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HOT SHOT Q&A: JESSICA EATON

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By Casey Gollan

Today we're back with another Hot Shot Q&A, with questions for and answers from Jessica Eaton! Jessica's photographs, often exploring the limitations and possibilities of photography as a medium, are the definition of experimental. So it comes as no surprise that she states, "I want to make photographs that surprise myself." But Jessica isn't the only one surprised by her work, so were our Hey, Hot Shot! Panelists. You can find a full statement and bio in Jessica's official Hot Shot post, and more on her work in her contender post which ran during the competition. We caught up with Jessica by email from her "self-directed residency" in Argentina, where she took a few minutes out from her daily experiments to answer our questions:

From: Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. I have also lived in Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, and currently, Buenos Aires. I will be in NYC this March and hopefully Berlin to follow.

Formal and/or informal education and training: I have a BFA in photography from Emily Carr University, Vancouver. However, very little of my technical knowledge of the medium came from there. Most of what I know technically came from books, colleagues, friends, staff at labs, rental departments and most importantly: trial and error. I re-shot my *Quantum Pong* series six times in studio and I would still re-shoot everything I have ever done to "fix things" if reality didn't stop me.

This is not to say that art school was a useless experience. On the contrary—the institution gave me the access to studios, darkrooms and equipment that would have been difficult to obtain on my own. Most importantly, school allowed me to connect with other people involved in the arts and provided me with a basic language and historical context for both the medium of photography and fine art and design in general. I would love to do my MFA if the opportunity became economically feasible.

How you pay the bills: Throughout my life I have been faced with the dilemma of how to live with very little money to cover basic needs and high photography expenses. I take the odd music-related photography gig, editorial assignments, wedding recommendations, photographs for other artists and sometimes stills for independent film. Typically, I have maintained service industry jobs but recently gave

it up to focus exclusively on my photography. At this point in my career, I am lucky to have the financial support of some very generous people who have faith in me. I have been given the privilege to concentrate solely on my work and to put exhibits together for show. Fortunately, this is beginning to pay off with increased exposure, awards, new opportunities and many kind letters from admirers of my work. I am optimistic that the financial rewards will soon be realized. I will often pre-sell friends the first edition of a gallery-finished piece for the cost of getting it on the wall. They get a great deal on a piece of work and I am able to do my exhibit.

Best advice you ever received as a photographer (and/or as a human):
"It isn't the gear you have, but what you do with it."
"Demand more, expect less."
"Happiness is a choice.

"There is no point to fret over not being able to afford a Hasselblad H3D or something like it. These days, photographs created with a point and shoot, a plastic black box, or even a cell phone, could end up in the MoMA. Sadly, too many people who are lucky to own an H3D or what-have-you, produce nothing but crap. For me ultimate creativity [comes from] work[ing] with limited resources, figuring out something interesting that I can do in the now. There are infinite possibilities. I have never met a person with real passion and perseverance for their art that I didn't like and respect, even if the works were not particularly to my liking. However, I have met many people primarily fixated on their lenses and DPP reviews whom I find difficult to tolerate.

I have also been advised to "always be closing," although I interpret this to mean "always be working." It is dangerous to ride or get stuck in your own success or failure. The only way to move forward into the future is to forget the past. I apply this rule of thumb to always be working on something, completing it, and moving on with new ideas. Imogen Cunningham said something to the effect that her best photograph was the one she would create tomorrow.

Top 3 Favorite Artists: Other than restaurants, I avoid making top lists. Every day there are new and amazing things just around the corner. I do think it is a good idea to put big ideas out there because that is the only way they might happen. As such, I will say that two well-known artists I would love to do collaborations with are James Turrell and Olafur Eliasson. I am very interested in and inspired by their work with light, space, scale and phenomena.

To include those no longer with us, I'd also add the late, great, Maya Deren. I have often felt like I have been working with her since I first discovered her anyway. Similarly, with regard to limited resources, Maya stated: "I make my pictures for what Hollywood spends on lipstick". Ms. Deren was first brought to my attention during art school by my friend Zoe Gordon. She suggested that I made photographs in her spirit which compelled me to learn more about her. Coincidentally the documentary, *In the Mirror of Maya Deren*, had just been released, a heart-warming and inspirational film for me to experience. If even just a tiny bit of her spirit is with me, that is enough to inspire me to dance in her footsteps.

Photograph (or other work of art) that you can't get out of your head, ever: There is a photograph I have held in mind and [it] has affected my entire life. It is a silver gelatin print, about 18" in height, cut and framed with a bubble of glass to an oval. The photograph, from the early 1900s, is of a little girl aged 2 or 3. The child is the sister of my grandfather who died from bad milk shortly after the photograph was taken.

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My grandparents had an impressive wall of family photos in the house they lived in throughout my childhood. I remember being fascinated by the wall and spending a great deal of time looking and thinking.

By the time I could talk, I would ask about each of the people in the photographs. Upon learning that the girl with the eyes that stared back at me had died, I became particularly fixated with [her photo]. It was this image, at around age three, the same age she was, that gave me my first memorable philosophic experience. It was an absolutely Barthean moment, having to do with time, the "real," the image and death. Being so young when these thoughts first dawned on me, there was something about the ideas that I recall as being more of a physical experience, a knowledge and questions embodied, as opposed to constructed in language.

In 1991, my mother passed away, so there are all those pictures as well. Although I didn't start taking photographs until 1998, I think all this death and the photographic relics of the deceased throughout my childhood significantly influenced my practice. I quickly realized that even if I had thousands of photographs of my mother, not one or all could adequately describe anything about her. All that remains is a mutable physical appearance and at best the suggested, contextual interpretation found in gesture. I would not hesitate to trade them all for a mere 15 minutes with her again, or even a recording of her voice. I ventured into photography with the idea that a photograph always was much more or something other than what it was presumably a picture "of." I think this has all made me most interested in creating a photograph that often disregards the indexical — a photograph that is about being a photograph and hopefully pointing to something more metaphysical.

Reading now: Being in Buenos Aires at the moment the obvious answer is, basic Spanish, as well as the history and politics of Argentina. Most days I find myself reading through restaurant and museum guides. I typically and avidly read fiction but have put that aside in favour of photography writing and non-fiction over the last few years. I just started the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz, as sun tanning while reading off a laptop is so wrong and difficult to see the screen. I brought no books and barely any clothing with me as camera and computer gear took up most of my luggage. When picking up fiction for the first time in far too long, a Pulitzer Prize winner is usually a safe bet—so far it's great! Sadly it is difficult to find books in English in Argentina and they are expensive. Fortunately there are many expatriates who are willing to share.

Top 3 photo-related websites/blogs:
Again no hierarchical top list, especially with so much of great stuff out there. I wish I could name them all but I do make an effort to back-link them on my weblog. That said, I would never turn down an opportunity to promote a few of the things I think are great. I have given this much thought and it was very difficult to name just three with so many out there. Here you go:

1.Flak Photo
Go Andy Adams GO! That is all I have to say about that :)

2. Tinyvices
Tim Barber's web site was the first place where my photographs were published online. I think my first portfolio went up on tinyvices in 2005 and photography was just starting to be disseminated online. Most of my initial images were poorly scanned 8x10 darkroom prints and at that time I had barely touched a

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computer, nevermind scanned a negative or used a curve. No doubt tinyvices is the first place many people first saw my work (I think it is how I ended up doing a 20x200 edition!), and for that I am forever thankful. While maintaining an active personal photography career and art practice, Tim has just redesigned the website and continues to graciously promote the work of others. It is a special thing to discover people who are both content producers in a serious sense as well as disseminators and promoters for the work of others. There are many more people doing this now, people with such an obvious passion for the photographs. Bless you all!

3. GIMP, the GNU Image Manipulation Program
GIMP is open-source software, very much like Photoshop but free. I do indeed use Photoshop and even the GNU folk will tell you that they are not trying to replace Photoshop or discredit the importance of higher-end commercial software and proprietary software. In my opinion, the three main reasons to use GIMP are in situations where maybe your computer has crashed and you are having an image editing emergency or when using a computer that does not have Photoshop installed, but most importantly, if you don't feel comfortable resorting to piracy. Open source is the heart of the Internet and computing, and indeed, much love can be found.

Top 3 non-photo websites/blogs:
1.Processing
More open-source software, in this case a programming language created to teach programming basics within a visual context. On my list of things to explore in 2010.

2. Tumblr and Wordpress
The two best ways to blog and the two that I use. Thank you! An extra shout out for Wordpress founder, Matt Mullenweg who has made me absolutely confident and content that I won't wake up one day to find my weblog gone for no apparent reason, without any explanation like a certain "140 character micro-blogging service" once did to me. ehemmm!

3. Zero.in (a.k.a Project guiGoog)
Coming soon, but you can check out a limited preview beta now. Zero.in is a Graphical User Interface (GUI) for Google Advanced Search. I have been watching the development over the past 6 months in my kitchen by a smarty-pants techie whom I spend a lot of time with. Every now and then, I pester him to focus more on image searching and he assures me this is in the works for the next release.

What project or idea are you working on now? In 2010, I am focusing on a number of new ideas although I am continuing with works utilizing masking, both in and out of camera like "108" and "Other Obstructions." These pictures and the process are very time consuming and I don't have a fantastic success ratio, yet they are extremely satisfying when things come together. I am working on my next solo show, to be held in Montreal tentatively in late spring at PUSH Gallerie. Other current works in progress fall under "Incidence and Accidents" and they bring together and fill in gaps of my tests of phenomena and geometry as interpreted through the camera.

I have recently started a collaborative project with a fantastic NY-based photographer, Lucas Blalock. The project, brought to the table by Lucas, will eventually be a publication and hopefully an ever-changing exhibition. Look for more news of that in the fall. We are both doing work independently at the moment

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but in March I will spend the month in NYC, developing the project and photographing together. When I first saw Lucas's work, I was struck by how many times I felt we were trying to work out the same ideas. I am totally fascinated by the differences in how we photographically expressed that process. I am quite excited to see how the collaboration unfolds between us. My biggest hope is that things present themselves in ways I can't yet imagine.

I am experimenting with some stop-motion, captured digitally. I have a few ideas where I would like to work with dancers — stop-motion pieces using bodies and different exposure variables, as well as stills based on the same ideas; dances that are choreographed specifically for a camera, the camera's options and lighting effects; the camera as dance partner.

Another project on the agenda for 2010 is an idea for a 35mm motion picture and surround sound project that I have had in my head for far too long. Funding and producing film and complex sound works has always intimidated me, but in 2010 I will try. If all goes well I hope to produce the work sometime in 2011. A huge thanks to Jessica for answering all of our questions! We've almost reached the end of our Hot Shot Q&A series, but our final Q&A for this round, with Hot Shot Marisa Aragona, will run on Monday so be sure to check back.

Photo credit: © Jessica Eaton, *Additive Pong*