

# PAPER JOURNAL

## 15 Questions with... Jenna Westra

All images courtesy the artist and Lubov, New York

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### How are you at the moment?

Doing well, all things considered.

### What is your morning ritual? How does your day begin?

I make a strong cup of coffee with warm foamy milk and have that while doing a close re-read of whatever essays I've assigned my students that week, or whatever books I happen to have on my table at the moment. Right now it's Douglas Crimp's *Before Pictures* and Susan Sontag's latest biography by Benjamin Moser, *Sontag: Her Life and Work*. Then I'll walk Atlas, my little dog and best friend of ten years, while listening to a podcast, usually *The Daily* from the New York Times. I try to limit my news consumption while staying informed.

### What, right now, can you see?

I'm at my studio (Long Island City, NY), the wall behind my desk has a film still from my 2018 film *Fruits*, it shows a cantaloupe that's been cut in half and is held by the hands of a man and woman. There's a self-portrait from 2009, a silver gelatin test strip, and a postcard with a quote from Felix Gonzalez-Torres that reads "I always wonder if men in uniform sleep better after performing their duties". The quote was given to me to respond to for *Middleplane Magazine's* last issue. On my desk there's a printout of Jeff Wall's essay "Marks of Indifference": Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art and a price list from My Own Color Lab, a colour and B&W darkroom on West 27th Street that opened in 1978 and still operates. The owner told me Nan Goldin printed *The Ballad* there; it's a really special place.

### What artist, project, or book would you recommend?

I would recommend my dear friend, the Berlin-based artist Johanna Jaeger. We work with the same gallery in Berlin, Schwarz Contemporary. She thinks deeply about the specific conditions

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of light, indexes, and colour, and works with photography, video, sculpture and installation. Her work is incredibly poetic and made with unmatched sensitivity, I admire her so much.

## **Tell us about your process when starting a new project.**

My projects are largely shaped by exhibitions, so I think about the space and practical things like the number of works I can show, their size, etc. I like to start by looking through my negative archive and contact sheets; there's always something I've overlooked and want to revisit, either by actually printing it, or taking some aspect or idea and following that thread and shooting new work. I'll collect inspiration images, and put out a casting call, usually on Craigslist, or by asking friends and models I've already worked with.

## **What has been your favourite collaboration?**

I've been lucky to work with so many amazing people, but one of my most cherished experiences was a residency I did in Mallorca in 2019. I was invited by L21 gallery to come stay on the island for two weeks and work. I spent my time shooting with a cast of women I was connected to by the artist Ian Waelder (another artist I admire). One of them invited me to shoot at her family home in Deià. Myself and six women spent the day shooting, swimming, sun bathing, and watching the sunset over the Mediterranean Sea. I used a number of the images we made for a subsequent exhibition at Fahrenheit Madrid, and they also appear in my new book. The work just keeps on giving and I'm incredibly grateful for the experience.

## **What is your greatest achievement?**

I had a hard time figuring out what I wanted to do with my life up until college. I had a professor I really looked up to, she is really invested in her students and so enthusiastic. I decided I wanted to be like her; an artist and professor. I'm doing both of those things now, so I'd say that's an achievement. As far as my greatest achievement, I don't think I've accomplished that just yet.

## **What is your greatest regret?**

When I was 23 or so, I was living in Los Angeles and I went to an opening at Bergamot Station in Santa Monica. The show was abstract paintings which were super tactile, with thickly applied wet paint. I reached out to touch one and an elderly man who looked somewhat down on his luck told me that if I touch the paintings, I would have to buy them. I just looked at him and walked away. I later found out that man was John Baldessari, I had missed my opportunity to speak with him and I'll never forget that. I tell this story to my students and just say you never know who you're talking to and anyway, you should give everyone the time of day and not write anyone off, ever.

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## **What advice would you give to your younger self?**

The above, and also to cherish and tend to your friendships. To ask questions and be curious, and to get all you can out of your time as a student. It's a very particular and special time in your life.

## **What is your latest project about?**

I currently have a solo exhibition, Afternoons, on view at Lubov gallery here in New York, and just finished a new book that's published by Hassla. The show and book are an accumulation of work made over the past 8 years that tell the story of my preoccupation with the female form, and gentle non-violent ways to portray it. It's also about the temporal aspect of photography, and mixing different modes of image making, finding relationships between scenes that are found, and those that are constructed and questioning value structures within that.

## **What are you researching at the moment?**

I've been reading about Expanded Cinema, and the films by Valie Export, specifically Syntagma and her 'Multiple Body Theory' according to which a single body may belong to diverse systems of representation. It's fascinating. I'm also looking at Adrian Piper's Catalysis series, and how the audience's response was as much part of the work as the performances themselves. I'm currently watching Eric Rhomer and Ulrike Ottinger's catalog of films.

## **What can you not work without?**

An organised workspace and a plan.

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Untitled, 2017

**What challenges have you faced working in your industry?**

I suppose my industry would be the art world. It's been tough to navigate the rules there since they seem to change on a case by case basis, but I'm learning with the help of my galleries. Also, since I quit my day job in 2018, I have to find the motivation and discipline to keep regular studio hours and stay focused, no one else is going to dictate that for me.

**What are you hoping for in 2021?**

The continued health and safety of my loved ones, a vaccine, a more equitable and fair society, more opportunities for black and marginalized artists, a sustainable plan to reverse climate change, a Harris-Biden White House, to continue making my work.

**Share a song with us, what are you listening to at the moment?**

I mainly listen to music when I'm running, and my favorite running song right now is Mariah Carey's Honey. She's an absolute Queen.

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Arm in Shorts, 2020

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