

INTERVIEW: JEANNETTE MONTGOMERY BARRON

James Barron: When did you take your first mirror photo?

Jeannette Montgomery Barron: In 1991, in our bathroom in Connecticut. It was after the death of a friend from AIDS, back when I was shooting in film. I developed the film and got the contacts back, and I wasn't really sure what to make of the photograph. I showed it to you, James, and you said, "You've got something there. Keep going." So I did, and I just became obsessed with photographing mirrors. You bought me that mirror, and I have four mirrors now. We found them along the way. It's like a little family of mirrors. I continued until 2003, when we moved to Rome. I took a few pictures in Rome, in color. I didn't know where to go from there. I stopped, and didn't pick up photographing mirrors again until 2014, when we moved back to Connecticut.

JB: Do you see the mirrors as personas?

JMB: Yes. I see them as self-portraits.

JB: All of them as self-portraits? Or do you sometimes embody other people, other moods?

JMB: Yes, I do. They can't always be me, but for instance, with the new red mirrors, it was a rainy day, and I had to get out of a bad mood. I was very inspired by two artworks that we have in our big studio barn, a red Olitski and a red Wolfgang Tillmans.

I saw those two red pieces, I started reading about the meaning and connotations of red: it's power, there is a force to red. I thought, "I've got to play around with this color." I've never really photographed with strong colors. Then the orange one came about, and other kind of electric colors. Some of the red mirrors came out of mistakes. I did a double exposure by mistake, and it led into a whole new series.

JB: You seem to be most comfortable when you have a finite language to work with. We've seen it with *My Mother's Clothes*, with your portraits of artists and writers, with the black and white mirrors, and now with the color mirrors as well. Could you talk about the feeling of not having infinite possibilities?

JMB: In life, I am the same way. I am more comfortable when I don't have too many options. Too many clothes, too many choices of what to eat: I can't deal with that. This is my discipline, and I can handle that.

JB: How long does it usually take until you understand you have a series? When you are in the series, is there ever a feeling of worry about when the series will end? How do you know it's going to end?

JMB: People told me, "You're done with the mirrors." That was 2001. But I did take a break from them, and maybe that's important. It's sad to think of a series coming to an end, and maybe it doesn't have to. It morphs into something else.

JB: Do you think about your audience when you're in the midst of a series?

JMB: I think anybody who is making work is thinking, "Who's my audience going to be?" I don't know anybody who doesn't think that way. I'm certainly that way.

JB: It's not even that it's rare that you are reflected in the mirror, it's non-existent. Have you ever thought about actually photographing yourself?

JMB: I did, and I didn't like it. I immediately stopped. I did that early on: parts of my face, my hand. That's not what I am going for. I'm going for minimal, for stillness.

JB: Is there one mood that permeates many of the Mirrors?

JMB: I think it's melancholy, which I have. When I am in a moment, I am already thinking of it in the past.

JB: Are there artists that you think of in relation to the Mirrors?

JMB: Yes. Rothko was probably my first inspiration, one of the first artists that turned my head around and made me see differently. Sugimoto – I think of his seascapes, his movie theaters, his wax figures. Robert Ryman. I like Tillmans. With the black and white mirrors, I was looking at the Bechers, and how they were obsessed with the water towers they photographed. They just kept doing it. It was an inspiration for me, in the way that they even showed them: in grids, in series. They hang them all together. I love that. I really have to say that the artist I am always thinking about is Rothko.

JB: When did you first see Rothko's work?

JMB: In 1974 or 1975, at the Phillips in Georgetown. My mother took me. It was a revelation for me.

JB: That is a great room of Rothko, it's underrated. People talk about the Rothko Chapel and other great Rothko rooms, at the Tate, for example. Nobody really talks about that room at the Phillips.

JMB: I need to go back. I haven't been back since.

JB: Rothko brings out the Russian Jew in you?

JMB: *(laughter)* Rothko brings out the melancholy in me.

JB: How do you see your work relating to Laura's?

JMB: It's about stillness and meditation. Trying to distill this beautiful moment. Laura must have these moments when she is on the water, looking at the light reflecting from the water, and she's distilling that moment. I have those moments too, both in nature and in the studio. Now I am photographing mostly in the studio, sometimes using artificial light and sometimes using natural light.

JB: What's the quality you like best about Laura's work?

JMB: It makes me feel calm.

JB: They are sort of like talismans, something you have that prompts a mood but also makes you aspire to that state. Do you feel that is the same with your Mirror photographs?

JMB: I do. I hope that is how people feel about them.