic, etc). The New Yorker described her show this way:

This survey of thirteen recent photographs—some in color, most in black-and-white—is modest, quirky, and offhandedly shrewd. Like so many contemporary photographers, Linn tends to take pictures of things that are not very interesting: bits of bread scattered on trampled snow, a sunny sidewalk peppered with tiny buds, a blond woman with an extravagant ponytail, a pine tree in a flooded field, a solitary cow. But each image is at once self-effacing and just right. The show doesn't exactly cohere (what does this woman in bed have to do with that dishtowel?), but no matter; Linn's scattershot approach feels right on target.

What is the trick? How do you make thirteen unrelated and unclassifiable pictures work together? Here is how Linn explains herself:

Words and pictures by nature don't agree. There is no good fit. I can't say what I do or have done, but I know what I want, what I try to do. I can tell how I aim. I can't say how I land.

When I began, I hated what I couldn't control—all the annoying things I couldn't see in the moment of taking a photograph, the crazy stuff that jumps into the edges of pictures. Now I like that part the best. But I do want to be accurate, although "accurate" is a slippery word. I don't mean a quality of photography. I think Cezanne, Ingres, and de Kooning are all accurate. I don't think Ansel Adams is accurate. If you look at a Hiroshige woodcut of a whirlpool, you figure it is a fanciful rendition because how accurate can a woodcut be? But if you go to see the whirlpool, you see that he is telling you exactly what it looks like.

I think when someone first looks at a photograph they automatically wonder, "What is it?" I want a photograph that easily answers that question. I want to be extremely obvious; obfuscation is bad grammar. Hopefully, the two-dimensional arrangements of shapes on the paper will be as lively and interesting as the three-dimensional world trapped inside the photograph. There should also be something there you haven't seen before. Something should happen in the act of looking.

I want a photograph that makes me aware of what is physically in front of me, a photograph that gives me the pleasure of getting lost. It is like asking yourself a joke: not really knowing what the answer is, giving up, and then seeing the punch line and really laughing.



Untitled, 1995, by Judy Linn

## 10 Comments

1. I found the following quote on [Photomuse](#), by John Szarkowski:  
"Photography is the easiest thing in the world, if one is willing to accept pictures that are flaccid, limp, bland, banal, indiscriminately informative and pointless, but if one insists on a photograph that is both complex and vigorous, it is almost impossible."

Just as Manuel Alvarez Bravo opposed the usual picturesque in his imagery there are many new waves of photography made in opposition. The snapshot versus the controlled and formal. I think Judy Linn, 'just' makes it here in the sense that she has retained elements of the complex and vigorous, the leg image above, suggestive perhaps of male and female (though I realise there could be a female leg in those jeans) adds some element of meditation. The bath towel though, perhaps sits in the context of the group, the intention I guess, but it is an example that falls on the 'limp' side of the spectrum for me.

Another place of interest for me is the knowledge that a subject is 'found'. The two legs appear setup because of their unusual placement. If we were told that it wasn't (ie rather than have to imagine tat it wasn't) we might have a new dimension of contemplation, i.e. why did the two legs fall like that.

*Comment by [Philip](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [1:56 am](#)*

2. I mean't 'was' found...

*Comment by [Philip](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [1:59 am](#)*

3. I appreciate this post.

*Comment by [grant ernhart](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [2:00 am](#)*

4. The thing that most people miss when talking about photography is all other mediums of art are drawn from the mind, while photography is drawn from what exist. Photography confronts the actual thing/s in front of the camera. I have often thought of photography as the art of found object, or the art of seeing. I don't mean to imply understanding necessarily, but more recognition that something exist in time and space. Linn's image of the snake coming out from the back of the guys shirt is just that, something she was confronted with and leaves the understanding to minds of her viewers.

Pitchertaker

*Comment by [Frank Armstrong](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [9:06 am](#)*

5. This is so cool. Judy Linn was my first photo teacher! I had her at Sarah Lawrence about 10 years ago. I was an exceptionally horrible photographer then but she was a great professor. I always wondered what happened to her. I remember her showing her portfolio to us one day. A photo of a dog and a hose still sticks in my mind for some reason.

*Comment by [Bess](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [11:39 am](#)*

6. Nice post. I really like what she says about "accuracy." Also about how a photograph should be immediately decipherable, that you shouldn't have to ask "what is it?"

*Comment by [george lechat](#) — March 28, 2007 @ [11:55 am](#)*

7. I got hip to Judy Linn in 1972. My Aunt Mickey took me to the Gotham Bookmart to buy Patti Smith's book of poems "Seventh Heaven". The cover photograph of Patti took my breath for a second. She brought to mind Joan of Arc (Patti not Judy) and I thought that was pretty effin' cool because I never had a reaction like that to a photograph – or a subject. Then there was a review

of a Golddiggers (sp?) album in Fusion Magazine (r.i.p.) that Judy co-wrote with The Greatest, Lester Bangs! I knew I had to meet this dame, and was fortunate to study with her at Pratt, Brooklyn about a hundred years ago. I will always be grateful for all she shared with us.

*Comment by Lisa Genet — March 31, 2007 @ [11:33 am](#)*

8. [...] Alec Soth bloggar om Judy Linn. [...]

*Pingback by [Fotografiskt » Blog Archive » Några länkar](#) — April 25, 2007 @ [2:51 pm](#)*

9. [...] The show pulled together a number of things that have been on my mind lately. Recently writing about the eclectic photographs of Judy Linn, I asked how she managed to make such unrelated and unclassifiable images cohere. In response to this post, Tim Conner wrote something very interesting: I've noticed that the only shows that don't fit into a catchy concept (the faces of Iraq war veterans, hypnotized subjects, naked mothers & children in the wild, etc.) are by photographers who are at the end of their careers or dead, with names that are already an established brand. Only then, it seems, can imagery be allowed to stray off message or venture into more than one style. [...]

*Pingback by [alec soth - blog » Blog Archive » surprise](#) — December 10, 2007 @ [10:15 am](#)*

10. [...] Alec Soth's mothballed blog has excerpts from an interview with Judy Linn in Interview Magazine. [...]

*Pingback by [Atlanta Celebrates Photography » Blog Archive » Judy Linn \(and more!\) at the Contemporary](#) — February 4, 2008 @ [2:43 pm](#)*