

<http://miad-fa382.blogspot.com/2009/11/q-aline-smithson.html>

Q&A: Aline Smithson



Favorite Condiment © Aline Smithson

I had the tremendous pleasure of interviewing photographer [Aline Smithson](#). Smithson resides on the "Left Coast" of the United States. She is productive both in the practice and the study of photography, as is evident by viewing her [website](#) and very active photo blog [Lenscratch](#). Her variety in subject matter is telling of her hyper curiosity for life. Her enthusiastic exploration of photography and photographers is a true inspiration for those interested in the medium.

Aryn Kresol: The extent of work on your website is quite impressive. You seem to be very purposeful about the ideas you pursue. Does most of your work initially come from preconceived ideas or do you find yourself producing work without a predetermined purpose and find one along the way?

Aline Smithson: I work both ways, usually starting from an idea and then I shoot a couple of images and if it feels right, I continue. Sometimes I'll spontaneously produce an image, find resonance in what I've done, and continue the exploration. It's all pretty organic, but I do think it helps to have an *intention*...as a project evolves, there is a voice in my head that constantly

discusses what I am doing and that helps me flush out my intention.



The Secret Language, from *In Case of Rain* © Aline Smithson

Aryn Kresol: As the daughter of a librarian and the patron of a library currently in economic crisis, I have a connection with your *In Case of Rain* series. Do you find connections with other photographer's work and can you give an example of such a connection?

Aline Smithson: Honestly, I feel more connected to painters, especially James McNeil Whistler - not just for his portraits, but for his gestural landscapes and influences from Japanese imagery. I have a wall of inspirational images over my desk and many are postcards of paintings, postcards of hand painted Japanese photographs, or vernacular images by unknown photographers. Lately I have been drawn to personal work dealing with family--[Phil Todelano](#)'s work, [Days with My Father](#), [Doug DuBois](#), [Tierney Gearon](#), [Elizabeth Fleming](#), [Jack Radcliffe](#). I recently wrote essays on this subject for [Fraction Magazine](#) and [Too Much Chocolate](#).

Aryn Kresol: In the same vein, are there any photographers who have had a profound impact on your photographic life?

Aline Smithson: In my Fashion Editor life, definitely [Mario Testino](#). He was a complete pleasure to work with and had such enthusiasm about his work and it taught me a lot about working with people. That kind of personality is infectious and makes everyone excited to create a singular vision as a team. [Patrick Demarchelier](#) and [Arthur Elgort](#) were pretty great to work with

too--and though I didn't work with them, [Guy Bourdin](#), Penn, and [Avedon](#) were visual influences.

I think when I was beginning my own photography career, I was most influenced by [Matt Mahurin](#) and [Keith Carter](#) (I only shot in black and white for many years). Matt Mahurin's work gave me permission to create and print images that were dark--I've always been drawn to ominous and quirky images, and his really resonated with me. For years, I had Matt's photographs of Marilyn Manson (from a story in *Rolling Stone*) over my desk, sort of as an inspiration for creating work that was "off". Keith Carter resonated with me because he approached his subjects with such compassion and dignity. My current favorites are [Jan von Holleben](#) who celebrates life and children with a disregard of traditional approaches and [Oliver J. Laude](#) for his quirky and humorous approach to his work.

Aryn Kresol: Do you consider yourself an artist or a photographer? Or both? What, for you, is the distinction between the two?

Aline Smithson: My education was as an artist, though when I reflect on my influences in college, they were definitely artist's that used photography. John Baldessari, [Ed Ruscha](#), and William Wegman were artist/photographers that I admired. When I was in college, no one considered being just a photographer. As an artist, you had permission to use all mediums--lithography combining photography, painting combining photography, or just straight photography--but it was art based. At this point, I consider myself both, though if someone asks what I do for a living, I just say I'm a photographer.



People I Don't Know #5 © Aline Smithson

Aryn Kresol: The *People I Don't Know* series most definitely speaks of your personal style; within it the viewer can see reoccurring compositions and lighting attractions. Is this a tendency that you are conscious of when you are photographing or is it intuitive?

Aline Smithson: That was an early series and I discovered the importance of light as an element that evoked more complex images. Since I didn't have any formal photography education, or a community to exchange ideas with, there was much on-the-spot learning. Working through that series did, indeed, create a consciousness about how I wanted to present the images-- though very little was planned in advance. I just looked for ways to connect the images when I was in the moment.



Life, from *In Case of Rain* © Aline Smithson

Aryn Kresol: You expressed interest in photographs that accompany articles, books, and such. Are you interested in the text? Or do you solely read the photographs?

Aline Smithson: Honestly, I always look at the photographs first, but I will read the story or the essay if it is of interest. If you are going to create images to accompany text, you should be reading the text! I am interested in image that begin to tell a story, but don't give away the ending, that are intriguing enough to make you want to read the text. I have to admit, I've purchased books because of the cover image.

Aryn Kresol: Does more of your work come from external influences or from internal curiosities?

Aline Smithson: Both, though probably more from external influences. I'm a visual learner and person. My husband will often have to remind me to stop looking at strangers for too long--I am so fascinated with life and people. I'm *always* taking in the world and thinking about what I'm looking at. I often take those external influences and make them internal curiosities.



Moving Through Life © Aline Smithson

Aryn Kresol: Do you still shoot with film? Mainly or Solely? If you do work digitally, do you feel a difference between the works you produce traditionally to that which you produce digitally?

Aline Smithson: I only shoot with film. And my cameras are pretty old--I use a Rolleiflex from the 1950s and a Hasselblad that could be from the 1980s. It just feels right. I have noticed that my students who shoot digital don't take the time or make an effort to slow down and really think about what they are producing...and the other thing I've noticed, is that many digital photographers have never made prints--I find that unbelievable. The darkroom, and the artistry behind printing, is an important part to committing to the image and elevating it to another level. I don't shoot as much random imagery these days, due to the cost of developing film, and that's where digital images would help. I do own a digital camera and have never used it.



Fur © Aline Smithson

Aryn Kresol: As a photographer and a mother, your children are at times present in your work. Do your children enjoy being photographed, or is it something that they tolerate?

Aline Smithson: My daughter has always been a willing partner--though I did a series of her wearing an enormous gold Thai hat in various locations, and had to pay her \$1 per shoot! My son begrudgingly allows me to photograph him, but i know he's happy with the images--especially since he made the cover of a magazine. I am grateful to have chronicled their lives through my art.

My immense thanks to Aline for her generous answers!

Posted by .aryn kresol. at [11:11 PM](#) 

Labels: [Aryn Kresol](#), [assignment 6](#), [interviews](#)

SHADOWS AND STAINS, NOTES FROM A DARK ROOM

I've been thinking about the state of photography non-stop this past year—it's pursuit, the business of it, the idea of selling an image, the artist's viewpoint, the MFA school of imagery, the death of the wet darkroom, iconic photography, toy cameras and digital cameras, edition and print sizes, old rules, new challenges—all the currents we photographers have to navigate in today's photographic waters. As a darkroom printer, I have found the meditative and creative state that I experience so important to my work—it's where I make my mark, it's where much of the thinking about the image takes place. Losing that experience as part of the process is not an option I want to face.

This series touches upon the brave new world of photography and takes a jab at what feels familiar. I want to explore the idea of a photograph, what it captures and what memory it creates.

Shot with a toy camera (the Diana), I set out to deconstruct images, overlap or cut my negatives, add thoughts that never get said out loud, add text and texture through traditional methods in the darkroom, add washes of oil paint to the surface, and discard the idea of making the perfect print. I want the shadows and stains of my photographic fingerprints as evidence that I was there, in a dark room.



not as interesting as it looks





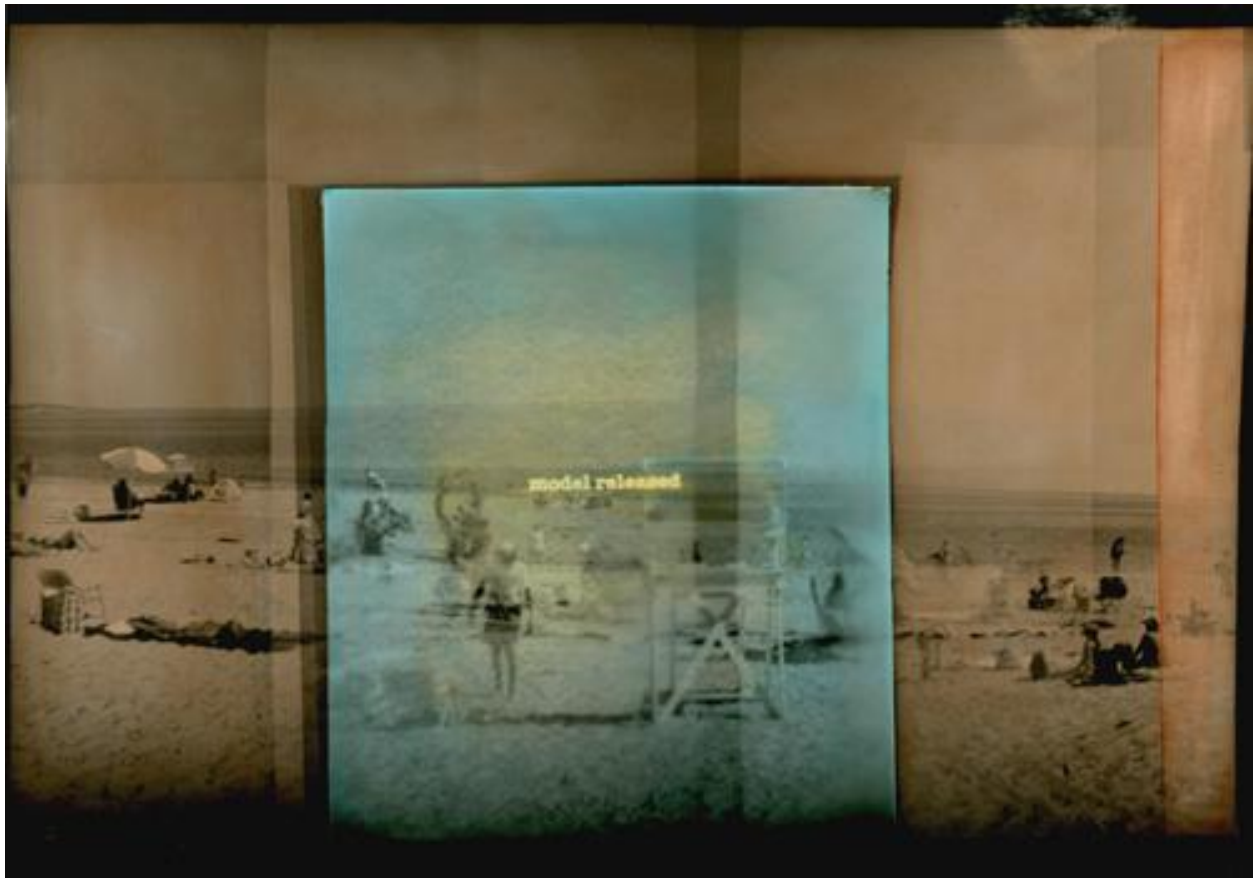




It's always something

















the more travelled road



another boring vista

