# Michael Massaia

*Interview by Michael Behlen*

---

*"My work is a record of a "distance from the world" that allows me
to depict isolation as something romantic."*

*Michael Massaia*

---

Michael Massaia is a -fine art- photographer and printmaker who has spent the past 15 years documenting areas and objects in New Jersey. His work deals with and portrays isolation and disconnection in an attempt to provide a spotlight on the ordinary things that are extraordinary all around us. He focuses, primarily, on large format black-and-white film, utilizing a variety of highly modified proprietary analog printing techniques.

A "one-man-band, "he works alone and is the sole craftsman, starting the instant the negative is exposed and ending the moment the final print is created. Those unaware of his complex analog approach might assume he shoots and processes digitally due to the quality of the prints he produces. This is definitely not the case and we are thrilled to share with you our interview with this master printmaker and photographer, along with a selection of images from his series *Afterlife, I, II,* and *III.*

**Michael Behlen** | *Hi Michael, we are going to jump right in. Can you please introduce yourself to our readers?*

**Michael Massaia** | *My name is Michael Massaia. I'm 43 years old and have lived in NJ my entire life.*
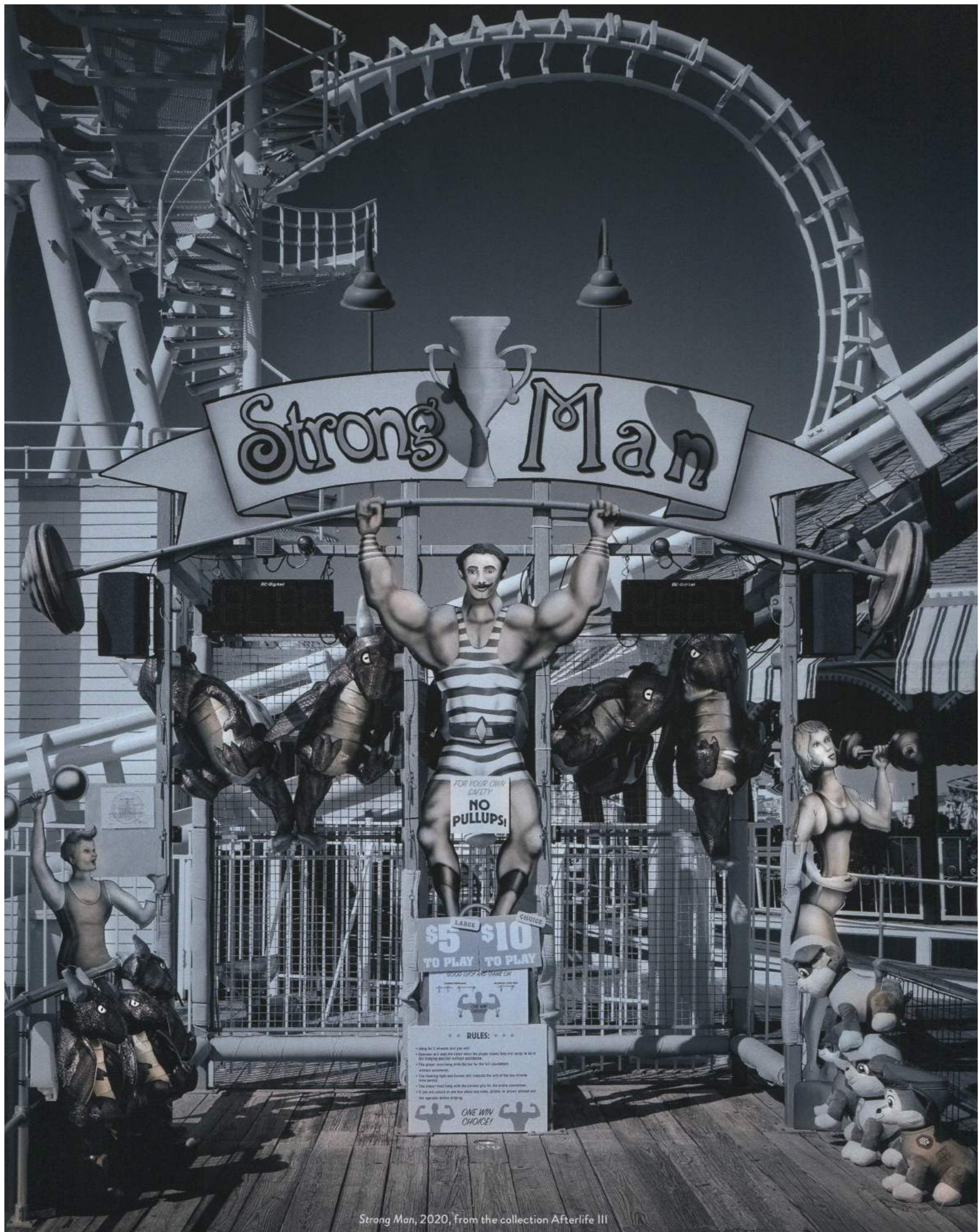
**MB** | *Can you tell us your "story"?*

**MM** | *It's hard to tell a story before it has a proper ending. Plus, I do find something distasteful about autobiographies.*

**MB** | *When did you take up creative pursuits and when did film photography come into your life? What inspired you to keep using it?*

**MM** | *I think "creative pursuits" used to be code for "unable to do normal things" or better yet "unable to fit in anywhere," so you tend to run to where you can control and create your own world. In regard to the use of film—the first film medium that really grabbed me was Polaroid's Time-Zero film. In my late teens and early twenties, I was obsessed with the look of this film and what could be done with it. I would carry around my tan and chrome collapsible SX-70 camera with me everywhere. As time went on, large-format film had the same effect on me that Time-Zero film did. It seemed like there were endless possibilities in regard to development, and achieving a personal look with large format film. There was also the ability to create the appearance of tremendous dimension when using large format film that still seems incomparable, even today.*

*Strong Man, 2020, from the collection Afterlife III*

*The Casino Pier-Post Hurricane Sandy, 2012, from the collection Afterlife I*



*The Funtown Pier-Post Hurricane Sandy, 2012, from the collection Afterlife I*

**MB** | *What drew you to photography as a whole when you started using the SX70? What did you enjoy about it?*

**MM** | *I think the main draw was the romance of it. Also the technical romance. To be able to conjure up an idea, and then go into a real environment and bring back proof that the idea really exists was exciting to me. I remember the self-portrait that O'Winston Link took of himself (with his assistant). He had his 4 x 5 view cameras set up, surrounded by all of the lighting he used for his night shots of the steam trains. He was on an adventure. He was chasing down his idea. It was technically exciting. He was showing something in its best light. He was saying goodbye to something he loved. It was absurdly romantic and left an impression on me.*

*In regards to the SX70 camera, the camera wasn't exciting to me. Time-Zero film was what interested me. I was a messenger in NYC in my early twenties and was dealing with some problems that could cause a good amount of confusion, and distortion. I would walk around the city all day and would have odd experiences with the environment. Sometimes disturbing, sometimes comforting, but I was always experiencing something heightened/manipulated. Time-Zero film was such a perfect match for that time in my life. Using old expired Time-Zero film, and woodcarving tools to severely manipulate it, created a perfect analog for my "day to day" back then.*

**MB** | *How long into your photography journey did you venture into the darkroom? Was there a moment when you knew this is where you would spend 100000s of hours in the next 20 years?*

**MM** | *Pretty much from the beginning. When I was very young my dad had a darkroom and used to make Cibachrome, as well as silver gelatin prints. This process always seemed to come pretty instinctively to me. There was never a moment when I knew that I would be doing this as much as I do. I still come up with ideas that this medium is the best fit for. If one day that changes, I would change mediums without thinking twice, to best fit the idea.*

> "I SUPPOSE EVERYTHING FROM YOUR PAST GETS BUNCHED UP AND AFFECTS EVERYTHING YOU DO, BUT I GUESS MY PREDOMINANT AND PERSISTENT THEME IS ISOLATION."
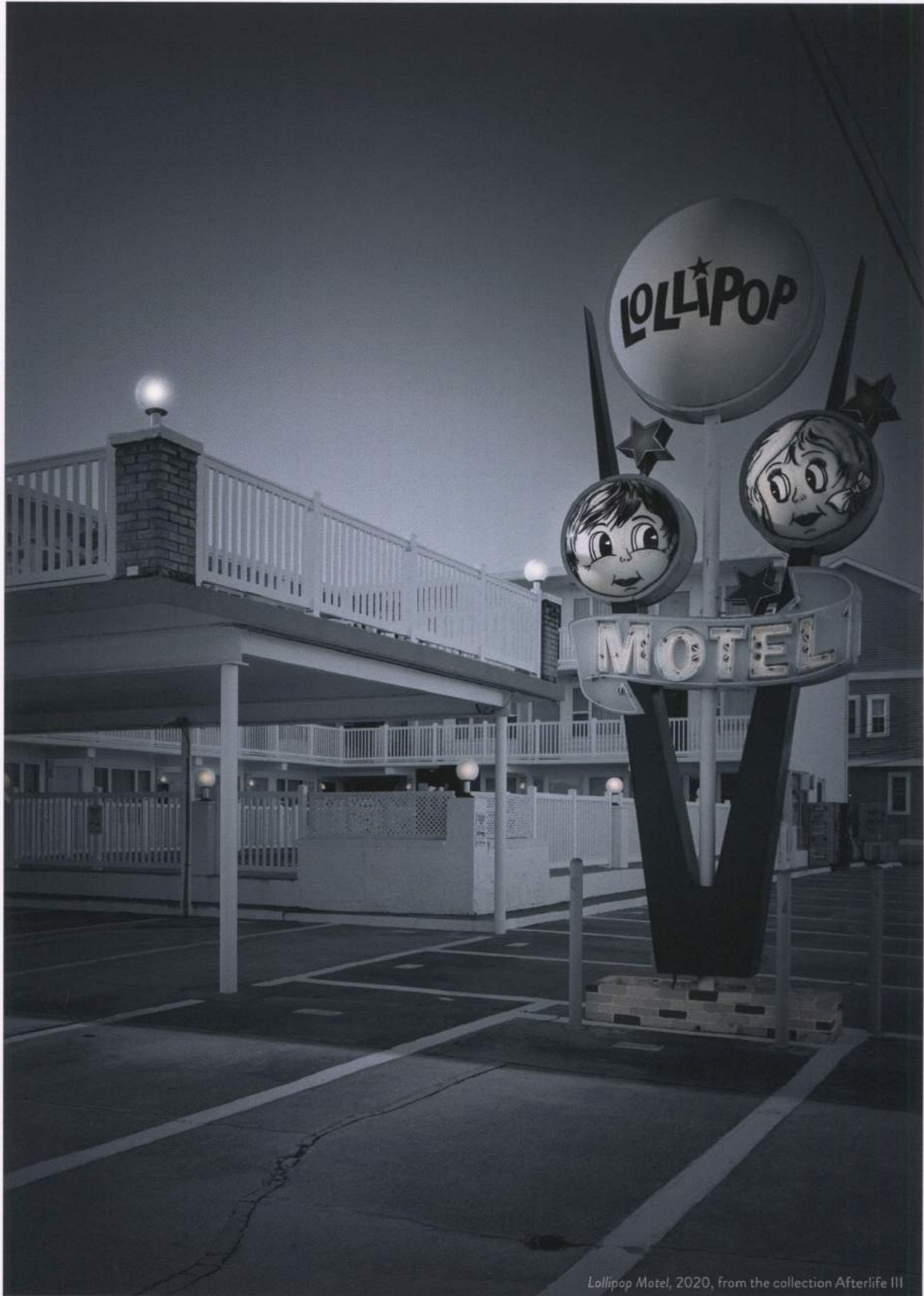


*Steel Pier-Moonrise, 2019, from the collection Afterlife III*
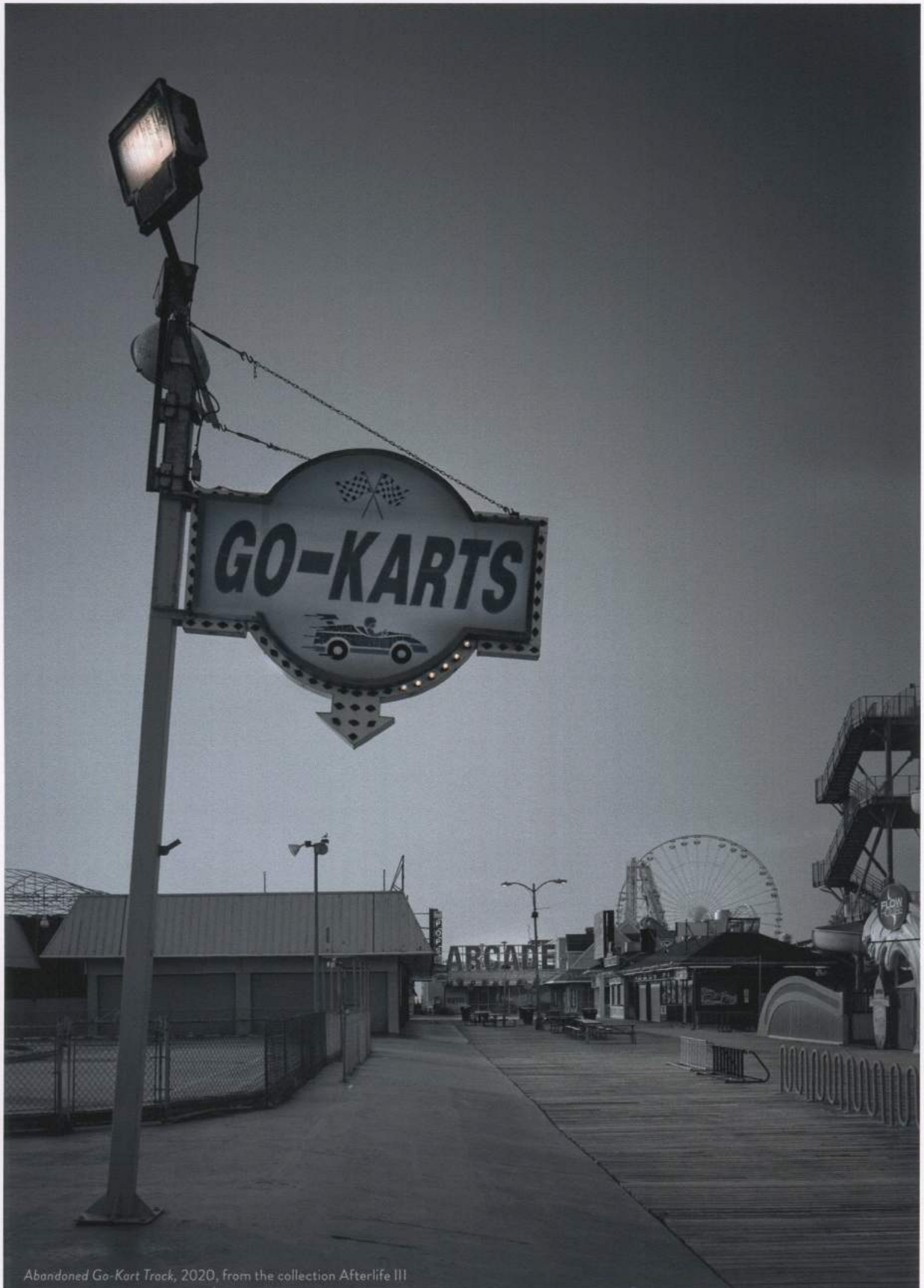
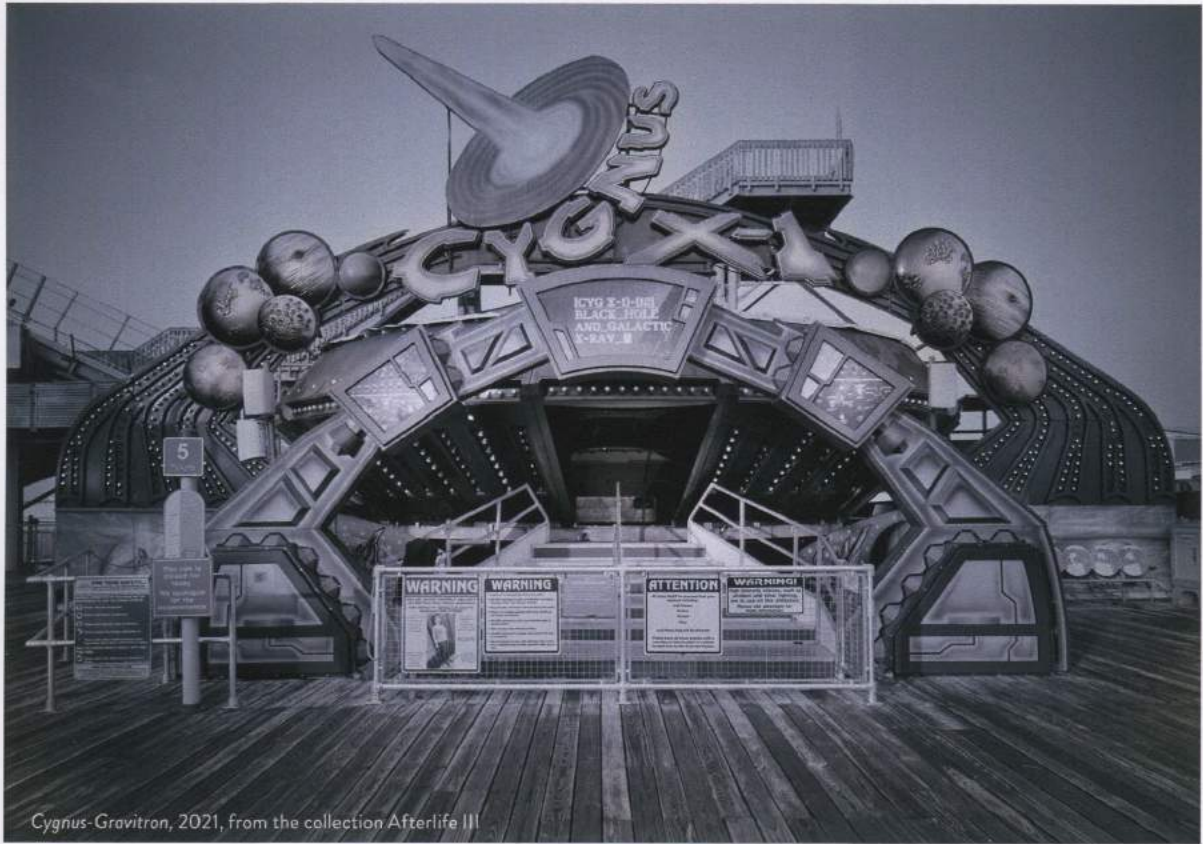*Abandoned Go-Kart Track, 2020, from the collection Afterlife III*

*Lollipop Motel, 2020, from the collection Afterlife III*

Cygnus-Gravitron, 2021, from the collection Afterlife III



Last Days-Morey's Pier, 2021, from the collection Afterlife III

**MB** | *Did you always want to be an artist? Do you consider yourself one?*

**MM** | *When I was younger, I wanted to be a truck driver or a circus clown. At some point, I realized I was probably too underqualified to do either one of those things. I think that if you're working in this field, for the correct reasons, you probably never wanted to be an "artist," but you had to become one because of some underlying inadequacy, or the simple inability to be able to properly deal with the harshness of life. I would say that I would label myself as a person who tries desperately to create distance between myself and the world.*

**MB** | *What are the correct reasons? The word inadequacy is interesting because it implies that there is a "normal" way we should act and/or perceive the world. Would you say that those atypical things about you actually give you incredible focus on the work you produce?*

**MM** | *Desperation is the correct reason. Longing is the correct reason. Knowing you're screwed and that this might just be the thing that can save you, is the correct reason. Self-aggrandizing is the wrong reason. Pretense is the wrong reason. And trying to teach someone something that they "obviously" don't understand, is the wrong reason.*

*I suppose the atypical thing about myself is the inability to feel a sense of accomplishment. But I don't see this as a deficit. This prevents me from ever arriving anywhere, which would make me feel as if I've done something special. This keeps me running like the greyhound chasing the mechanical rabbit in a dog race. I think, even the dog knows, he'll never get the rabbit, but I think you can have hope, and yet, at the same time know, that it may just not be in the cards for you in this world.*

**MB** | *Do you think a lot of artists use art as a way of expressing a world they fit into? What would you say this statement says about the work you create and how you create it?*



*Dante's Dungeon, 2021, from the collection Afterlife III*

**MM** | I don't really want to get into the heads of what I think other artists are attempting to express, but with that being said, it does seem like many artists working today that graduated from ivy-league schools, could have easily been lawyers, or a number of other things. And I guess I have noticed a real shift into artists, using their mediums as a tool of manipulation, and self-righteous points of view, that are, in the end, simply poorly veiled acts of narcissism.

**MB** | Is there anything from your past that you feel has had a dramatic influence on how you create images today?

**MM** | I suppose everything from your past gets bunched up and affects everything you do, but I guess my predominant and persistent theme is "isolation." The experience of isolation is more profound when you're younger, and as a result, the environments in which you were experiencing that isolation are also more profound and never leave you. Hence, the amusement parks in my "Afterlife" series.

**MB** | Your photographic series as a whole deal with isolation and disconnection, can you share more about this with us?

**MM** | Ultimately, I think you have to explore what you know, in order for whatever you're doing to be worthwhile. Isolation and disconnection are what I know. [My work] is a record of a "distance from the world" that allows me to depict isolation as something romantic.

**MB** | Speaking of isolation, your series "Afterlife" shows amusement towns of New Jersey abandoned and desolate. How and why did you begin working on this series? What has motivated you to keep working on it through the years?

**MM** | I started working on this series in 2008. There is something very specific about the shore/amusement towns that line the New Jersey Coastline. People have their opinions about these places, but I always felt they had all the ingredients to create



Mirror Maze, 2020, from the collection Afterlife III
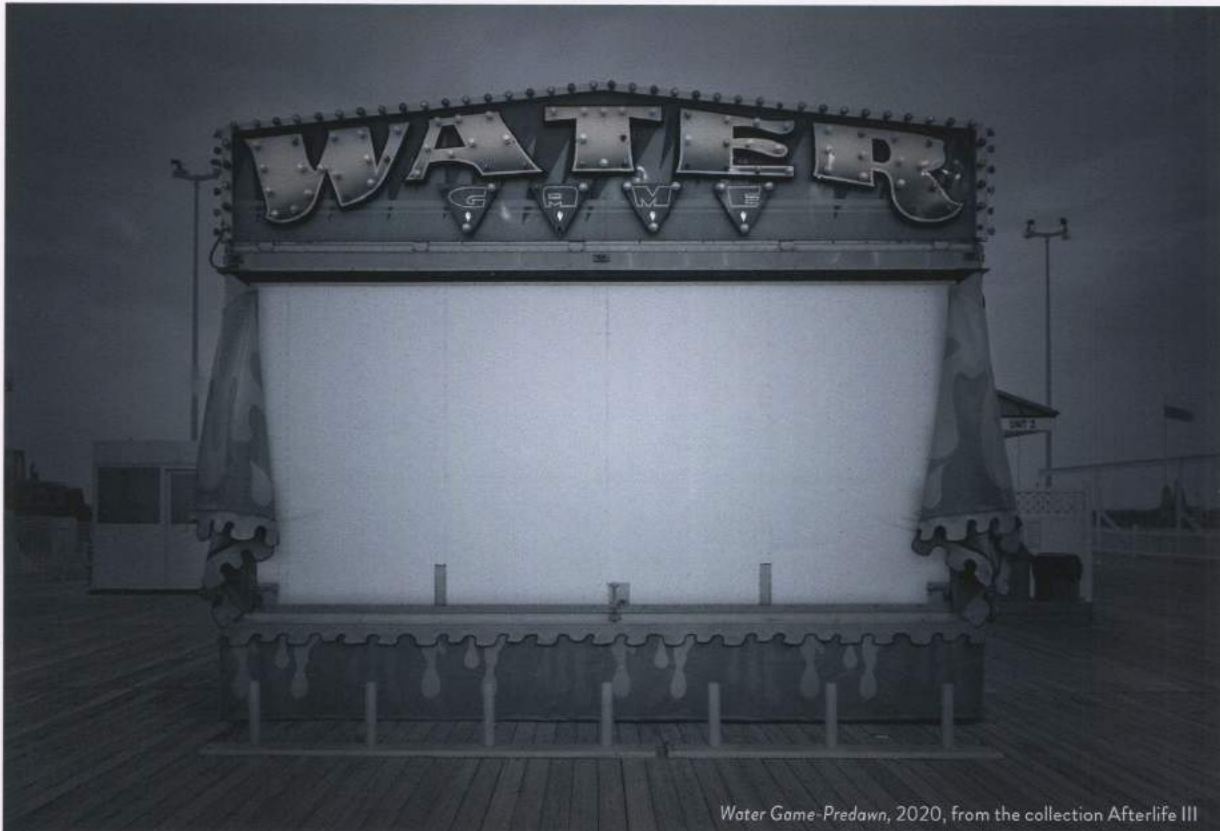
*Water Game-Predawn, 2020, from the collection Afterlife III*

*an ongoing series. I always had this strange connection to carnival culture and everything that goes with it. These areas feel like the last bastions of this culture.*

*I've been documenting these small New Jersey coastal/amusement towns for the past 15 years now—"Afterlife I" and "Afterlife II." I started the "Afterlife III" series in late winter-early spring 2020 and worked on this series all throughout the [pandemic] virus when everything was shut down and when these towns/amusement piers started to try and open again this summer.*

*These amusement towns/shore communities in New Jersey seemed like the last free places on earth. They took on an eerie (almost romantic) stance in the face of all the turmoil surrounding them. I found this time reminiscent of when I was younger and would hang out on the boardwalk throughout the night. There was this beautiful mixture of danger, freedom, unpredictability, that gave way to an odd type of romance. There was always an undercurrent of sadness, but it was a gorgeous type of sadness. ..*

**MB** | *How did they appear to be one of the last free places on earth?*

**MM** | *The towns really fought to keep going. The rides were all open. Families showed up to go to the water parks. Men and women in their eighties were selling ride tickets. Tone-deaf hippies were playing old folk songs on the boardwalk. At night, occasional fights would break out. It felt completely removed from what was going on in the rest of the world.*

**MB** | *The shore's boardwalks are deserted and appear illuminated by an internal glow in your prints. Can you tell us more about how you achieved this and your desire to present these places in this light?*

**MM** | *I guess my goal is to kind of honor these places. Treat them in a way that you wouldn't think they deserve to be treated. The glow gives them a feeling of something special, something unforeseen, and perhaps something that a person may not attribute to these areas. The glow is created through overexposure, over development of film, and then, pulled back when printing.*

**MB** | *What is it about these abandoned places that draw you in? Especially between the hours of four and six a.m.?*

**MM** | *The recent absence of people allows for isolation, but because the absence is recent, the spirit is still present. I simply relate to the world better at these times. I go through long periods where I don't sleep at night (or day), so working at night was a natural fit for me. Plus, the late-night and early morning hours offer the most crucial element to what I'm after—"a recent absence."*

**MB** | *Can you tell us how Hurricane Sandy changed the scenes you were capturing and how it impacted the creation of your ongoing series?*

"THERE WAS THIS BEAUTIFUL MIXTURE OF DANGER, FREEDOM, UNPREDICTABILITY, THAT GAVE WAY TO AN ODD TYPE OF ROMANCE. THERE WAS ALWAYS AN UNDERCURRENT OF SADNESS, BUT IT WAS A GORGEOUS TYPE OF SADNESS...."

**MM** | *Hurricane Sandy rolled in and completely destroyed both piers. The landscape was forever altered. The images in the "Afterlife I" series chronicle the final days of these piers, as well as what remained of the piers after the hurricane. After the storm basically destroyed everything, the culture also changed a good deal. The carnival culture that was both disparaged and secretly revered seems to be reduced to only remnants now.*

**MB** | *How has COVID affected your work, process, and printmaking?*

**MM** | *From a process point of view it's made getting materials, especially large rolls of silver gelatin paper, very difficult. I've managed to get materials throughout the past year, but it's been an ordeal. In regard to inspiration—I've found the control over the environment/population to be extremely disturbing. I feel this type of control kills creativity and the idea of romance. It's as if the spirit has been sucked out of everything. I suppose the inspiration came from the challenge of desperately searching for that spirit, amongst all the control. I was able to find that spirit and hopefully, documented it properly. It was exciting to feel like the only person out there producing work. It was inspirational for me to create work that didn't reference the virus at all. I felt like I was at the beginning again.*

**MB** | *What is it about control that makes you feel the need to find that spirit of freedom? How does it motivate your work and the scenes you create?*

**MM** | *Control kills everything I find compelling. It kills chance. It kills hope. It kills the individual. It kills romance. And it kills redemption. But, I guess, most importantly, it kills desire. Once everything becomes a foregone conclusion, what's the point? Also, I really don't appreciate being told what to do, especially when it comes to something as basic as walking down the street. I have mixed feelings about the isolation of my work in comparison to what's going on now. I would never want people to live like I do. My work wasn't about people being afraid to leave their houses with empty streets as a result. That's just sad. No, my work depicts a vacant landscape/isolation that is about what the world becomes when people have done what they want and have had enough for the day/night. They retired the night with a full heart, no fear, and that's when their spirit is still present even though the landscape may be vacant.*

**MB** | *You have now created three series of "Afterlife." How has your process of creation changed and evolved over the past 15 years?*

**MM** | *The major evolution while working on my "Afterlife" series is the obsession with trying to create the most perfect in-camera negatives possible. When I was younger I was a bit haphazard when developing my sheet film, and I felt I could always just fix messy negatives while printing. I've become so obsessed with creating perfect negatives now, that I almost want them to be something you could display. I also don't have the energy anymore to spend hours upon hours spotting prints from messy negatives.*

*Primetime Arcade-Last Light*, 2019, from the collection Afterlife III

As the years go by, I also don't dodge and burn the new prints as heavily as I did in the past. When I was creating the earlier prints, this was simply how I envisioned them—heavily dodged and burned. Recently I've replaced that heavy dodging with selective toning, which just tends to appeal to me more these days.

**MB** | *Your website mentions Hebrews 11:13-16 which states: "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth." How does this relate to your photography?*

**MM** | *I think Hebrews 11:13-16 sums everything up. It describes the process of passing through and accepting a place that will never really feel like home. Acknowledging the longing to find a place is real and innate, but at the same time, dealing with the knowledge that it's probably not going to be found here. This acknowledgment allows me a sense of freedom that is profound. Loneliness melts away once you realize that perhaps, you're supposed to be a fish out of water.*

*It relates to my photography because ultimately all of the photo projects are an attempt to bend the environment just enough so that what was once alien, is now closer to what might be that feeling of going home. I feel there needs to be a certain level of malcontent-ion regarding your environment in order to create something worthwhile. This passage tends to absolve and perhaps justify you in feeling that way.*

**MB** | *Your images are shot on black-and-white film but have an immense depth of hues and tones. Can you tell us how you achieve this and how you create "color" prints from black-and-white film negatives?*



The Great White, 2020, from the collection Afterlife III

**MM** | *Black-and-white film is a perfect "blank slate" for my work. I want all parts of the process to be personal, and not be dictated by a color gamut manufactured by a film company. About five years ago, I started doing a very intricate toning process for my gelatin silver prints using iron, gold, selenium, bleach, re-development, and sepia. I will also hand-color some parts of some prints. The toning process is done in multiple stages in the darkroom. I will mask out parts of prints, use brushes, etc. The process is always being modified and hopefully improved to create fewer mistakes, but there are still tons of discards.*

**MB** | *How is the work made from a technical standpoint? Can you walk us through this from start to finish?*

**MM** | *All the work is shot 8 x 10, 5 x 7, and 4 x 5 black-and-white film (predominantly Ilford FP4, Rollei Ortho 25, and Kodak Tmax 100). I use a variety of view cameras. Most of the images are usually shot about 30 minutes before the sun rises. All of the film is developed in staining developers, using standing development process.*

*After the film is developed, I then make a series of colored internegatives (from the original in-camera negative) using different output devices—imagesetter, pigment printer, etc.—to create the negatives used for the contact-printing process. The negatives are made on solid white polyester and are registered, and contact-printed in large vertical vacuum frames. I use large banks of LED light sources for exposing, and I control the variable contrast of the paper by using large colored gels. Most of my prints are exposed multiple times with different colored lighting, which allows me to create split contrast prints. I process all of my prints in large open trays, and will selectively tone them using gold, selenium, sepia, and iron.*



*Casino Pier Facade #2, 2010, from the collection Afterlife II*

Great White-Pre-Storm, 2020, from the collection Afterlife III



Crystal Sands-Dawn, 2020, from the collection Afterlife III



Self Portrait-Carousel Arcade Photo Booth, 2009, from the collection Afterlife I



Carousel Arcade Fortune Teller Machine, 2008, from the collection Afterlife I



Turned Off-Bumper Cars, 2020, from the collection Afterlife III



Go-Karts & Ice Cream, 2010, from the collection Afterlife II

**MB** | *How do you think your ability to create a world of custom colors says about your ideas of the scenes you capture?*

**MM** | *I think it says that I am not satisfied, or maybe, not impressed by what I'm seeing. It's not in my nature to leave "well enough alone."*

**MB** | *Can you tell us about your evolution in a technical sense? Processes, printing? Your prints are highly labor-intensive. Where did you first learn how to print in platinum and silver gelatin processes?*

**MM** | *These days I predominantly make gelatin silver prints. I feel as if I have forced the platinum/palladium printing process as far as I could take it. I was making platinum prints as large as 44 x 60; I was doing pin registration, multiple coatings, custom sizing, colorized contact negatives, etc., but I was never completely satisfied with the results. Then I started making platinum/palladium prints on fixed-out gelatin silver paper, and other glossy surfaced paper (like treated mylar) to create a more dimensional print with better dark, midtone separation. These results were exciting, but the tones were still too brown for my liking. I somewhat resolved this by gold-toning the platinum prints, but still, not completely satisfied.*

*As time went on, I started moving towards silver printing. I now create gelatin silver contact prints up to 44 x 60. I first make a series of colored internegatives (from the original in-camera negative), using different output devices-imagesetter, pigment printer, etc., to create the negatives used for the contact printing process. The negatives are made on solid white polyester and are registered, and contact printed in large vertical vacuum frames. I use large banks of LED light sources for exposing, and I control the variable contrast of the paper by using large colored gels. Most of my prints are exposed multiple times with different colored lighting, which allows me to create split contrast prints. I process all of my prints in large open trays, and will selectively tone them using gold, selenium, sepia, and iron. I work alone and do not outsource any of my processes. The reason I still print like this is because of the results. There is a dimensional tonal quality that I feel can only be obtained through this process. I've never been able to separate printmaking from photography. For me, neither one makes sense without the other. I've spent upwards of 100 hours on one print.*

> "THE REASON I STILL PRINT LIKE THIS IS BECAUSE OF THE RESULTS. THERE IS A DIMENSIONAL TONAL QUALITY THAT I FEEL CAN ONLY BE OBTAINED THROUGH THIS PROCESS. I'VE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO SEPARATE PRINTMAKING FROM PHOTOGRAPHY FOR ME, NEITHER ONE MAKES SENSE WITHOUT THE OTHER. I'VE SPENT UPWARDS OF 100 HOURS ON ONE PRINT"

**MB** | *Do you think that a good print is a one-of-a-kind print?*

**MM** | *I think so. Some of the best prints I've ever seen were in no-way technically perfect, but they had a quality about them that was probably impossible to duplicate. I saw an Edward Weston print once that was so trashed it was almost ridiculous, but the feeling, the tone, and the dimension were incredible. I've also seen the same print in perfect condition and it just didn't have "that thing."*

**MB** | *What's next for you? What projects are you working on and when can we expect to see the result?*

**MM** | *I'm always working on new projects. I have a problem stopping, so I'm constantly producing new work. I think the longest period I have ever stopped this for over the past 20 years was for about three days, so I'm not sure what to expect. I try to explore every new idea I have. Sometimes, you fall flat on your face, and other times, you feel as if you're almost where you should be.*