

INTERVIEW: JEANNETTE MONTGOMERY BARRON



Moira Dryer, 1989. Photograph © Jeannette Montgomery Barron.

James Barron: How did this photograph come about?

Jeannette Montgomery Barron: It was an assignment for *Vanity Fair*. Elisabeth Biondi was the director of photography at *Vanity Fair* and later went on to the *New Yorker*. She called me and asked if I could photograph Moira Dryer. It was 1989. Then, you would go meet the subject, take some Polaroids and go back to speak with the photo editor. So, I visited Moira's studio, took the Polaroids, and returned to meet with Elisabeth, who gave me some instruction. I went back downtown to Moira's studio, took the pictures, had a great time with her.

JB: What did you talk about?

JMB: I don't remember exactly, but I always try to put my subject at ease with some small talk.

JB: Where was *Vanity Fair* located?

JMB: In the Conde Nast building, 350 Madison Avenue.

JB: Did you have to turn over the Polaroids to *Vanity Fair*?

JMB: Yes. I don't have them. Back then, with magazines, you took the film to be developed and you got two sets of contact sheets. One set I handed over to *Vanity Fair*. When I brought them to Elisabeth, she said, "Moira looks so different from when you took the Polaroids...what is it?" We discovered that she was wearing a wig in the second sitting. She was undergoing chemotherapy.

JB: In the first visit, did you know that she was sick?

JMB: No.

JB: What was your impression of her?

JMB: Just kind of a quiet, gentle person. At least, she was that way with me.

JB: I am looking at Moira's hands in the photo. She looks like a very strong, physical woman.

JMB: — I'm looking at the contact sheet from *Vanity Fair* that Elisabeth marked up and it says "Jeannette's choice." That's the one we chose. Interesting, *Vanity Fair* went with my choice.

JB: Looking back at these contact sheets after 31 years, I'm wondering if there's another image that you would consider printing if you were to do a contemporary print?

JMB: There are several other photographs that show her personality and her strength.

JB: How long were you at her studio?

JMB: An hour or so.

JB: And you tried several different set ups in different locations in her studio.

JMB: Yes. That's usually the way I did it. I would go through several set ups, because if you're working for a magazine you have to give them some options.

JB: Did you photograph her with natural light?

JMB: I think so. I might have brought a Tota-Light, which I worked with a lot. She was in a loft, so I wasn't sure how much natural light there would be at that time of the day.

JB: What was the atmosphere at the loft? Was it ordered? Was it disordered? Did she have a lot of paintings going at once?

JMB: I don't remember. It becomes a blur sometimes because I am so focused on getting the photograph that I don't take in a lot of other information.

JB: How much time is it from when you walk in until you start to set up the photo?

JMB: Almost immediately. I walk in and I start setting up. I use that time to chat with the person. To help put them at ease, to loosen them up a bit hopefully.

JB: How would you characterize the photo you selected?

JMB: She looks almost fearless, the way her arm is placed. There is something strong about her pose.

JB: She is clutching the chair pretty tightly. The chair almost looks like the steering wheel on a ship.

JMB: I'm looking at her other hand, on her face...the half-hidden mouth.

JB: Did you send the picture to Moira after? Did you ever hear what she thought?

JMB: I would usually give a copy of the photograph to the subject.

JB: Did you know about her family being mathematical?

JMB: No.

JB: I did an interview with her family, and both parents were brilliant. Her mother was an architect and her father a professor of philosophy. They were in Panama and noticed that a wave seemed to be standing as it moved past a concrete pier. I can't remember the details, but they were involved in the mathematics of what is called a 'standing wave.' I have often thought that a standing wave is part of Moira's art, like in *EKG* or some of the paintings that have the sensation of a standing wave.

JMB: James, you know I've never understood math.

JB: How did you feel when you heard about Moira's death?

JMB: Sad, because she was so young.

JB: I believe she would've continued making amazing paintings, even today.

JMB: It makes me think about Mapplethorpe, Basquiat, Haring... What kind of work would they have made?

JBA: Warhol too?

JMB: Warhol less so. He had kind of said everything already. I think about the young ones.

JB: It's interesting looking back at your photographs from that period. It's a snapshot of a moment in time, and there's a fair amount of tragedy.

JMB: That's life.

James D. Barron
South Kent, Connecticut, May 2020