

Michael Lundgren

TRANSFIG-

URATIONS



MATTER

Michael Lundgren was born in Denver in 1974. He received his bachelors' degree in photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1997 and his masters from Arizona State University in 2003. He has been a faculty member at ASU since 2004.

Transfigurations, Lundgren's first monograph was published in 2008 by Radius Books. He is co-author of *After the Ruins: Rephotographing the San Francisco Earthquake* with the artist Mark Klett.

Lundgren's work is currently on view in the exhibition *Photography is Dead* at the Three White Walls Gallery in Birmingham, UK, selected by Martin Barnes, curator, Victoria & Albert Museum, London. In 2007 Lundgren was nominated by Britt Salvesen, curator, Center for Creative Photography for the Silverstein Photography Annual, New York. He is a recipient of the Magenta Foundation's Flash Forward 2009 Award, a

nominee for the John Gutmann Photography Fellowship, the Santa Fe Prize and a 2007 finalist for the Aperture West Book Prize.

Lundgren's work is included in the fine art collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London; the Museet for Fotokunst, Odense; the Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego as well as numerous private collections. He is represented by ClampArt, New York.

Two distinct series, *Transfigurations* and *Matter*, are presented here in the same portfolio. In both bodies of work Lundgren engages the language of landscape, not to record the specifics of place, but to allude to an atavistic experience of the desert.

All images © Michael Lundgren, courtesy ClampArt, New York

'Only in darkness can light be born'

interview by Jörg Colberg

Let's start by talking about what might sound like technique, but which is more than that. *Transfigurations* is very stark – almost completely black or white. What motivated you to take this approach?

Photography is a duality: a record and a transformation. Jonathan Greene describes this perfectly in his book *American Photography*: 'The camera cannot lie, neither can it tell the truth. It can only transform.' My hope is that they convey the transformative experience of the desert; however, these pictures relate as much to the medium as the land they traverse. In the desert one is often confronted by extremes of light and dark. My work is motivated by the Sublime: a meeting of one's personal awareness with something much larger. What one *knows* is overwhelmed by one's experience at high noon, or in the gray black of the desert night. I work at the edges of photography's sensitivity, to circuitously speak to that experience. Recently, an astronomer described to me the beginnings of a star. Within a molecular cloud of dust and gas, the particles become so dense that no light can enter. Without light, the temperature and pressure drop and eventually the gravity of the cloud collapse on itself. Only in darkness can light be born. From the facts, form arranges content, begetting metaphor.

Matter at first seems more colourful, but its imagery is as stark as that of *Transfigurations*. Does this have deeper meaning for you?

Stark is a way to describe it, but perhaps more appropriate is the word reduced. I'm interested in reducing the world to a bare essential. By photographing in non-directional light or with on-camera flash, and printing with a less saturated palette, the photograph becomes a presentation of a symbolic subject amidst a field of mute colour. These pictures are motivated by a history of violence in the desert, not just our own politically underwritten aggression, but nature's violence as well. Within this is the idea of two levels of time: shallow time and deep time – the life of cells and the life of stone.

How do you approach working on a series? Is there an idea, or do you have images and then develop the series? How do you find the photographs for your series?

I'm a follower of the Nathan Lyons' school of photography. In this tradition, photography is ideographic; photography is its own language. A body of work developed over time deals with associations from picture to picture. By working intuitively (making photographs, digesting them, going out to make more), one allows meaning to develop and be sustained by the pictures themselves, rather than imposing a pre-formulated idea or continuity of subject matter. I'm drawn to make certain photographs, yet I never know what I'm going to photograph next.

***Transfigurations* would be called landscape photography, even though your photographs look nothing like most other landscapes. How you see yourself in the tradition of this genre?**

In response to the idealization of nature as Eden, landscape shifted dramatically with the work of the New Topographics' photographers. This shift is more complex than I can describe here, driven by major changes in photographic seeing. Underlying both movements is the assumption: 'Look at how great nature is. Look what we've done to it. It is better off without us'. Since then we've been inundated by work that *describes* human devastation. This imposed limitation acknowledges only one half of the photographic duality: the record, leaving little room for a spiritually-motivated response to place. I'm interested in what exists because we are perceptive beings, susceptible to direct impressions and in need of mythology.

Care to elaborate on this a bit? I'm interested in your idea of mythology especially.

Western culture is short on myth. And perhaps for modern humans, the choice is between mythology and fantasy. What interests me is the idea that mythology is real. Mythology gathers small untruths that when taken as a whole, form a story of humanity's real experience. Through the interpretation of mythological archetypes – the desert, its phenomena, its blinding light and enveloping darkness – what cannot be expressed in words is elucidated in metaphor.

A lot of photographers are trying to push the boundaries of what photography actually is. Is this something you are interested in?

Yes and no. I'm simply trying to understand photography. Dealing with the medium in a simple way is enough for me. The word radical comes from the Latin 'radix', meaning root. Much contemporary work is disconnected to the trace of history, disjointed from photography's essential paradox. Instead it relies on technological possibilities and the spectacle of the subject. Photography's future is in peril. New technology expands the medium's democratic nature, but a nuanced understanding of the inherent dialectic in photography is at the risk of being lost.

Thomas Ruff would probably argue that photography's future is only in peril if we ignore new technologies' potential. Might it not be time to re-think old ideas of photography, given that image-making now encompasses ways people never imagined in the past? You said that photography was a transformation: Haven't recent photographic developments made this fact clearer than ever?

Foremost, I am not a Luddite. Much of my work is altered in the computer and the darkroom. Directorial photography and digital compositing (directorial's newest agency) have been steadily supplanting analytical photography. It is often so seamlessly crafted in intent and message that it becomes indistinguishable from advertising. History demonstrates that technology alone will not expand what photography is. Pictorialists created directorial narratives 100 years ago while Edward Muybridge seamlessly printed rocks and skies into his albumen prints. What interests me is how digital will change photographic formalism. What does the world look like photographed digitally? Does the transformation exist because one creates a composite, or is it something more integral to the way digital sees the world – as hyper-reality, a state where it is impossible to distinguish between reality and fantasy?

