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Jenna Westra on the subject of the body

by MARIGOLD WARNER

Westra reflects on the presence of the female body in her work, and her latest photobook and exhibition, *Afternoons*

New York-based artist Jenna Westra first became interested in photography in 2009, when she reluctantly enrolled in a history class. "I needed an art history class to graduate, and was late registering. The only option was a section on history of photography, so I signed up, despite having little interest," she says. "I was immediately fascinated by early image-making processes... Imagining what it must have been like to create a direct visual record of the world for the first time – a way of seeing and looking that was new and different – felt really exciting to me."

Westra began collecting old cameras, taking them apart and piecing them back together to understand the mechanics of image-making. At the beginning, she was producing self-portraits as a way to "learn how light and form are translated on film". Eventually, she began working with female models, often dancers, because they have a good understanding of how their bodies look and move. Her images are tender and fluid, painted with limbs and torsos moving and intertwining through space. "I've been working in this particular way, with models as collaborators in the studio, for about seven years," she says.

Now, a collection of Westra's works are gathered in an exhibition, at New York's Lubov Gallery, as well as an accompanying photobook, titled *Afternoons*. "It's the time of day I'm most productive," says Westra, explaining that the inspiration for the title first came from one of the chapters of the 1986 film *Hannah and Her Sisters*. "I had also been spending a lot of my afternoons photographing people in parks around the city. The word has a certain texture that fits within the mood I try to convey in my work. It has a poetic quality."

Below, Westra reflects on the presence and evolution of the body in her work.

I am forever interested in how the camera shapes ideas of the female psyche. I taught myself through self-portraiture, at a time when I was figuring out my own identity, but I didn't like the lack of control you get by actually looking through the viewfinder at the

genesis of an image. Eventually I replaced myself with other women who are somehow physically similar.

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I started working with dancers when I made my first 16mm film. It was about an injured performer who could no longer move how she once did. I liked the idea of a dancer who couldn't move, but could pose in a specific, learned way and how that idea relates to stillness and photography in general.

She poses and makes slow, meditative movements over the course of the sun setting in Prospect Park. Two bodies, the movie camera and the dancer, both with the capacity for movement, that when held still, vibrate together.

I have never been a photographer who works in 'series'. I consider this collection of pictures as an ongoing investigation into how the female form can be imaged in a nuanced, feminine way that resists traditional power dynamics between genders and questions the politics of looking.

We're all missing human touch and contact. Maybe this work is a reminder of the tenderness in that, and that is refreshing to see again. But I also hope it's a reminder to keep making, keep pushing, and find solace in creative work, however that may look.

My studio and darkroom have been both sanctuary and lifeline in this trying year. I'm so grateful for these spaces and for the people who continue to support me.

[Jenna Westra](#): Afternoons is on show at [Lubov](#), New York, until 22 November 2020. The accompanying book is published by [Hassla](#), pre-order a copy [here](#).

MARIGOLD WARNER

Marigold Warner joined the British Journal Photography in April 2018, and currently holds the position of Online Editor. She studied English Literature and History of Art at the University of Leeds, followed by an MA in Magazine Journalism from City, University of London. Her work has been published by titles including the Telegraph Magazine, Huck, Gal-dem, Disegno, and the Architects Journal.

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