

# LOIS GREENFIELD

*An Exclusive Interview*

By Anastasia Tsyapkina



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## LOIS GREENFIELD *Moving Still*

Lois Greenfield, one of the most influential photographers in all time, developed a unique approach to photographing the human form in motion and redefined the genre of dance photography and transcended its limitations. For the last 40 years, Greenfield has explored movement and its expressive potential in dynamic photos of dancers frozen in split seconds of extraordinary motion. Her dynamic development over the years can be seen in her shift to colour photography and from shooting with a film camera to a digital camera.

Lois Greenfield became a legend thanks to her strong contribution to the exploration of the expressive possibilities of photographed movement. Her unique approach to photographing the human

form in motion has radically redefined the genre and influenced a generation of photographers and will continue to influence the generations to come.

Lois Greenfield's work can be found in many international museums and private collections around the globe including The National Museum of Dance, Saratoga Springs, NY, Musée de l'Élysée, Lausanne, Switzerland, The International Center of Photography, NYC and many more.

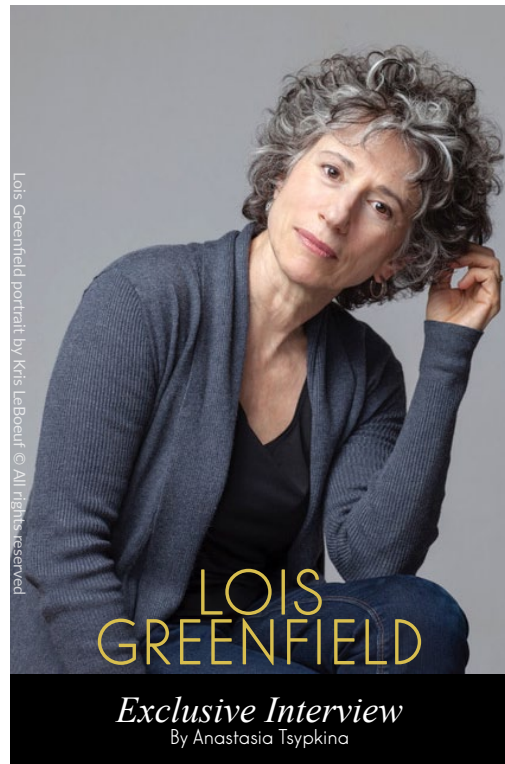
In 2016 she received a Lifetime Achievement Award by McCallum Theatre Institute, and in 2015, she received the Dance in Focus Award by the Dance Films Association.

Greenfield published several books

including "Lois Greenfield: Moving Still", 2015 (Text by William A. Ewing. Thames & Hudson, Ltd. UK), Airborne: The New Dance Photography of Lois Greenfield, 1998 (Text by William A. Ewing. Thames & Hudson, Ltd. UK), Breaking Bounds: The Dance Photography of Lois Greenfield, 1992 (Text by William Ewing, Thames & Hudson, Ltd. UK & France).

Since her first show at New York City's International Center of Photography in 1992, her work has been exhibited in many museums and galleries, such as the Tel Aviv Art Museum, Israel; the Venice Biennale, Italy; the Musée de l'Élysée, Switzerland; the Erarta Contemporary Art Museum, Russia; and the Southeast Museum of Photography, Florida.





**Anastasia Tsyapkina** : Please tell our readers when did you start your career and how it turned out that you've become one of the most inspiring and influential dance photographer?

**Lois Greenfield**: So much in life happens by chance, just like my photographs! When I was 14 years old I spent a summer on an Apache indigenous community in Arizona and took photos with my Brownie camera. From that experience I got interested in studying anthropology, which became my major at University. But my interest in photography grew with my studies and my dream was to be either an ethnographic filmmaker or a photographer for National Geographic magazine, chronicling indigenous cultures.

Neither of those dreams happened. Instead, I started working as a photojournalist in Boston when I graduated from college, and after being assigned to shoot dance concerts I realized that I was more drawn to the graphic potential of dance photography than photojournalism which required the photos to tell a definite story.

I was still more interested in photography than dance, so I wanted to create a hybrid into which I would merge the two very different art forms. Rather than photographing moments that are

visible to the theater audience, I wanted to have my pictures capture fleeting moments that could only be seen as a photograph. I was shooting for the Village Voice, NY Times, and other magazines from the mid 70's to the mid 90's. Not wanting to capture choreographed movements that could be seen on the stage, I started shooting in a photography studio with Broncolor strobes and creating unique compositions for my square format Hasselblad camera. This was considered radical at the time, especially since my square frame often rearranged their positions and cropped off dancers' limbs!

So that is how it all began, and my two books from the 90's, *Breaking Bounds* and *Airborne*, codified that style. Since I had veered away from literal choreography and asked the dancers to improvise for the camera, doing non-repeatable high-risk moments. This gave the dancers the opportunity to experiment with how their bodies moved independently of choreography. Shooting at 1/2000 of a second produced moments that were beneath the threshold of perception.

So that was how my photographic style developed. My two newest series, illustrated in this article, "Reflected Moments" and "Moving

Still", which is the title of my newest book "Lois Greenfield: Moving Still" are also products of improvisation.

**Anastasia Tsyapkina** Tell us about your childhood, did you grow up in an artistic environment? (Classical music, dancing, art)?

**Lois Greenfield**: I did not grow up in an artistic environment. My parents were first generation immigrants from Eastern Europe. Back then, there wasn't much expectation for girls to have a career, but they were very supportive of my interests and proud of my accomplishments.

**Anastasia Tsyapkina** : Have you ever thought of an idea to change your professional direction? I mean, a photo is just one moment, barely seen with a naked eye, while the video making lets you capture hundreds of those moments going one after another. That is something what we imagine by saying "movement" or "dancing" - continuous frame change...

**Lois Greenfield**: The videos show us continuous time, as it is lived or experienced, whereas the photo stops the action for all time. So instead of seeing the continuous flow of the dance as experienced on the stage or in film, the photographs I take at 1/2000 second flash duration reveal an otherwise imperceptible moment that is beneath the threshold of



Kimberly Lyons, Shannon MacDowell © Lois Greenfield. All Rights Reserved

human perception as the naked eye cannot see a slice of time that thin. The resulting image can look surreal because the viewer may conflate the time spent looking at the photo with the duration of the event.

I am interested in the spontaneous act of creating images without forethought. I know many artists start with an idea in mind and then they put it on paper. I don't work this way. I may have a starting point, which is in the form of a question that begins with "What if..." or a directive- "let's try that..." Frankly, if I knew what the finished picture would look like I wouldn't bother to make the picture, as my interest in this process is to get beyond my imagination, not document an already formulated idea.

The point is never to have the viewer figure out what is going on in the photo, but just to present the mystery of that instant.

**Anastasia Tsyapkina** : Sometimes in your works I guess Michelangelo or Bernini, or Renaissance's language speaking about glory to a man and its beauty. Are you inspired by great artists? What does inspire you in today's world?

**Lois Greenfield**: Yes, I have been inspired by Michelangelo, Bernini and others. During my college years, I spent a semester in Florence and must have absorbed the art I was surrounded by. In Michelangelo I saw both strength and grace, in Bernini I saw passion and mythology. Sculptures taught me that when photographing dancers, it is important to look at their movements from all sides, not just the perspective of the dance that is visible on the stage. I like to think of my photos as split-second sculptures.

**Anastasia Tsyapkina** : Let's talk about the collaboration with the Australian Dance Theatre from 2003 to 2007, You created "HELD", a dance inspired by your photography, you were on stage shooting the live action while the images

were projected real-time as part of the performance. That's a very impressive idea to combine the both artistic fields in a real time, live in front of the audience. It's a different way of work than in the studio, maybe stressful?

**Lois Greenfield**: It started with a photo shoot in Adelaide, Australia. Working in my usual way, I created photos based on the choreographer's ballistic moves. Those photographed movements were then embedded into the choreography so that I, standing on the stage shooting the dance, could pluck them out. There were two banks of my strobe lights on each side of the stage, firing every time I took a shot. All 250 or so photos that I took each evening were projected within seconds - unedited! - On two large screens on the stage. In some scenes, I didn't shoot the action per se, instead I took extreme closeups of the entwine bodies, or stroboscopic visions of dancers with multiple limbs. In the final scene, I shot from the back of the stage to show the reverse angle of what the audience saw.

The audience could see the afterimage on the flash, previewing the shot the moment after I took it. Among the many things I loved about the show was the concept that I was plucking a split-second out of the flux, giving that moment the solidity of a photograph by screening it for 10 seconds, and then it was gone.

It was like catching a fish, then throwing it back in the water...

**Anastasia Tsyapkina** : What methods or technics do you regularly use for editing photos?

**Lois Greenfield**: I don't do a lot of retouching, just color correction. I don't combine different negatives. All the photos are a single, in the camera frame.

**Anastasia Tsyapkina** : Wouldn't you like to experience with the process of photo shooting by going out from the studio "en plein air" or shooting dancers with moving animals, flying birds?



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Natalie Deryn Johnson © Lois Greenfield. All Rights Reserved



Peiju Chien-Pott © Lois Greenfield. All Rights Reserved

**Lois Greenfield:** My work is not only about movement; it's about the enigmatic moment and the poetic gesture and the mystery hiding in the split-second.

**Anastasia Tsypkina :** You are also doing special Workshops for emerging photographers, such as at the International Center of Photography, NYC, University of the Arts in Philadelphia and at the Les Rencontres de la Photographie, Arles, France. What is your impression from this new "Digital" generation of photographers?

**Lois Greenfield:** During the workshops that I give in my NYC studio the photographers learn to shoot with my old-fashioned method of shooting one photo at a time on my manual Hasselblad camera, now fitted with a digital back, that I have since the 1980's. There is no continuous action function or auto focus on the camera.

I pre-focus and make sure that the dancers are in the right spots when we shoot. We shoot one frame at a time, regroup, and shoot again, letting the dancers explore the potential of different movements, and we adjust our lighting according. Every now and then we look at the monitor and invite the dancers into the creative process, as I like to bring out their unique way of moving rather than telling them what to do, or have them do standard choreographed poses.

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*I'm fascinated by photography's ability to defy logic and gravity, to stop time and reveal what the naked eye cannot see.*  
*The ostensible subject of my body of work may be movement, but the subtext is time.*  
 - Lois Greenfield ”



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LOIS GREENFIELD  
 Moving Still

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