

FEATURE

All images © Michael Massaia

THE EXPLOSIVE POWER OF SILENCE

Buying fireworks with his grandfather in lower Manhattan is an abiding memory of childhood for **Michael Massaia** – and one he was determined to immortalise in his studio. Steve Pills talks to him about his life, his work and his sleepless nights.



Michael Massaia is that rarest of things: an artist who can make you look at commonplace subjects in a whole new light. From fireworks, billboards and sunbathers to the houses of his native New Jersey, each of the 36-year-old's portfolios alights on an everyday sight and fixates on it with a controlled intensity that produces striking results.

Much of this focus derives from Massaia's thorough approach to image making – as both photographer and printer, he is able to control every aspect of the process from conception to exhibition. 'I have a very specific vision of how I want things to turn out and having someone else involved in the process would have

compromised that vision,' he explains. 'In my opinion, it validates the process when the artist sees the entire creation through from beginning to end.'

Nevertheless, he has no romantic, pre-digital notions about the darkroom process itself. 'The printing is very important to me because the print is the presentation of the idea. But once the idea is conceived, it then simply becomes a process of technical grunt work and the endurance of recreating the original envisioned idea on print.'

Massaia shoots mainly with Sinar and Canham large-format film cameras, before processing his own films and creating heavily dodge-and-burned platinum prints in a home darkroom. He only began making prints in 2006 but has since put in countless 100-hour weeks to refine his darkroom

technique: 'I was chasing a vision and the challenge was persuading the chemistry, equipment and, ultimately, the prints to bend to what I was seeing in my mind.'

Despite his father once being an avid Cibachrome printer and owning his own darkroom, Michael is proudly self-taught – even avoiding taking courses or speaking to his peers as he developed his craft. 'One of the reasons I chose to keep everything to myself was because I knew I was taking an odd road and, if I were to talk to other printers or photographers, they probably would have mocked my working methods and caused an unnecessary distraction for me. I knew the direction in which I wanted to be going with all this before I started and I was only going to get there by doing this work my way.' >

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This singularity of vision can be seen in a collection like *Quiet Now*, Massaia's portfolio of firework photographs. Like all of the young New Jerseyans' projects, it began not with an image but with an idea. 'There is a moment when I simply see and experience something in what I feel to be an unusual way,' he reveals. 'If that experience can be turned into something graphically compelling, then I begin the process of reproducing the experience in what I hope to be a graphically compelling way.'

For *Quiet Now*, that experience was a rather nostalgic one. 'Fireworks were a huge part of my life when I was younger,' he recalls. 'My grandfather and I would drive down to lower Manhattan and he would buy grocery bags of them. It was an

adventure. It was dangerous and it will be one of the few memories I have that I hope will never leave me.'

While most photos of fireworks involve long exposures of explosions in the night sky, Massaia photographed his firecrackers and cherry bombs in the studio prior to their fuses being lit. In the resulting split-toned silver gelatin prints, they can be seen as curious, colourless still lifes loaded with potential. One bottle rocket is even wedged into a crumpled Budweiser can, suggestive of how his younger self might have set it off.

'In many ways, the portfolio is a sort of swansong, a way of saying goodbye to a time and mindset that seems to be quickly vanishing,' says Michael – a time, as he puts it in his introduction to the series, when 'the freedom to blow your

hand off was yours and yours alone'.

Quiet Now is a little unusual in that it was conceived and produced entirely in the studio, whereas many of Michael's other portfolios were shot on the streets at night and came about as an indirect result of regular bouts of insomnia in his mid-20s. At the time, he was working a string of odd jobs with unsociable hours in movie theatres and mailrooms, so whenever he couldn't sleep he would grab his camera and head out in search of new subjects. One series saw him setting up his tripod on neighbours' lawns at 3am to capture long exposures of the local houses. Another series, *Seeing the Black Dog*, featured trucks pulled up in lay-bys on the New Jersey Turnpike, as the drivers slept while Michael could not. >





Sleeping remains a real issue for him, but he has continued to use it to his advantage. 'Living in such a populated area, there is a real sense of relief that occurs in those late night and early morning hours. I actually feel fortunate that I can function at a time when the majority of people do not. This allows me to still have an intimate relationship with my surroundings, which is almost impossible to have during more civilised hours.'

Michael is currently working on a series that was borne of a similar desire to make more intimate connections. Begun in

2006, *Deep in a Dream – Sheep Meadow* features portraits of sunbathers in New York's Central Park, printed with heavily 'burnt-in' backgrounds that isolate each figure in an inky black void. 'What excited me about the *Sheep Meadow* portfolio was that the subject was unaware,' he says. 'I tried to capture the subjects in very vulnerable and unassuming poses, as if they had completely surrendered to their environment. Capturing the moment [in which the subject's] pretence completely melted away was the goal, and in Manhattan this is very challenging.'

Michael had momentary qualms over invading other people's privacy in this way and shelved the project for several years. Ultimately, however, he realised the validity and uniqueness of the portfolio and has been adding to it this summer. In fact, all of the photographer's portfolios are open-ended, so his plans going forward are rather simple: 'I suppose my future ambition is to keep trying to explore the ordinary and figuring a way to present it in any way but ordinary.'

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