

# A8

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# The Architect's Brother

Jonathan Stead on an intriguing series by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison

ONE BOOK COVER was all it took and back in 2003 my 'you can do everything with this new digital' bubble was well and truly burst. This was something entirely different. The image in question was *Da Vinci's Wings*, created by the husband and wife team of Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison. So far removed from what I understood as photography at the time, their images were a mix of photography, painting and sculpture, as well as performance art. I became fascinated by their work. All I knew about photo manipulation at the time was purely digital (I was at college when the terms 'digital' and 'photography' had become interchangeable). The idea of creating something like this by hand, in a darkroom, was incomprehensible.

The more of their work I discovered, the more I became fascinated. Each new image I found was enthralling; it was the first time photography had really 'spoken' to me. The way the dreamlike images were presented made them almost believable, as if someone had uncovered photographs from another time. They seemed like a window into a foreign yet familiar world one shouldn't have been able to witness. The images seemed to be almost a 'mental' still, taken from someone's subconscious; they had no clear reference point in terms of origin or creation. If ever there was a case for what was achievable by process and craft through traditional photography, the ParkeHarrison's work was just that.

The images I had uncovered were from a body of work called *The Architect's Brother*, created between 1993 and 2005. Described as 'stories of loss, human struggle, and personal exploration within landscapes scarred by technology and over-use', the work is extraordinarily rich and visually arresting and set in, what we imagine to be, a post-apocalyptic world. It is in this world that the viewer finds a character called 'Everyman' who seems to be endlessly attempting to mend the broken landscape that he alone inhabits. We are unaware why the earth is in such a state of decay, but are left with the impression that overuse, both that of technology and of the environment, has led to the infertile and lifeless landscape.

Work like this poses many questions, and every time I came across further examples from *The Architect's Brother* I had more. I wanted to find out about this body of work, to discover why it came about, what came before it, and the process of creating such a unique series, from conception through to realization. I asked the artists: What was the initial starting point for the series, and how did the project begin to evolve?

"We began *The Architect's Brother* series while we were in graduate school and it evolved over a twelve-year period. Of course we both did other work, but by 1992 the ideas that led to the series were building. Shana studied painting in undergrad and dance history and metalsmithing in grad school, while Robert studied

Facing: Guardian. All images © Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison from *The Architect's Brother*.

## It is in this world that the viewer finds a character called 'Everyman' who seems to be endlessly attempting to mend the broken landscape that he alone inhabits. ##

Facing: Flying Lessons.

“We make images that remind the viewer of what is at stake. But we choose to work through poetic means in order to impact individuals in a way which allows them to imagine for themselves different ways of being.”

photography in both undergrad and grad school. Our work derives from our individual backgrounds and our shared interests, and it grew out of our studies and visual experiments. We both approach photography as outsiders. It is simply one component within our process.

“When we started this body of work we lived in New Mexico. The landscape of New Mexico exhibits, in very raw terms, the fragility of the earth, with its scarcity of water and its dry, warm climate. We became interested in the native cultures and teachings, and learned about treading lightly and working with the Earth rather than abusing it. These concepts are woven throughout our work, but we also deal with man’s fascination with technology and the ingenuity of human beings. It’s clear we have the ability to choose technologies and lifestyles that inflict less stress on the environment, but it is a matter of will. So we make images that remind the viewer of what is at stake. But we choose to work through poetic means in order to impact individuals in a way which allows them to imagine for themselves different ways of being.

“Our work draws upon many subjects including the teachings of Joseph Beuys. As such, we attempt to inspire conversation about personal and collective responsibility regarding the earth. We create open-ended narratives that allow the viewer to contemplate his/her role in the larger world. We believe art should inspire people to question and to act.”

*The Architect’s Brother* is arguably their most famous body of work, and by its nature has sparked discussion of how it was created. Could they clarify some of the techniques used?

“Photoshop was not used in these works. We merged multiple images through an adapted form of the paper negative process. In this process we had to shoot the various components of the images with the other elements in mind

(angle, depth-of-field, lighting and so on). Paper negatives allowed us to collage several images into one. It is a lengthy process that requires working back and forth from paper negatives, paper positives, drawing and contact printing. Once a final image was completed we then mounted it and painted on the photograph. This painting process consisted of many, many layers of washes, which further distanced the final image from photography.”

Does producing an image create a starting point for more work, or is an entire series mapped out at the start?

“Both scenarios take place. We work in series with each grouping beginning with research, which progresses onto dialogue and drawings. We then build sets and props and look for appropriate settings. Along the way an image can change. We then compile the images in the darkroom, or maybe now on the computer, where more changes can occur. There can even be backtracking at this point – where we change an idea, or reshoot a particular portion of an image. Once a series/grouping of images is complete we have discussions about what worked, what failed, and how we’d like to proceed. Inevitably, we have favourites which may inspire us to move in a specific direction.

“Our work combines our interests in science, theatre, literature, history, politics, religion, dance, just to name a few subjects. We engage in a process of research and reflection as we begin each new body of work. During this beginning stage we immerse ourselves in conversations, research and events that inspire us, and watch a lot of movies, dance and theatre performances. We spend time discussing new ideas and ideas we want to continue from previous bodies of work. We ‘centre’ ourselves. We draw a lot. As we begin to discover the ‘voice’ of a body of work, we begin to transform our drawings into three-



Facing: Garden Of Selves.

// Looking at Everyman and watching his attempts at fixing the broken landscape, we are reminded of our own immortality and personal struggles. Having a somehow anonymous, yet universal figure to relate to is somehow comforting. //

The Architect's Brother and other series by Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison can be viewed at their website: [www.parkeharrison.com](http://www.parkeharrison.com)

dimensional objects, or sets. Our approach to photography allows us to draw upon realistic landscape as well as using multiple and appropriated images in order to create our hybrids. In these works we create an imaginary, yet believable and strangely familiar world. We attempt to speak about the human condition.

"The intensive paper negative process allows us the time to consider and develop our ideas. Further, the process is not rigid, thus we can change our images as we develop the ideas. While our current work draws upon a similar working process, we now use digital processes to merge the images. This is still a lengthy process, but we feel time and thought add dimension to our images.

"In our current work, such as the *Gray Dawn* and *Counterpoint* series, we continue to investigate our interest in the relationship between humans, technology and nature. Looking at Everyman and watching his attempts at fixing the broken landscape, we are reminded of our own immortality and personal struggles. Having a somehow anonymous, yet universal figure to relate to is somehow comforting. This work is born of a need to comment on current issues, the three elements that form each image – the land, Everyman and some kind of constructed technology, creates a triangular relationship that reflects our own dependence on both the earth and technology. The work invites questions such as: what is fundamentally important to us? In reality, without technology, how successful would we be?"

The ParkeHarrisons provide more questions than answers. In *Garden of Selves*, for example, we are faced with a vision of a seemingly endless number of Everymen, being somehow re-born into a structured, ordered landscape with no hint of how they got there or who has created this landscape. These unusual images allow the

viewer to internalise many theories and possibilities.

It is interesting that, to represent the contemporary issue of overuse, they have looked to the past for inspiration; the techniques they employ were in use over 120 years ago. I find this link between subject and process fascinating: the toil of Everyman reflects the toil of the creative process. For me it is this tension – contemporary issues expressed through an antiquated process – which adds a critical authority to the work.

Perhaps it is also this antiquated appearance that makes these images so haunting, as if they precede the dawn of photography itself, a forewarning from another time. The construction of the sets alone is impressive enough; but for anyone who has tackled the labour intensive, back and forth workflow of the paper negative process, the work becomes even more implausible. It is so intricate, so remarkable and on such a large scale.

In using methods from photography's infancy in a contemporary way, the ParkeHarrisons have created a body of work that elevates itself above the typical qualities of photography. They tamper with the facets of the medium. The bringing together of so many areas of the arts into a single body of work creates something that is incredibly multi-layered. The work allows us to imagine our view into another world, elementally simple yet enchanting. We are left with a series of questions rather than answers, allowing us to indulge in our subconscious. Whatever it is about the Parkharrisons' work you find interesting, whether from an inspirational viewpoint concerning artistic output, or a philosophical question regarding our future, *The Architect's Brother* highlights a powerful and loaded question ... what if?

Jonathan Stead

