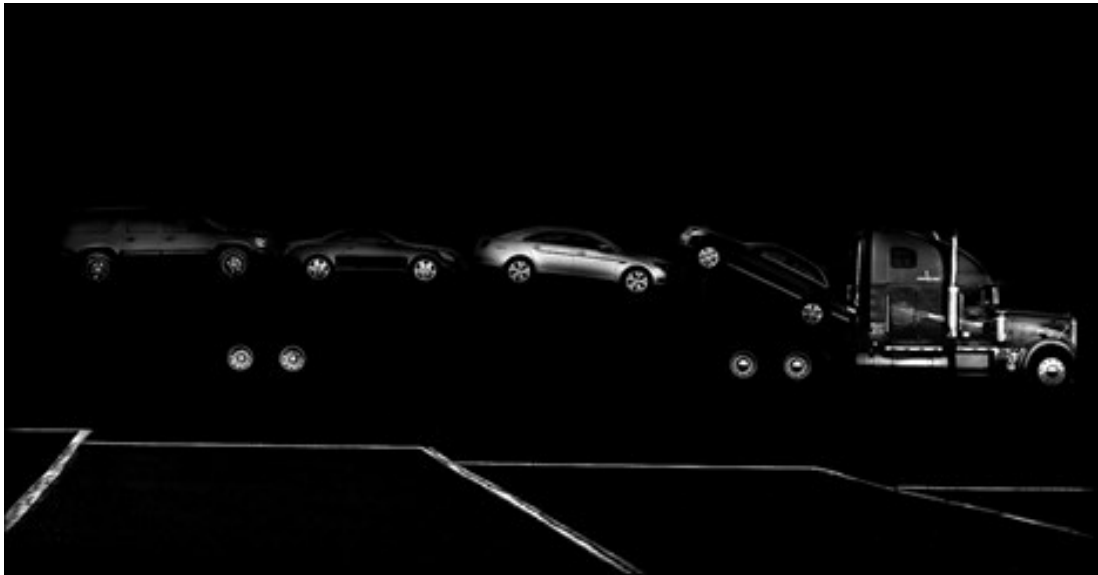


Michael Massaia

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By Pygmalion Karatzas



Seeing The Black Dog - New Jersey - Turnpike Car - Hauler#4. Photo © Michael Massaia

Michael Massaia is a young fine art photographer and printmaker who spent the past few years documenting areas and objects in his native New Jersey. Black and white, isolation and a unique render of the ordinary is among his trademarks. Here, he explains how severe insomnia, photo realistic paintings, self-taught discipline and seeing what is right in front of him with an uncompromising vision, made him into the very talented photographer he is.

“My dear friend Baron Wolman not only mixes business with pleasure himself, but he insists those around him do the same. Baron likes to enlighten. He introduced me to Michael Massaia's photography in 2010, essentially dragging me to it by the nose and insisting: you need to see this.

I poked that nose very gently into Massaia's world at first - it was sort of overwhelming. We engaged by email and it got surreal - how is he so unassuming? So young? So self-taught? Can he really be this brilliant? This poetic? I stared at his images on-screen:

backlit they were luminescent, and his prints are as luminescent as the images appear online.

I still find it almost impossible to believe he can work so slowly, so gently, and so dangerously - making his long exposure photographs by the ocean right after Hurricane Sandy; working in Central Park alone at night for hours; loitering around truck stops at 4am making breath-taking magic.

Four years later, I am deeper down the rabbit hole, and it's really superb in here."

/ [Julie Grahame](#), consultant and online publisher, [acurator.com](#)

Q&A with Michael Massaia

Q: Michael, thank you for accepting the invitation to discuss and show some of your work with us here at arcspace. Could you tell us a bit about your background and how did you start being involved in photography?

A: I appreciate it, thank you. Well that's a bit of a long story, but to sum it up, my interest in photography started as a result of going through long periods of insomnia (days and days at a time). I would commonly be up all night walking around and during this time it was suggested to me to start carrying around a camera to document my late night walks. I tend to have a bit of an obsessive mind, and as time went on, in addition to my photographs, I became consumed with many different printmaking techniques, modifying large format cameras, film development, and every aspect of how I could use photography to create an uncompromised vision. A few years of 24 hour a day experimentation and testing led me to a large format black & white image capture technique, and a handful of odd large format darkroom contacting printing methods that I developed. I'm completely self-taught.

A: Everything starts with an idea and the technical maneuvering of how to present it in an uncompromised way. From an emotional point of view the only criteria is that, I must have an earnest connection with the subject matter. The idea/portfolio is always done before the first image is taken, so there is a process of working backwards, and at times this can be monotonous, because the most exciting moment is the beginning/conception of the idea.

Most of my ideas come from things that seem to have an odd (or maybe even inappropriate) emotional trigger in me. If I can figure a way to present those emotional triggers in graphically new and exciting ways, then I feel I'm on to something.

Being self-taught and having no formal training, I believe works in my favor. There is something pure about not being guided by someone else's teachings or opinions. I have no interest in being fostered or held by the hand when it comes to the creative process, and if that means falling flat on my face from time to time, so be it.

Q: Who are some of your favorite photographers and how has their work affected your own? Are there other influences to your artistic approach outside photography?

A: My first artistic influences were not actually photographers, but photo realist painters like Charles Bell, Ralph Goings, Richard Estes, and Robert Bechtle. What I found so compelling about their work was how they were able to re-introduce the viewer to the mundane in a very compelling way. It was almost like a magic trick, and from an artistic point of view, I knew that for me, being able to present to the viewer a time, place, or object that was normally considered not art worthy or undesirable, was extremely challenging, and ultimately the direction I wanted to head in.

The other compelling aspect of photo realism was the virtuosic craft that was required. There was absolutely no room for hacks. I wanted to bring that same perfectionism and meticulous uncompromised vision to what I was doing with photography and printmaking.

Q: Urban spaces play a central role in your work. Could you tell us why you gravitate towards those subjects?

A: It's really all I know. I've never lived outside of a 40mile radius from where I was born, and I rarely, if ever, travel. I believe the ideas are always directly in front of you and you don't have to travel the world to find something compelling.

Q: Tell us a few words about your 'Deep in a dream', 'Afterlife', and 'In the final throes' series shown here.

A: I think the concept behind those three portfolios is isolation, disconnection, and an attempt to find a connection within that reaction. I suppose I feel that I never had the typical experience/relationship to the subject matter in all three of those portfolios, and as a result, I tried to set out and present the idea of the home, the amusement park, and the city in a way that bucks what the majority would normally take from those environments.

It took me about 6-7 years to complete the majority of those three portfolios. The printing process can slow me down enormously at times because I'm simply not getting the results I was seeking, but it's vitally important to me that the final product is something that I produced by hand, with absolutely no out-sourcing from its conception, to the final print is perfected.

In The Final Throes - New Jersey - Mantoloking Home #1. Photo © Michael Massaia

Q: How did your awareness towards the built environment change with the photographic practice?

A: It really didn't change, but I did feel that by using photography, I finally had a vehicle to explore and present what was previously trapped in my head.

Q: What photographic gear do you use and what are your thoughts about their role in the creative process?

A: The most important pieces of equipment I use are large format view cameras, and slow black and white film developed in Pyrogallol variations. The camera formats I use are 11"x14", 8"x10", 5"x7", and 4"x5". I prefer to use very sturdy architectural view cameras made by Sinar, opposed to folding field cameras, because of the increased sturdiness, range of movements, and geared

movements. They are extremely heavy to carry around, but I don't want any part of the process to be compromised.

Large format black and white film plays the most important role in what I do, because when developed properly, it's the best information collection device there is. It has an ability to handle highlights and record finite detail that is still far superior to the current batch of digital image sensors, no matter how many megapixels they squeeze onto them. In many ways, I feel technology has devolved, when it comes to image capturing devices. While people are doing some fascinating things with digital photography (ie. - compositing, stitching tons of exposures together, and basically creating completely virtual worlds in Photoshop), I still take a sense of pride that all of my images are "one shot" scenes. All of the information that exists in the original capture/moment is what exists in the final print. There are many technical hurdles when it comes to using large format cameras, but I think it's best to try and figure out those challenges, opposed to immediately "jumping ship" and using a digital device when things start to seem impossible.

Q: 'Seeing the black dog' and 'NYC billboards' present unique ways of viewing ordinary scenes, a blend of realism and altered states of perception. Could you tell us about them?

A: It's simply the way I experience those two things. These two subject matters generally agitate the people that live around here. Semi trucks are viewed as nothing more than an insane nuisance on the highways (despite how crucial they are to everyone's well being /the American economy), and billboards are viewed by most people as calculating/manipulating devices to get you to unconsciously spend money, but I don't experience them that way. I suppose it's simply another exercise in looking very hard into your environment and not being controlled by the general perception.

Q: Which locations outside of New York would you like to photograph?

A: I never think like that. I know the next idea is always directly in front of me and I simply have not seen it yet.

Q: Although fine art and commercial photography are defined and practiced differently, do you think there's also a common ground and a trend to fuse their boundaries? How would you define fine art photography?

A: To me, art is ultimately a very selfish and personal endeavor, that when done correctly, should only be measured by the satisfaction of the person who created it. In commercial work many other opinions must be taken into consideration. I certainly don't think this is a bad thing, but for me once the purity of an idea is been compromised for compliance sake, it's no longer art.

Q: Could you tell us your thoughts about the matter of a personal vision in relation to broader visions of artistic movements?

A: I try to not to get caught up/pay attention to any type of contemporary art movements. I simply try to chase ideas I have, and whether or not they fit into the "flavor of the month" movement, must remain irrelevant to me. Finding your voice, in whichever artistic field you

choose, I believe is the ultimate goal for any artist. Becoming infatuated with specific movements, and or artists, is a very good way to hinder that process.

Q: You have done numerous exhibitions the last few years. How do you handle the business aspects of photography?

A: I do struggle with this. I basically do everything myself. The creative process for me can be all consuming and it leaves very little room for anything else in my life. As a result, there are certain things outside the creative process that can be neglected. I'm constantly trying to improve those "other things", but it's difficult.

Q: Could you share with us any ideas about future projects you would like to work on?

A: I'm currently working on my first portfolio, that I suppose would be classified more in the "street photography" category, but I have run into many technical stumbling blocks. However, I won't stop until I figure them out....