

Art on Paper

Evidence of Existence

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A conversation with Toronto-based photographer Arnaud Maggs

By Ben Portis

Arnaud, I understand you were 47 years old when you decided to become an artist. What were you doing before that?

I began my career as a graphic designer and illustrator, and then when I was forty I started doing fashion photography. So I was able to use what skills I had already developed to great advantage.

What took you so long to switch?

I had never really given it a thought. The idea had never entered my mind. Then one day, BOOM, I thought that's what I'll do.

When did you begin doing the sequential work?

In 1978 I had just completed a large work titled 64 Portrait Studies. It showed 16 men and 16 women in frontal and profile views. The work was arranged in a grid, my idea being to emphasize the differences in head structure in a more or less analytical way. In order to do this piece successfully, I had photographed a great number of people and had taken over 2500 photographs, which were then carefully edited.

The following year I went to Paris where I arranged to photograph a group of chefs at a restaurant called Ledoyen. The restaurant was set in the Champs Elysées, so I was able to work outdoors. I had the idea that I would shoot two or three rolls on each chef, and then edit the pictures into a large grid, in a manner somewhat similar to what I had done in 64 Portrait Studies.

I had set up my backdrop and was preparing to photograph the first chef when I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw that all 20 chefs were standing in a cue waiting for their photo to be taken.

I realized immediately that I would not be able to spend much time with each chef. I very quickly calculated "twelve pictures to a roll of film, I'll do two chefs per roll, three front views, three side views on each chef.

And that's what I did. I dropped the film off a lab, and picked it up the next day. Luckily the film had been cut in threes. I couldn't believe the contacts! Three little frontals, three little profiles on each chef. And the work was exhibited that way, as contacts. I had produced my first sequential work quite by accident.

My next large work was done in Dusseldorf. I set up my camera at the Kunstakademie, and began photographing art students. This time I very consciously photographed two students to a roll of film, and showed the film uncut, in contact strips of twelve images. So here I was going from a happy accident with the chefs to very carefully editing my exposures in the camera.

Did you meet Thomas Ruff?

I think he was a student there at the time, but I don't believe I met him.

Did you do other sequential works after that?

Yes, I went on to do several, including Joseph Beuys, 100 Frontal Views, Joseph Beuys, 100 Profile Views, and André Kertész, 144 Views, where he is shown turning 360 degrees.

I also began a series called "48 Views", where I would photograph the subject frontally, then do a profile, then back to a frontal view, and so forth for 48 pictures. The resulting contacts fit perfectly on a 16 x 20 sheet.

I photographed over 200 subjects in this manner, mostly people I knew in the arts. The resultant work showed nearly eight thousand photographs arranged in a grid.

Arnaud, all these portrait works were done in black and white. When you began photographing objects, why did you decide to switch to colour?

I much prefer black and white to colour, especially in portraits. However, the work I began doing demanded colour – old ledgers and documents from the 19th century, beautiful worn paper, sometimes soft pastels.

There was a famous American photographer, I've forgotten his name, who said "If you're photographing in black and white, you can suggest, But if you are using colour, you have to be certain, absolutely certain."

I think that's quite true; a lot of the work we see produced in colour today is questionable.

Can you tell us something about Répertoire?

Répertoire was a little note book that Eugene Atget used to list all his customers and would-be customers. He would write down addresses, complete with the nearest Métro stop, and the best time to drop in. He made lists of editors, decorators, and other trades that might use his pictures. Many of the entries have been crossed off with a big 'X'. I was fortunate to locate this book, which I photographed from cover to cover. We are allowed to see another side of Atget, who photographed much of Paris until his death in 1927.

Let's talk about two recent works you have produced, that are currently showing at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Both these works deal with colour as a subject. Can you tell us a little about them?

Yes, the first of these works is titled "Werner's Nomenclature of Colours". Gotlob Werner was a German geologist who made a set of colour charts showing where these colours would occur in the mineral world. His colour charts were later expanded upon to include the animal and vegetable worlds. In 1814, the charts were included in a tiny book that could be carried in one's pocket. This was of great use to naturalists and explorers in order to describe specimens that were being discovered. The charts included a wide range of colours. Beside each colour is a descriptive text explaining where the colours might occur in nature, under the headings animal, vegetable and mineral.

Darwin carried one on his trip aboard the Beagle. It enabled him to describe specimens he collected, using a core set of colour terms from the book. Darwin wrote colour descriptions that could be understood by other scientists using the same colour vocabulary elsewhere in the world. The descriptions are quite poetic. Under the colour Brownish Orange we read "eyes of the largest flesh fly". Under Sap Green we find "underside of lower wings of orange tip butterfly".

I've used photography to document these charts, which in turn, were originally used to describe something before photography was invented.

The second work is titled "Cercles chromatiques de M E Chevreul". Chevreul, a chemist, was director of the dyeing division of the distinguished Parisian firm of Gobelins, famous for its tapestries and rugs. He began a series of experiments in order to verify complaints that the tapestries were not

holding their colours. What he found was not weakness in the dyes, but rather a phenomenon peculiar to vision;

That the eye sees colour differently depending on adjacent colours. Chevreul published these findings in 1839, the same year that photography was invented. He went on to publish his discoveries in colour (he lived to over a hundred) and was interviewed on his hundredth birthday by Nadar, the French photographer. His colour theories influenced many painters including Seurat and Sonia Delauney. *Cercles chromatiques* was published in 1861, and shows what occurs when black is added to the colour spectrum in increments of ten percent. I'm fascinated by this document. It's a sequential work, which I am drawn to, as much of my work is sequential. For me, it symbolizes the passage from day to night, from positive to negative, and from life to death.

Arnaud, you're showing a new work at Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto this May. Could you let us know what it is about?

Yes. I am currently completing a new project titled *Contamination*, which shows pages of a water damaged ledger from the 1905 Gold Rush. I have bypassed the factual transactions in favour of showing a series of mould formations that have migrated from page to page through the unused portion of the book. The soft tainted pages and the bleeding pink ink are somewhat ghostly traces of a cruel history, motivated largely by dreams of wealth. The spores are the animating principle of this work. The book itself is the host, the ground upon which these spores dance.

Thank you Arnaud, we look forward to seeing this work.