



## The Accidental Photographer

photographs and text by Bill Armstrong

**R**enaissance is a portfolio of photographs in the ongoing *Infinity* series, an extensive body of work I have been photographing since 1997. The images in *Renaissance* are made using my unique process of photographing found images extremely out of focus, with the lens set at infinity. In this case, the source materials are reworked master drawings, mostly from the

Renaissance, but some from other periods. The many-layered process of reproduction and blurring, appropriating an image and subjecting it to a series of manipulations (photocopying, cutting, painting, re-photographing, etc.), transforms the original images. This gives them a new meaning in a new context—a renaissance of the Renaissance, if you will.

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The original drawings were attempts to capture the human figure in a specific action, either from biblical, mythological or historical scenes, but the rough sketches were removed from the milieu of the larger whole. My process accentuates that extraction, removing them further from their context and adding a new psychology of color to the achromatic drawings. Extreme blurring erases features, dissolves identity and obscures individuality, while retaining the essence of the original gesture, so that a 15th century religious figure can have secular relevance today.

The themes of the images in *Renaissance* move in opposing directions. Some of the figures seem to be ascending—flying, floating, or otherwise suspended in ether—and represent man's aspirations toward freedom. Or, conversely, they may seem to be falling, or doomed, as the crucifixes and divers become oddly interchangeable. Others are bound, bent, tethered or twisted and appear to be struggling against the frame, representing the limits and agonies of the human condition. At the same time, the photographs may be seen as motion studies of dancers or athletes, reminiscent of Isadora Duncan's search for a Hellenic ideal, ironically fluid and active for reproductions of action, frozen.

I spent a year in Italy in the late 1970s, so working with Renaissance imagery has allowed me to return, in spirit, to a favorite time and place. These images are meant to transport the viewer to another world, human-centered like the civic humanist ideals of the 15th century, but ethereal and luminous—an exaltation of the spirit.

I have been working on the *Infinity* series for more than ten years. Prior to that, I had been shooting collages found on the street that were created by the chance juxtaposition of torn



posters on temporary construction walls. I exhibited that work at the Fogg Museum in 1987 and in a show at Uma Gallery in New York in 1997. Around that time a couple of things happened that made me change direction completely: I saw Uta Barth's out of focus work at MOMA and it interested me. At the same time, I noticed that the street posters I was shooting were sometimes out of focus. It was also becoming clear that Photoshop was here to stay and going to change photography drastically. I began to question the value of going to so much trouble to "find" images when it seemed that the nature of truth in photography and the value of the found image were coming into question. Photoshop was threatening to me and made me





feel my whole approach was going to become obsolete. One day, while framing a picture of a poster, I spun my lens out of focus—and I liked the way it looked.

While I kept shooting on the street, but out of focus, I was asking myself: "Why drag myself all over town looking for a found collage, if I'm going to manipulate it by taking it out of focus?" The purity of the chance found image, printed full frame and as sharply as possible, was no longer relevant, since I was blurring it. I realized that I could find the same images in magazines—hundreds of them—without leaving the house. And within no time I was collecting magazines and shooting my images at home. I was still connected to the Surrealist element of chance and the street because I was collecting magazines from the trash, but suddenly I had so many more images to work with, and so much more control over the imagery.

The next big "eureka" was the realization that I could cut up and collage these magazine images, and if I blurred them enough, setting the lens at infinity, but shooting close-up, the seams of the collage would disappear, and they would appear to be integrated images. This sleight of hand allowed me to conjure a mysterious tromp l'oeil world that hovered between the real and the fantastic. This became the crux of my process, that I could perform some "magic" and create illusions that seemed real. And the fact that I could do it with paper and scissors and a simple lens tool, depths of field—or in my case, negative



depths of field—rather than with computer...well, I did like that.

So, ironically, the advent of Photoshop, even though I didn't use it, changed me—saved me in a way—and sent me in a completely opposite direction. It got me to give up all my old-fashioned, self-imposed, arbitrary rules about straight photography and set me on an unexpected path that has been very fruitful and is still evolving today.

And, as is so often the case, from fear

came change, change evolved into growth, and a new vision then emerged.

There are now 15 portfolios in the *Infinity* series, covering a wide range of imagery (see [billarmstrongphotography.com](http://billarmstrongphotography.com)) from figures to non-representational abstraction. For the last few years the work has centered around making photographs from pre-existing art: African masks; erotic Rajastani painting; Roman sculpture; and currently, Renaissance drawing. All the work is held together conceptually by the process and by the fact that extreme blur de-materializes the subjects and renders them ephemeral, so that they become spirit doubles for something in the real world. The *Infinity* series has become a catalogue of a de-materialized universe, where the images are meant to be meditative pieces, glimpses into a parallel world of pure color—beyond our focus, beyond our ken. **©**

To see more of the work of Bill Armstrong, please go to [www.billarmstrongphotography.com](http://www.billarmstrongphotography.com). "Renaissance" January 10-February 16, 2008, *Clomp/Art*, 531 West 25<sup>th</sup> St., New York, NY 10001. *Clomp-Art.com*.