

## **Our Sense of Self and the Chaos of our Strongest Feelings**

*An Interview with Em Rooney by Emile Rubino*

### **Emile Rubino**

I first saw your work when I was studying in NYC and I remember getting really excited by the very particular relationship it devised between photography and sculpture/object-making.

While the various approaches I had seen over the past few years seemed concerned with the dematerialization of images. Your approach felt like it either came from a different place, or just didn't really need to keep asking the same questions anymore. I was wondering what your thoughts on this would be?

### **Em Rooney**

Huh, the dematerialization of images, I wonder whose work you're referring to? Sometimes I think this is really beautiful. The first work that comes to mind is a show of photographs by John Neff I saw at Golden Gallery, which used to be in the Lower East Side but hasn't existed for several years now. It was a group of photographs, if I remember correctly, that he had taken with a scanner hooked up to a large format camera, and the prints were fuzzy and hard to see with a lot of noise and interference, but they were also of the home, flowers, nudes... There was a pdf that you could download for free on their website, to own all of the images of the exhibition—which I guess is a type of dematerialization or a hacked rematerialization. Either way, I loved it. But I somehow think that might not be exactly what you were thinking about.

I am definitely interested in the rematerialization of images. It's almost dull how simple my thinking is about it—I make photographs, mainly in a vernacular way, because that is the way I want my photographs to exist. I'm borderline technophobic. I use inkjet printers to make color prints because they are much more accessible, but I really miss printing in the color darkroom because of the physical aspect of it. The sounds, the smells, the darkness, how when the color is wrong the print still looks so beautiful, and the way the paper holds the smell of the chemistry. It's not nostalgic. I actually feel like most technologies (especially visual ones) are poison, and photographs for me have always been personal—and not that they're always relating to my personal life, but they have personal value and meaning and significance. They are a unique unto themselves. And I don't want to think about them or any of my work in relationship to corporate technologies. I don't want their only home to be as data behind a screen. Data, even the word, to me is nefarious.

As I write this, I am looking across the room at a 9x7" photograph of my friends Lydia and Elizabeth on a perfectly sized custom shelf. It's a UV print on aluminum, and therefore it required technology to be created, and I love it nonetheless. But I guess what happens is that it still gets to be an object, and my primary interest is in objects. (Not that photography hasn't utilized technology to great ends for a very long time, it's just not where my interest in the medium lays.)



Em Rooney, *Jesus Is Thomed (5)*, 2018  
Walnut, pewter, UV print on aluminum  
19.75 x 15 in (50.2 x 38.1 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Bodega

**Emile**

I guess what I had in mind with “the dematerialisation of images...” was roughly akin to the curatorial framework used for the *Ocean of Images* New Photography exhibition at MoMA in 2016. The inclusion of your work in the following 2018 edition *Being* just made a lot of sense to me because your take on object-making felt liberated from these sets of questions directly related to the “digital flow of images...”, hence opening up some space to think and talk about other things too.

I didn't know this work by John Neff! I just looked it up and they are really beautiful, especially the portraits, they remind me of your hand-colored photographs from 2016. As pictures, I find they have the same kind of thoughtful intimacy.

This intimacy is something I really love about your work. When I was listening to the interview you recently gave for WYBCX Yale Radio, I was really interested to hear you discuss your approach to making work as gift editions. It also reminded me that while talking to a friend of mine, we kept making parallels between Moyra Davey's practice and your work, even though yours is much more materially involved. But we thought that the literary quality of her work is something we also found in yours. This parallel, which I really liked was then furthered for me when I started thinking that your gift editions were perhaps a bit like 'more material' versions of Davey's folded photographs that she sends through the mail.

I was hoping you could tell me more about the gift aspect of your recent works. What role do you think it occupies as a mode of making, and as a way to create community through a kind of casual “gift economy” etc? Also curious to know what you think about this parallel with Moyra Davey?

**Em**

How do we ever get around thinking about the digital flow of images? Even as we try to think about other things our conversation about my photographs is still attached to that dialectic. But Moyra Davey does get around it, and I think it might have something to do with her work developing before conversations around the internet and art production dominated.

I love her work so much. It's funny because I've assigned her texts several times, and looked at her work with my students over the years, and they don't get it. I might venture to say they hate it even. Which always makes me feel like I'm failing as a teacher or that these terrible devices we carry around and depend on have shortened our attention span to such a degree that really bright people and students who otherwise would display curiosity and a desire to excavate meaning from things they don't understand, instead are bored and dismissive. They always see Davey's work as a closed feedback loop: why make art about art about art for artists? Unsurprisingly the same thing happens when I try to show them Sherrie Levine's *After August Sander* project. The takeaway, more generally, is that as a culture (and I think this is specifically an American issue) we don't value art and real creative production or the production of ideas without describable use value. And artists who commit themselves to this value—that artistic production (and the struggles therein) can itself be content—are written off as navel gazers, especially when they're women. Davey dives deep into that cycle, especially in her video and written works, she complicates it and gives it added meaning by drawing connections between her life and the lives of the other artists, poets and writers she is making work for or to.

So yes, she has been a model for me and I'm flattered that you've made a connection between my work and hers.

I hope my work has the time and space to achieve such depth.

I'm not so sure the work I'm making "creates community" or even refers to a gift economy, which is something I think is very tied to the internet.

I think there are other things that I do, and try to do that build community much more—like a project my partner Chris Domenick and I are running out of a shack in our backyard called Gertrude. Artists come and make projects, stay with us, bring their friends, and we all cook, and it is very community building. So has been working on writing projects with other artists, towards their shows, which I've done many times over the years. So too, is being with friends when they install their work, hanging around getting coffees, talking about all the possibilities and taking time with the work, putting completely out of our minds what is for sale. Doing studio visits. Going to people's openings and telling them—later—how you feel about the show. Those things build community.

I'm not so sure this gift project does. I guess I like that it could be situated within that historical context alongside Lutz Bacher, and Julie Ault, and Moyra Davey but I'm not so sure. I don't know if objects can build community the way they once did, there is a false sense of community that we all rely on through social media, and then there is showing up and being a body, and I think the possibilities in between are now, quite limited.

Weirdly, I think before it became a show, and when it was just some one-off pieces here and there, it felt more spontaneous and truly about the gift. In, *You Too Know That You Live*, the gift giving component became more of an opportunity for me to make the sculptures I wanted to make, while still having them relate to the semantic (like a photograph)—as containers for gifts, and elaborate jewelry

boxes. And also, as Nancy Lupo alluded to, I think rightly in her press release, the gifts in some cases become a way of exercising or processing humiliation. That is maybe a little complicated to unpack and this answer is already getting quite long. But yes, to bring it full circle, there is this inward look at my own creative practice and how it is informed by others, in my community and right outside of it. For instance the quilt piece in that show, was made for RJ (all of the gift objects are doubles, or multiples so her quilt exists in the gallery space as a re-creation of a second quilt that was made and actually given to her). RJ Messineo is a close friend and a painter whose work I love. She made a painting last year that referenced a quilt and we talked about how amazing a show of her paintings with Zoe Leonard's quilt collection would be. So in making that piece I'm shouting out to RJ, to Zoe, and to Eva Hesse from whom I borrowed the g dome structure that both penetrates and holds the quilt.

### **Emile**

Thanks for this amazing answer, it touches upon many things I hope we get to discuss later on, but first, I'd like to talk about teaching.

It's interesting to hear about your student's complicated relationship to Moyra Davey's work because I remember also having a hard time with her work at first. She had a show at the gallery I interned at during my undergrad in Vancouver and I just couldn't get into her work at all back then. It took me some time and now I love it unconditionally. Im sure you are doing an amazing job as a teacher and some of your students will probably look back at the material you provided and find interest in it later on.

In your show in Amsterdam there is this picture called *Students with Urn Pendants* (2019), which is this pretty straightforward picture of a group of students wearing these urn-shaped pendants. I find that picture seems

to encapsulate many aspects your work at once. Can you tell me a bit more about this work and the Urn pendants? And perhaps you could elaborate on the connections between teaching and your practice in light of the aforementioned idea of the gift, community and intimacy?

**Em**

This photograph was the first photograph I ever made with an 8x10 camera, I was so excited when it came out like this, so perfect with the dull colors and the late morning fog. The kids in the photograph were in a class I taught during my first year at Simon's Rock. It was a class called Seminar, which goes on rotation among faculty, and is an introduction into humanities. So we read a classic work of fiction, non-fiction, theory, theater, looked at a film and a painting, one of each, as the primary texts of the class. I had to teach Plato's dialogues, which I had only read one of many years ago in a literature class I took at San Francisco community college in 2006—so it was hard for me, but they loved it. We had amazing debates about logic, and the existence of the soul, and then I asked them to help me design a pendant in response to Phaedo. Someone drew an anatomical heart which reminded me of canopic urns used by ancient Egyptians to preserve organs in the afterlife, and from there reminded me of the metaphor of the urn that reoccurs in different ways in Socratic dialogs. Its etymology is linked to foolishness because *pithos* is the greek for urn, and *pithanon* means persuadable—and so already the connection is there, but he elaborates that the leaky urn is a metaphor for an unwise and unhappy man, and that the urn of a man with a full mind and soul doesn't leak. Anyway, so I turned my student's heart drawing into an urn and they decided to inscribe it with the words "breath/breadth" because we meditated at the start of every class and because of the breadth of the material we had covered. I led their orientation so we had a special relationship. They were my first students of my first full-time teaching

job, I was their first professor, and we were all reading and discussing this material for the first time. I told them about my jewelry project, and they all seemed extremely proud and happy (especially for teenagers) that I had made them all this heavy piece of jewelry that we designed together. I love that photograph. It's not for sale, it's just for me. Teaching informs my practice less than it is a natural extension of it. I love being around people, sharing ideas with them, and collaborating. And that's basically what teaching is, and my students are really smart and special.

I also liked the idea of doing a larger edition, and the only way it would work conceptually was if I made it for my class, because at any given point in time my class is the largest community I am a part of. Although I am making rings for everyone I was with at MacDowell Colony this summer (or I will once this insane fall has chilled out a little bit). I have also been excited about photographing younger people lately. I always really loved Rineke Dijkstra's photographs of young teens, and now that I am quite far from my teenage years, I see younger people and children with a certain awkwardness and latency that is so beautiful, complex and unresolved. Last year for Liste I made a series of photographs and a video of RJ's daughter Helen, and I feel similarly about those.

**Emile**

I love these photographs by Rineke Dijkstra too! A few months ago I saw a small show with some of these pictures at Jan Mot in Brussels. I hadn't thought about these photos for some time and I was amazed by how 'fresh' they looked even though I have known them for a while. The way they depict teenagers' intense state of oscillation between power and vulnerability remains so striking. Talking about this actually brings to mind the great Audre Lorde quote from *Uses of the Erotics* that Nancy Lupo included in the text she wrote



Em Rooney, *Pilate Condemns (4)*, 2018  
Walnut, pewter, UV print on aluminum  
20 x 14.75 in (50.8 x 37.5 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Bodega



Em Rooney, *Students with Urn Pendants*, 2019,  
Digital C-Print, cast pewter frame, walnut, glass  
19,7 x 25,4 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Fons Welters

for your show at Fons Welters. “The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings.” I feel like this quote also does a weirdly good job at describing the state of teenagehood—a moment where one is just starting to figure out the kind of internal satisfaction that Lorde talks about as being the key to using the erotic as an empowering tool in life.

Also in *Uses of the Erotics*, Lorde talks about how, “...it has become fashionable to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory and antithetical.”

Thinking about the history of photography, this seems especially true. It seems to me for instance, that documentary and ‘aura photography’ never really get to cohabitate much! In your work, and especially in your series *Ordinary Time*, composed of sixteen frames presented like an out of order Stations of the Cross, you develop a specific relationship to spirituality and I think you successfully make the spiritual and the political work together. I hope it’s not too broad if I ask you to how you perceive the role of spirituality in this body of work and in the rest of your practice?

### **Em**

This is a great question, and I have some answers to it formulating in my head right now.

I live in the country—I can’t remember if that’s come up already or not—but the power is out right now because there was a big storm where I live, and branches and debris made a big mess on the property. I don’t have cell service, a landline, any power, lights, etc. I’m at the studio right now, where I have all of those things, but I need to be at home tending to the mess. I’m going to try to answer this question tonight in front of the fire, and send it to you tomorrow a.m. hopefully when the power is back on.

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Firstly, the role of spirituality, in *Ordinary Time*, is complicated or it’s sublimated into the larger premise of that work, which is about how Biblical, Western narrative tropes are. Our ideas about revenge, sacrifice, damnation, glory and redemption are all tied up in the stories of the Old and New Testament. There were also some direct references to Renaissance paintings, like *Jesus Is Thorned (5)*, which I made with Fra Angelico’s *Christ Crowned with Thorns* in mind. But mainly I selected the images and arranged them the same way I might on a timeline if I was making a video. In some ways, the series is like a montage. I was thinking about ambient narrative, stories around stories and B-roll. Pontius Pilate, in some interpretations, was a burdened judge, guilty with indecision when he condemned Jesus to death, so in *Pilate Condemns (4)* I see Pilate with his head tipped down, leaving the courthouse, I imagine his face filled with onus. When Jesus dies on the cross, the bible mentions a solar eclipse, so the 13th station, is a photograph of a dark sky with the sun barely perceptible behind the clouds, instead of an image of a corpse nailed to a cross. What is happening in the crowd while a primary (and violent) action is occurring? Or how can we envision contemporary moments of betrayal with nuance? Or care without sacrifice?

I don’t think *Ordinary Time* answered all of those questions but I thought about them. More than spirituality, I was thinking about narrative structures.

But yes, it’s in there. I was raised Catholic, and it’s apparently been hugely impactful. The symbolism, and images of and from the church inform the way I approach materials and photographs. But it is more complicated than that. I don’t know if I know how to put it into words.



I was recently reading Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*, and there is something in evil which resonated—even though I'm not sure if I've interpreted it correctly. Something about the proximity of goodness and evil. She writes "Good as the opposite of evil is, in a sense, equivalent to it, as is the way with all opposites." and then a little later "Good is essentially other than evil. Evil is multifarious and fragmentary, good is one, evil is apparent, good is mysterious; evil consists in action, good in non-action." When I read this I was thinking about the proximity of good and evil, and about evil in relationship to our political structure and to capitalism.

And this is where my thinking about Audre Lorde comes back in, and I hope this isn't totally convoluted. When she talks about the psychic and the emotional as separate from the political, I think about the psychic and emotional (or the erotic) as good, and the political as a constructed opposite, therefore necessarily close.

Our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings (why teenagers provide such a salient metaphor).

When we react (even though Weil says good is inactive) to things that illicit strong feelings—people, structures, spaces—we're exercising our spirituality, and our politics. And as art is innately reactive so too is it spiritual. And furthermore, I see a connection between the erotic and evil. This is what I think I was trying to say, very ham-fistedly, when lecturing on my work at Cranbrook in early 2018 I told the auditorium that watching right-wing politics and policy makers in action "makes me want to fuck." (facepalm) The linkage between politics and spirituality, even when both are challenged, requires an eroticism that isn't always about sex but definitely can be.

The thing of honoring people, and making altars, is something that comes in and out of

my practice when I need to touch down and find purpose. It's like a palate cleanser, there is always content in love and appreciation.

This thing about documentary and aura photography is interesting. I have never thought about it that way, but I guess you're right. I think I know what you mean. Although there is that thing of artists getting labeled and grouped without interest or consent. Even Cartier-Bresson never considered himself a documentary photographer or a photojournalist, he was a surrealist. And maybe here we come full circle back to Moyra Davey, and an interest in looking that can shift drastically based not only on what is expected of you, but also on what is happening in your life, what you're reading, looking at and thinking about. I think about Carrie Mae Weem's *Kitchen Table Series*, compared to her *Shape of Things* or Catherine Opie's *Icehouses* relative to *Portraits*. Aura photography, if it is what I think it is, seems like it would be meaningless if it wasn't connected to a body in politic. If that connection can't be made then who cares?

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This interview was conducted by email between September and November 2019.