



TIME TRAVERSIFIED BETWEEN BEAUTY AND CHAOS

The Unpredictable Leah Oates

By Dale Youngman

Transitory Space, Beijing, China
color photography
16 x 20in. & 20 x 24in., 2008 - 2009

Leah Oates is an old-school New Englander. Born in Boston MA, and reared first in Cambridge, then in the small town of Sanford, Maine, the current Brooklyn – based photographer credits her style and sensibilities and strong reverence for nature to her mostly rural upbringing. Her mother’s ancestors in Maine and Massachusetts can be traced back to the early 1600’s, where they were sea captains, and fought in the Revolutionary War. This rich colonial heritage has definitely infiltrated her stylish work with a kind of East-coast discernment, as she recycles and layers images of dilapidated structures and industrial wastelands with the natural beauty she was surrounded by as a child, to produce something entirely new and noteworthy. Seeing beauty where others may not, she manages to create surprising and engaging art from unremarkable subject matter.

Oates is well-known for her images that encapsulate the essence of the rural countryside - the meandering streams, massive trees and cloud-strewn skies that she manipulates and juxtaposes with abandoned structures, trash heaps and the chaos of human impact. Capturing and connecting naturally beautiful organic images with the taint of an apathetic society creates the complex and intriguing content of her expressive images that are both energetic and serene, eliciting questions about meaning, impact, and significance. Her renowned work has been shown in galleries across the country, and is featured in many public collections, including the National Museum of Women in the Arts, The Brooklyn Museum, The British Library, The Walker Art Center Libraries, The Smithsonian Libraries, and the Franklin Furnace Archive at the Museum of Modern Art.

Beauty is a word Oates uses often when talking about her muse, Mother Nature. Bringing attention to mankind's often destructive behavior



(above) **Transitory Space –Newfoundland, Rene Mill 16**

Born into a family of artists including her mother, brother, an aunt and uncle, Oates was immersed in art and culture from early childhood on, and her interest in that world never wavered. Oates remembers, "My mom being a painter loved all things art-related, and she always brought my brother and I to museums, galleries, film festivals and street performances in Harvard Square. I was exposed to a lot of visual art, theatre, dance, and live music. We often went to museums to see the Old Masters and European painters like Caravaggio, Cezanne, Corbett, Rembrandt, Goya and Velasquez, and modern painters too, but rarely contemporary artists. I think this was a very good foundation."

Growing up in Cambridge opened up many doors for the young Oates. At seven years old she received a full scholarship to study dance at the Cambridge School of Ballet. "The teachers were Russian and British, and we studied every day after school for hours, and on weekends too. I loved it, as it was full of wonderful music, with magical ideas and costumes. I lost interest in dance though when I was thirteen, as the level of commitment at the time was too intense for me as a teenager. That was when my focus shifted to visual arts." The move to Maine that followed brought about the appreciation for nature that is still so prevalent in her photography, and is the mainstay of her professional work.

in that realm and the ensuing dire consequences seems to be a motivating factor in her work. As she explains "Beauty is transformative, and elicits so many emotions from us, makes life so much better, and elevates us. I see beauty even in the seemingly "ugly," as a keyhole into our true reality without fear, assumptions, or a need for control. It's all there, all the time, and one just has to turn ones focus towards it. I'd like viewers who interact with my work to see the beauty everywhere, all the time, and how urban and natural environments relate to each other. Both have this incredible creative energy from different sources."

Oates obviously has a profound respect for nature, and feels very connected to it. Certainly, having uncles that worked for the Environmental Protection Agency didn't hurt, but her connection to the great outdoors seems more innate. From her perspective, "How we view and treat nature is a reflection of our personal inner world, as we are as much a part of nature as a tree or a rock. Where I grew up in Maine it



Transitory Space, Bronx, Pelham Bay

color photography
16 x 20in., 2014

Transitory Space, Pelham Liliy Strip

color photography
20 x 55in., 2008-2009



was both rural and industrial and the landscape in Maine is truly American and off the grid, which still influences my work. It is wild, sublime and has unique energy which I just love and respond to."

In this age of Instagram, it is hard to stand out as a photographer, since nearly everyone has a camera phone in their pocket. Yet Oates, who still uses a film camera and develops her own work in the darkroom, not only has a great eye for composition, but also has some unique tricks to create her unusual and complex images. Shooting multiple exposures and using multiple cameras in a single shoot, then layering image upon image is part of her technique that creates her unpredictable and eloquent photos. Utilizing infra-red photography gives many images a ghost-like appearance,

capturing fragile moments of time and space for temporary memorials that seem more like intricate paintings than photography. This is how she captures time transpiring - layered, splintered, and not frozen in a crystalline single moment. Later, when she looks back at the film, there are many impressions to play with, due to the multiple exposures. The documentation of that moment, location, or shadow exists only partially - and fragmented - in her minds eye, but captured completely by her cameras.

"I think I'm creating images that we are not seeing much in contemporary photography. Now a photograph can't just be a photograph. It has to be dissected, repositioned and analyzed, which can detract from the actual work. It's like a really well

written novel, where the writer is so good that the reader doesn't see the mechanisms of the writing. It's all there, effortlessly, because the writer is so skilled, has a vision and knows what they want to communicate, and achieves it."

As observers, we are fortunate that Leah Oates has the skill and motivation to show us the splendor of the wilderness all around us, while forcing us to acknowledge our own damaging impact on it. Her work is like an excursion through time and space, viewing the natural environment in an unnatural way, forcing us to open our eyes a little wider, and take in the contradictions of ephemeral beauty and society.

<http://www.leahoates.com/>