

INTERVIEW BY ANNE DORAN
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Anne Doran: So, the images in this book are derived from snapshots you took that you've scanned and enlarged as digital prints. When were the original pictures taken?

Steel Stillman: The earliest one is from 1979, although there's a pair from 1963 that I didn't shoot—they were taken by my father. And the most recent source images are from 2014. This series of photographs is very much about time, about looking back across the past several decades.

Are the photographs taken by your father a kind of touchstone?

I don't know about that, though they were taken outside the house I grew up in. My father died in 1964, but I lived there with my mother and stepfather until the early '70s. In 1993 I went back and photographed the house myself, inside and out. In the 20 years since I'd lived there, it had gone through another family, and that family had sold it to a woman who had begun a gut renovation. She dismantled a lot of it, but ran out of money apparently, and the house sat empty for several years. It was quite strange to go back to a scene from my childhood and encounter it as an archaeological ruin.

Some of these pictures, then, are quite loaded.

Absolutely. That's been one of the big challenges with this work. Every image here has some kind of personal resonance for me, so the problem is always how to make room for other people's associations. It's probably important to say that I'm not just printing up old pictures—in scanning them, I'm actually re-photographing them. And, in the process of doing so, I'm also eliminating a certain amount of information, which makes them less specific.

I was going to ask about that. They seem pretty abstract for snapshots.

That's because they've all been cropped, sometimes quite radically. I originally wanted to call them Blow-Ups, after the 1966 [Michelangelo] Antonioni movie. Because, as I was trying to decide how much to reveal or cut out of each image, I kept flashing on that scene where Thomas, the protagonist, is cropping in, and enlarging, and cropping in, and enlarging, and cropping in, and enlarging a photograph, believing he may have unknowingly recorded a murder.

And he's trying to find something in the photograph that in reality might not be there.

Exactly. I came to think of my images as stills from a movie that doesn't exist.

Is it a movie of your life, or is it a different movie?

I think it winds up being its own narrative.

But it seems that even before you crop them, the snapshots are largely pictures of minor incidents. No wedding pictures, no baby pictures, no major events—or rather, there is a picture of a bride, but one might not recognize it as such. She looks more like an extra.

Right. If this were a film, these would be the in-between shots, the inserts: the cut to the hand picking up the telephone, or the view out the window. But, at the same time, as you begin looking at them together, you find yourself reading them, making connections. I'm convinced that looking and reading go hand in hand when it comes to photographs.

So it's a story, but it's not a history?

It's probably both. This series is, in part, a memoir. But my hope is that other people will be able to connect to it. I've always taken snapshots as if I were making notes, or gathering raw footage to be edited later. In this book, I'm looking back on moments that I experienced. I was there for all of them. Not only was I there, I was there taking pictures. At the time, I wasn't necessarily thinking, "I'm taking a picture of something in my life." That was a given. I just wanted to capture moments I somehow felt were important in the fastest, most direct way—with a snapshot.

But your snapshots differ in important ways from what we think of as snapshots.

Partly that's because, as you point out, they aren't quite snapshots. I was trying to use snapshot equipment and techniques to record my own state of mind in that moment. Early on, in my twenties, when I was looking for clues about what to shoot, I was looking at [Pierre] Bonnard's paintings, intrigued that he'd used his own snapshots as source material; at films by [Alfred] Hitchcock, [Jean-Luc] Godard, and Antonioni; and—and this is important—I was also reading [Marcel] Proust, [Henry] James, [James] Joyce, and [Virginia] Woolf. All of them, it seemed to me, were describing and stitching together scenes of daily life that, at the same time, conveyed something of the psychological state of their protagonists, and I wanted to use my snapshots to do the same.

Here's a percolator on a stove. . . .

It was at a friend's house, at Nancy Shaver's house. Nancy has always had a great eye for objects, and I was struck that day by the light in the room, by the glass top on the percolator, by the glow of the gas flame. Rescanned, the same image is still all those things but also something completely different. What I'm taking a picture of now, in scanning it, is the time since that snapshot was taken—what I think of as the afterlife of an image.

In the words of John Ashbery, the "experience of experience."

That's a great way of putting it. There's so much life in the space between the past and the present, between the event and the image of the event. The image of the percolator—and this is true of most of the images in the book—is one that I've been looking at for 27 years. The pictures that remain after all that time are those whose power has only increased.

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