

This interview took place in April 2009 in conjunction with the exhibition *My Certain Fate*, curated by Timothy Buckwalter for Pharmaka, Los Angeles.

Timothy Buckwalter: There is something very distinct about your recent choice of images. They feel very cinematic, like stills from second units. They also feel like on some level they are talking to a certain history of art (like that of European paintings).

Can you tell me how you arrive at the ones you choose to print? And how you figure out the size?

Nina Zurier: I do most of my shooting work while traveling, so even if I am downloading the images to my laptop every night, I rarely do more than give them all a quick look. It is often a month or even a year (or two or three) before I get around to printing. Part of this has to do with creating a kind of separation from the experience of the moment and place.

Occasionally something will catch my eye at home—like the dead hummingbird, which was actually shot on a copy-stand in my studio after I found it in my front yard.

There isn't much space in my work and what is there is often ambiguous, it is all pretty flat, even when it is in focus, and I think this relates to the experience of looking at painting and film. Unlike a lot of painting and film (and photography, for that matter), I am mostly interested in the color and composition, not the story.

I use Bridge to look at groups of photos, and I usually start with them at about the size of a 35mm slide. If an image attracts my eye at that scale, then I open it up for a closer look. I have a really good, big monitor to work on, and a pretty small studio, so I often don't print until I have a reason to—I'm usually satisfied to just look at it on the screen. I don't think there is a "perfect" size for anything; it just depends on where it is going to be. The work in this show all comes from a big show I had last fall, and for that I did a scale layout of the photographs in the galleries and then sized and printed according to that. At the moment, I am interested in making groups of images that have visual relationships and a kind of non-linear narrative possibility, and that combine images from different times and places, some representational, some abstract, some in between.

TB: The ambiguity of the pictures combined with the specificity of the way you offer them in groups, creates a kind of visual poetry. They feel somehow related to the writing of someone like Clark Coolidge.

Do you think of them as a kind of poem?

NZ: Yes, exactly. Clark Coolidge's work is a perfect example of the same sort of thing done with words. Both are suggestive and image-driven, fragmentary. The individual photos are like lines or stanzas. I was going to say that the visual relationships present a sort of rhyme or rhythmic structure, but then I thought of the phrase "neither rhyme nor reason" and I think that might actually be more to the point.

TB: I think you once said that color is what initially forces you to take a photograph, not the image or the composition of the image itself.

NZ: I think it's still true, but there are no absolutes in my work, I try to keep all options open. I'm also trying to keep the work open to all possibilities of experience/interpretation. This is kind of what I was getting at with the "neither rhyme nor reason" although it would be disingenuous of me to claim that it is all chance. But for the most part it is color, usually just one or two colors, that makes me get out the camera. I organized the show last Fall by color, it was just a way to start grouping things in the process of choosing the work, but then it made sense to continue with it. I also discovered some of my color biases—I like a yellowish green, a red that is really more orange. However, there was more work that falls into the gray category than any other color, but of course there are lots of shades and hues of gray. When I was still painting, I found that I had gradually reduced my palette to pink and green, and when I couldn't force myself to introduce any other colors, I further reduced it to black and white; and then reduced it to drawing with black oil stick and silver leaf on gray felt paper, and then I stopped painting. I love color, but I find that more than two colors together are usually too complex for me.

Once a color has caught my eye, the composition is usually quite purposefully framed, I use the grid on the display, and I'm quite interested in the edges, which is probably another painter thing. My camera's display is pretty accurate, so I usually don't need to crop much if anything, although I don't have a problem with doing that.

TB: I know I've brought up the images in your photos before, but what I want to talk about a little more is the choices you make.

When I look at a group of your photos, the images that I see are almost neutral. All the images seem equal. And there is a certain feeling of remoteness that is emitted from them. But after lingering for a few moments over the group, a few photos always pop out at me. The ones that do are ones that I very quickly personalize (or relate to my own experiences). This is amazing to me because, for the most part, this is not how I respond to photographs. I

usually am intrigued by pictures that present a sense of voyeurism, or spark some feeling that is a bit further away from the core of my being.

NZ: When you look at more than two or three images in a close grouping, you first see it as a whole, in a sort of vague way. Then, if it is the least bit interesting to you, you start looking at the individual images. If there is a similarity—or neutrality, as you put it— particularly in color, among the images, then it is easier to see the individual photos and the larger composition simultaneously. But, because this macro/micro/macro/micro focus is hard to maintain, your brain starts looking for ways to concentrate your attention. A memory or sense of familiarity boosts that process along, and a few images pop out.

A lot of what I shoot is pretty mundane, it is not really about the subject/object, so that contributes to the sense of remoteness but also leaves it more open. I'm looking for a kind of balance and tension between color and focus in an image and among groups of images. When you are talking about photographs, focus is a double entendre, referring to both a point of attention and the acuity or sharpness of the image. Perhaps even more than color, I am interested in how the acuity of an image affects the focus of attention. When shooting, I bracket for both exposure and focus, which means I usually have at least nine shots of everything.

I'm not sure I can really explain why I choose one over the others, and, in fact, the choice may vary depending on when I'm looking and what, if anything, I'm going to put it with. It is both a rational and intuitive process, and sometimes it is very deliberate and sometimes I just get lucky.

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