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Portraits of Sunbathers as You've Never Seen Them Before

By Julie Grahame
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Young master photographer and printer Michael Massaia's *Deep in a Dream* series has until now shown us images of Central Park made in the wee hours of the night. Sometimes up to the top of his waders in the lake, or being cruised by guys, chattered to by rats or growled at by dogs, the long-exposure photographs he takes are finessed to within an inch of their beautiful lives in his homemade darkroom where he spends days mixing chemicals to outstanding effect. His prints need to be seen to be believed.



Although he is just releasing them now, Massaia has been making the *Deep in a Dream - Sheep's Meadow* sunbather photographs since 2006, concurrently with his other long-exposure series (which include the streets of suburban New Jersey; Seaside Heights before and after Hurricane Sandy; long-haul trucks at rest; and vintage pinball machines). All I could imagine was him laying flat in a hide in camo (I couldn't understand how

he'd get his 8x10 in there), but in fact, he's in plain sight. Following are excerpts from an interview with Michael in May, 2014.



It's hard at first to work out what is going on in these images. The subjects have surrendered to their environment and must have no pretensions of privacy; they look as if they are sunbathing in the dark.

“Though people are the focus, my objective was to wait to capture the moment they turn into unassuming sculpted objects.”



The conversations these days are about how much less intrusive an iPhone is to taking photographs. Michael Massaia, however, started out with the largest format.

“For about 1/4 of the portfolio I used an 8x10 camera. It was not a fancy modified one, just a standard Sinar F2. It became quickly apparent that I simply could not handle the pressure of getting so close to the subject while using such a large camera. I literally felt like I was going to have a nervous breakdown when I was using the view cameras for this portfolio, but it was tempered by my excitement over the results I was getting.

The problem was also, not so much the people I was photographing, but all the people surrounding me. It was pretty clear I had to change my working method, so that's when I switched. I basically used every camera I could get my hands on to accomplish this job at the highest quality. I was able to borrow Leica's flagship medium format digital camera - the S - to also use on the portfolio. I've been very impressed with the results from that camera, and while it's a digital camera, I still create analog negatives from the files that are in turn contact printed on traditional fiber based silver gelatin paper.

The inspiration came from simply trying to create a portfolio that involved people in some way. In 2006, I saw these people laying out in the Sheep Meadow and was very drawn to how "out of their bodies" they appeared. All of the pretense was gone, and what remained was this perfect unassuming figure. I found myself being very connected to the honesty of the people at that moment.

My goal was to then figure a way to photograph the people in the most exacting/intimate way. During the printing process is where I started to severely "burn" out everything surrounding the subject. This way, there is no distraction. It is just the viewer and the person.

To this day, no one I've ever photographed, has noticed me. The last thing I ever want to do is to make someone feel uneasy or uncomfortable, but no matter what, I have to see my ideas through until the bitter end. Hopefully my luck keeps up...”