

# double exposure

Spirit With a Sleight of Hand—An Interview with Bill Armstrong

By Robert A. Schaefer, Jr. | Apr 1, 2008

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*In 2000, I attended Fotofest in Houston, Texas, for the first time, and besides furthering my photography, I had the opportunity to meet other photographers, many of whom were from my city of New York. One of these was Bill Armstrong, whose colorful, abstract images were very popular. The Meeting Place where photographers had their reviews with gallerists and other people of the photo world was held at the Student Center of Rice University. Besides the interview room of the Meeting Place, there was a large public space where photographers were able to show their work. Bill Armstrong and I were often in this space showing our photographs and got to know each other during this time. Living in New York, we have kept up with one another since that time and recently saw each other at Martine Fougeron's opening. I had a chance to talk with him in depth about his work over dinner afterwards.*



**Robert Schaefer:** In describing your imagery, many people would call it "soft-focus." Is that how you would describe it?

**Bill Armstrong:** No, I don't think of my imagery as soft focus, in fact, I call it extreme blur to distinguish it from soft focus. My concern is not to make "soft" or impressionistic images of the real world, like the early pictorialist photographers, but to make de-materialized or ephemeral images that represent a completely different world—a spirit world, if you will, or a parallel universe. My images are made from collages of found images. The blur makes the edges of these collages disappear, so that the images appear to be "real" when, in fact, they're not. This sleight of hand is the magic that allows me to conjure illusions. I also use extreme blur to mix and blend colors, creating abstract color fields—I paint with blur the way Rothko painted with pigments.



**RS:** Tell me about your background. Were you interested in art as a child?

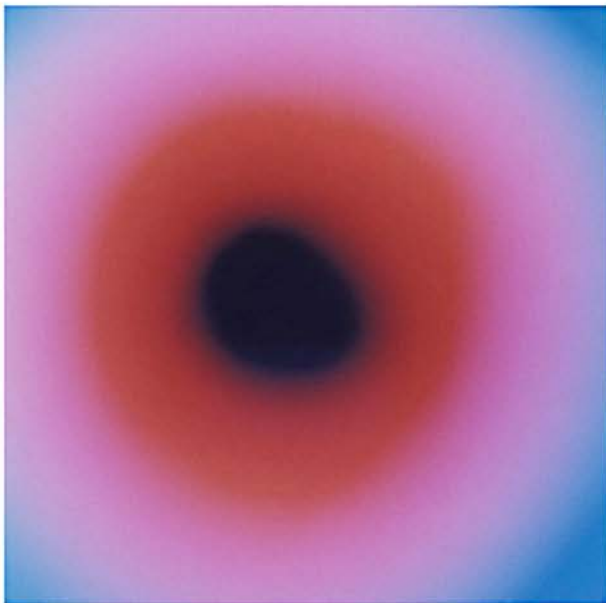
**BA:** I was born in Montreal, Canada in 1952 and moved at the age of five to Concord, Massachusetts. Although my childhood was mostly that of the suburban kid, Concord is imbued with history. The Revolutionary War began there and it was the home of Thoreau, Emerson and the Transcendentalist movement. In retrospect, the exposure to radical and philosophical thinking when I was young influenced me quite a bit. I wasn't interested in art as a child, however, even though my parents

both painted as a hobby. My dad was a Sunday landscape painter and my mom was quite inventive: she made abstract seascapes with spray paint. She passed away in 1967, when I was fourteen, and everything in my life changed. From the all-American kid, I became a hippie interested in eastern religion and psychology, reading Alan Watts and Carl Jung and the like. This, by the way, has found its way back into the metaphysical aspect of my imagery.

**RS:** What brought you to photography? Did you study it formally? Who were your teachers and which photographers or artists in other media have influenced your work?

**BA:** I studied art history at Boston University; however, this did not lead me into photography. In the summer of 1975, I went on a hiking expedition to South America. I took along my first camera, a Canon 35mm SLR loaded with Kodachrome, on the suggestion of my friend, Roger Farrington, a photographer best known for taking some of the last photographs of John Lennon. Upon my return and the development of the slides, I knew I had found my medium. Having studied art history, I was already looking at things differently than most photographers, and it was a big surprise for me to hear that photography was not supposed to have any relationship to painting! After graduating from college I lived in Cambridge, MA, where I did some commercial work and photojournalism while working in restaurants waiting on tables. In about 1980, I began shooting collages of torn posters found on the street in the vein of Aaron Siskind. Beyond Siskind, my influences were often broader than photography: Rimbaud, Rauschenberg and Bob Dylan were some of my heroes.

My whole life changed when I was on a skiing vacation in Alta, Utah and met the woman who would eventually become my wife. I moved to New York City to be with her in 1989. In my first years in New York, I didn't do much photography, but starting in 1993, I took color printing classes at the International Center of Photography with Audrey Bernstein and then Linda Hackett, two great teachers. This brought me totally back into photography, and I started shooting posters on the street again.



**RS:** How did you get into your current imagery?

**BA:** When I saw Uta Barth's out of focus work at the Museum of Modern Art in 1995, it interested me. One day, while framing a shot of a poster, I threw my lens out of focus and really liked the result. Soon I came to the realization that there was no need to walk all over town looking for "found" images, since I was manipulating them by shooting them out of focus. I began creating images in my studio from magazines

**RS:** In his introduction to your Renaissance catalogue, the New York-based collector, curator and gallerist, W. M. Hunt, mentions that your figures go beyond the frozen Motion Studies of Edward Muybridge into another dimension, thereby liberating your figures from the photographic plane. Has this been an objective of your imagery?

**BA:** The creation of an illusion of depth is a direct result of my process, but it is somewhat serendipitous. I certainly like the outcome when it happens, so I could say that it is an objective, at least indirectly. And if he means that the images are liberated from the material plane, well, certainly that's my objective!

**RS:** Hunt also says that your colors are harder to decode. In my first question of the interview, you sight these colors as one of the reasons that your work is not pictorial, but abstract. How did you decide on the color relationships of your images?

**BA:** I make my images quickly, sorting through different color combinations until I see one I like. There's a spontaneous, trance-like aspect to the process, so it becomes "gestural," reflecting my feelings at the moment. Often I'll come back to an unfinished shoot the next day and find that different color patterns appeal to me. My process is quite intuitive, but at the same time, I keep the principles of color theory in the background.

**RS:** Does your direction of photography say anything about your own personality? What might that be?

**BA:** As I mentioned earlier, my work incorporates a lot of my interests as a young man in philosophy, psychology and eastern religion. I suppose you could say it's all part of a rather loose spiritual quest, an attempt to express something about the human condition. Someone once said that I'm trying to photograph the human soul. I like that idea.

**RS:** Do you ever take any photographs that are totally in focus? If so, when do you shoot such images?

**BA:** I take pictures of my daughter, which I hope are in focus, and various vacation snapshots.

**RS:** You currently teach at the International Center of Photography as well as the School of Visual Arts. Please talk about your classes there. Do you find that working with students enhances your own work, or does it take time away from it?

**BA:** I teach Color Printing from Negatives at the International Center of Photography, which I enjoy very much. It gets me out of the house and away from my own thoughts, which is a good thing. It's an adult education class, and many of my students are good photographers, so the dialogue is often on a high level. At SVA, I teach a course I've developed called Principles of Color for

Photographers. We study color theorists such as M.E. Chevreul, Johannes Itten and Josef Albers, and we look at the work of colorist photographers like Alex Webb, Steve McCurry, Andrew Moore, Nan Goldin and Greg Crewdson, among many others. I occasionally teach the course at ICP, too.

**RS:** Where do you see your work going in the future?

**BA:** Although I have been exploring my current direction in photography for ten years, I still have a lot of ideas I want to realize. Right now, I'm continuing working with Renaissance imagery, but in a different way. I'm also making new Mandalas in preparation for an upcoming show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I foresee making a new body of work using Eastern imagery in the next year or two. And I've got a few more ideas brewing. I tend to have more ideas than time to realize them, at least so far, knock on wood.

**RS:** I look forward to seeing them.

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