

MARTIN OSNER'S

Moments of Grace

Words by Fiona Peake and PiX by Martin Osner

On a winter's day in 1984, photography and Martin met quite by accident. A meeting that redirected his life, changing it forever. Over the past twenty odd years, while walking the path of self-discovery, his approach has taken numerous detours. The journey has allowed a move towards a relaxed subconscious attitude with the desire to express simplicity and honesty through his work. "For me" admits martin, "a photograph holds an undeniable sense of realism, a visual connection that is easy to associate with". Unlike many artists, Martin treats anything as a subject and photographs things mainly because he is interested in their transformation from reality to realism to art. Although Martin has never been a dedicated painter, he sees and experiences the world as one. Martin's inspiration stems from the great artist and master photographer Henri Cartier Bresson.



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ABANDONED: The purpose of this series is to highlight today's modern "throw - away" society and the excessive desire to have. Consumerism has reached an all time high in world economics today. Homes are filled with the best modern electronic equipment; beautiful cars are parked in the garages, and caravans and motorboats are lined up to guarantee weekend pleasure. All these items have a relatively short shelf life. Soon they will be traded in for a new model and their journey towards insignificance commences. This body of work is a collection of things that have passed their "sell by date", subjects that have fulfilled their purpose and have now been thrown away by their owners only to be forgotten. Earthly items, discarded if you like. "Things" brushed aside...Once worshipped, idolized and even loved, now simply abandoned





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"I see, I understand,
I experience, I relate..."



1. How would you define Fine Art Photography?

Good question. It really does not matter how I define Fine Art Photography; what is of importance is how society defines and experiences it. If you consider the definition of art, it is really the expression of a creative skill through a visual medium such as painting, sculpture etc, or in my case photography. Fine Art on the other hand can be defined as art that is intended to be appreciated primarily or solely for its aesthetic content. Fine art photography does not stray far from both of these definitions. In my opinion Fine Art photographs are works that have been primarily born out of a desire to fulfil the creative vision of the photographer. At the end of the day some may hate it, some will feel indifferent about it and others will connect with it in different ways....but this is art, is it not? Let us not forget that in the history of art, photography is the new kid on the block and because the medium was founded on the pillars of chemistry, mathematics and scientific technology, it has been long frowned upon as a pure art medium as a pure art medium. Indeed, most would use photography as a medium to record and document reality as it exists. In my view, Fine Art Photography is where the camera is simply used as an instrument to help capture an image within a creative process, be it mentally or physically. I guess that is the difference.

2. What challenges did you encounter when moving from commercially focused photography to Fine Art Photography?

I struggled with finding creative boundaries within which to practice, combined with the high level of artistic energy that is needed to do so consistently. Allow me to explain. For most of my photographic career I worked for clients who came with a creative brief or final purpose for an image. In a way, I really felt like a lighting specialist who, from time to time, may be given some creative freedom. Concepts and compositions were predetermined depending on their usage, meaning that I needed to carry out briefs to the best of my technical ability whilst having a creative team standing by just to make sure that I did not stray too far from their creative inspirations. It is like being one musician in a large orchestra under the watchful control of many conductors. For years I did well in this world, but after a while I realised that creative fine art photography is really my deep-seated passion. While practising both I found it increasingly difficult to mentally move between the technical correctness of commercial photography and the artistically pure mindset of fine art at short notice. I found myself turning away commissions because I knew it would negatively affect fine art projects that I was working on. One day, I decided that it had to be one or the other. The choice was simple. Within a month I gave over my lucrative clients to a close friend, sold most of my studio equipment and leaped off into the creative unknown.



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“Many of my still-life studies can be described as painterly expressionistic; drawing influences through the Fauvism movement, in particular the work of Henri Matisse. In my spiritual walk, I experience hours of peace and contentment when behind the lens of a camera. I have never doubted my love for photography or my burning passion for art. It is something I could never stop. It is what I do. It is what I love. It is who I am.”

3. *How has your teaching background influenced your photography, especially your fine art photography?*

Teaching has had a massive influence on my photography, from both students and fellow colleagues. What I like about teaching is that firstly one is forced to experiment and practice before taking a workshop, some of my favourite creative techniques have been developed through this preparation time. Secondly, the creative energy that is generated between fellow lecturers is just incredible. I will never forget the times that Dirk Boshoff and I would brainstorm ideas over a glass or two of wine. He has to be one of the most creative talents and technically proficient photographers I have ever met. And of course the students themselves. The one thing I admire about my students is their total disrespect for a technique. Creative students would take the information that you have painstakingly taught, throw it into a liquidiser and blend it with absolute disregard. To add insult to injury, they would come back to class the next day with mind blowing images and no idea how they achieved them.

4. *What equipment do you use?*

I knew you would ask this question...what a pity. Equipment is not important to me in fine art photography. Over the last twenty plus years I have been fortunate to have shot on just about every format from 35mm to 8 x 10 inch sheet film. Funny, after twenty years of chasing quality and technical correctness, I now find the modern equipment too good for my liking. The other day I bought a Canon G9 compact digital to try and help me break out of a technical rut. Even though I love using it, this tiny camera is still too good for the creative output I am looking for. Really, if it has a lens, aperture and shutter and is lightproof enough to record an image, it is good enough for me.

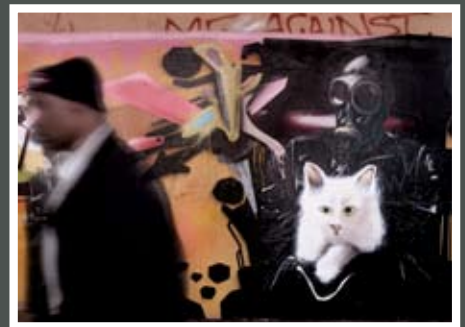


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URBAN REFLECTION: "Graffiti": the modern canvas of society, by society, for society. Clandestine messages and animated youth heroes etched onto the derelict walls of our city. Are these works of art or merely vandalism that tests the patience of government? It is strange that a cult which has been around since the Roman Empire has still not found its rightful place in society. Intrigued by the graffiti art in and around Johannesburg, South Africa, Martin Osner has captured a body of work that showcases the humorous juxtaposition of the characters on the walls and the environment that they inhabit.

5. Fair enough, but what if you were forced to make a choice? Hasselblad...no question.

6. How does the type of equipment influence your photography?

It does not. It used to but not anymore. It's like asking a painter what make of canvas they prefer to use. I consider light, subject and idea the fundamental ingredients in my photography; the camera is merely a mechanical instrument to help me achieve this. End of story.

7. How much of your work is done on film and how much is done on digital?

Sorry, but again it is like asking, "do you prefer strawberries or cream?" I love both mediums; it is not a choice for me. There is nothing like processing a roll of film and printing up the images on photographic paper in the darkroom. Although creative ability is limited when compared with digital, it is still the classic way of enjoying photography. On the other hand digital capture combined with software creativeness is like a breath of fresh air. Anyone who has experienced the wonders of RAW images and HDR will know what I am taking about. Due to time constraints I confess that I shoot a lot more digital nowadays, but every now and then I cannot resist the temptation of medium and large format photography.

8. What function does digital post-production play in creating your fine art images?

I consider digital post-production a must in modern photography. Most of my limited edition, archival work is printed Gicleé, using the best fine art acid free paper and inks. This means that Photoshop will always have the last say before printing, even if it is only to correct density and colour. Image software and the computer is the modern dark room; let us rejoice in the technology that is available to us and pay homage to the software developers for a job well done.

9. How did you approach galleries to show your work; do you have any advice?

Tough one. As a Fine Art Photographer you must realise that the gallery owner has to make a living off the commission they generate from selling art. They are certainly not charitable organisations and need to make sales to survive. For this reason, even if they take a fancy to a new artist's work they will always seek to show established artists who already have a name and a following. This of course is a double-edged sword: how can an artist make a name for themselves if they are not given the opportunity to exhibit? In this question lies my advice. If you are good enough you will be noticed and you will get your opportunity.





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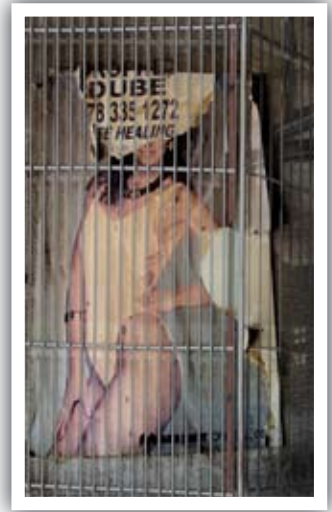
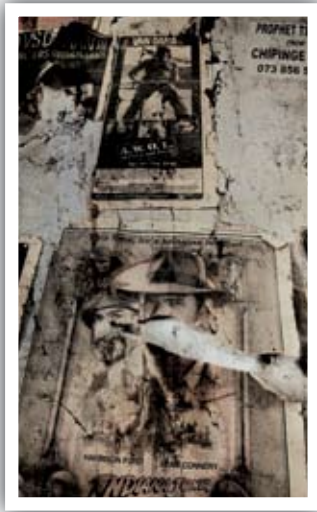
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FACELESS SOCIETY: Day by day life goes on. Year by year society documents itself on the walls of the city. Politicians, sportsmen, religious leaders, artists and icons are posterised for all to see. After all is said and done, time will be the judge of their successes and failures. When this generation moves on, are they going to be proud of the legacy left behind? Or are we going to wish that their faces had been removed from the records?



BIOGRAPHY: Born in Johannesburg, South Africa (1963), Martin Osner opened his first photographic studio in Johannesburg (1985) where he established a solid reputation as a professional photographer and artist. In 1993 he co-founded the National College of Photography, which today has become the premier photographic training institution in Southern Africa. Osner eschews the conventional approach to photography, favouring a more expressive vision that accords with his visual understanding and spiritual appreciation of the world. As a multi-award winning artist his photography is characterized by an urge to explore, with the willingness to experiment. Concentrating intently on elemental form, pattern and shape, paired with a necessary sense of restraint, he bears out his belief that simplicity is the cornerstone of successful imaging. Today Osner specializes in a contemporary portfolio of fine art photography, offering limited edition Gicleé and traditional black & white vintage prints, into a collectors' market. His collection consists of ghostly abstract renditions, moody landscapes and social documentary imaging.

You must understand, and come to terms with the fact that for the most part your career as a Fine Artist will span many years. You will experience a creative and energetic world full of emotion and passion, hitting some highlights after going through some intense and hazardous lows. I am convinced that it is more a calling than anything else. Just stay true to the cause. One day at an exhibition I was having in London my son, Matthew, came up to me, put his arms around me. "Don't worry, dad", he said, "the day you die your work will become very popular". We had a good laugh, but in the comment is hidden much truth.

10. *You have exhibited in South Africa and in Europe and recently in Canada. Have you found a difference between the South African viewing public and that of the International viewer ?*

Maturity, without doubt. For the most part our South African art public is still not ready to embrace photography as an art medium. Overseas, they have passed this stage and enjoy photography as contemporary art. I notice it from some of the questions asked at my exhibitions; South Africans seem to be more concerned with the type of camera you use than the artwork itself. Overseas, the art public and collectors are far more interested

in you as an artist and the message expressed through your work. It is almost as if they allow the images to touch them emotionally. I am sure it will not take long before we see a breakthrough in South Africa.

11. *How do you keep your photography innovative and interesting?*

I draw just about all my inspiration for my relationship with God. As a Christian, I believe that talent is a gift given, inspired and observed by God. Most of my photography, especially nowadays has more to do with the way I feel than with just what I see. Although, as with most artists, I would naturally draw inspiration from other forms of creativity such as music, drama and everyday life, it comes back to that bubbling sensation that generates deep from within that tells me that I am on the right track. I see my art as a dedication to God and my family who both have supported me without question.

12. *What advice do you have for photographers wishing to enter the fine art market?*

I guess that I have already answered this question. Just remember that it is a calling more than a career. If you are not in it for the love of it, do not do it.



13. What has been your most memorable moment on this journey?

There have been many: but recently at my exhibition in London, a cab pulled up outside and a young couple got out. The day before the opening they had purchased one of my images and had now returned to collect it. They came into the gallery with such excitement and anticipation. The gallery owner introduced them to me and we spoke for some time. After greeting them it dawned on me that someone out there actually appreciated my work. It was a great revelation and I knew then that art will always be an emotional thing for me, making the long journey I find myself on, will be worth it in the end.

14. What values do you believe one needs to uphold as a fine art photographer?

Firstly, realise that the work is really a reflection of the artist's heart and soul which is openly displayed for all to see. Secondly, I believe that one does not just buy an artwork; one invests in it, in many cases for a lifetime.

For this reason it is extremely important, especially in photography that the investor gets excellent value. By this I mean that the prints are made to the highest archival standards possible and that the limited editions are registered and managed in a professional and ethical manner.

15. How do you merge concept and craft in your photography?

This is the most difficult question of them all to answer. Craft is a natural skill that one develops over years of practice; mastering your craft will help form confidence. Concept is the originality of one's work. It is that something special that needs to be fresh and challenged, almost on a daily basis. Craft is the foundation. Concept provides the zing. Frustratingly, sometimes I find myself with a basic idea or concept of what I want to shoot and nothing happens. Then all of a sudden as if a light is switched on, inspiration turns up and the energy starts to flow, sometimes for months. Perhaps this is Divine direction and inspiration or just harmonious moments of blessing.....thank you for the opportunity. <<<

Websites: www.martinosner.com, www.martinosnerphotography.com



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