

Movement: From One Side of the Picture to the Other

Danielle St-Amoure interviews Elena Willis

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- Elena Willis

Elena Willis, *Conversations*



The dark can be anything, for myself as the artist and for the viewer.” Montreal photographer Elena Willis sits over coffee. She’s talking about interpretation, about the stark yet dreamlike movement in her new, highly stylized photographs, and about dreams in general and her relationship to them. “I see dreams as a portal to freedom from restrictions and restraints,” she says, “and although dream imagery can be interpreted in many different ways, I believe that if the dreamer searches deep enough, they will find the single most important meaning of their dream.”

The same process is required for interpretation of Elena’s work. Three days ago, select patrons had the chance to view her newest collection of work at Galerie D’Este, a gallery in Westmount also home to a Dali sculpture; works by Montreal’s Jean-Paul Riopelle; and work by a small roster of other Surrealist artists. Willis’s offering consists of eight large works united by an ominous darkness. Compared to the busy and complex imagery of the older surrealist works, her images appeared stark: large black spaces with minimal intervention.

The vernissage attendees huddled in close to the pieces, their inquisitive faces mirrored in the highly reflective glass. Moving so close was necessary to the experience, as each step brought into clearer focus the subject matter of each piece: a long chain of faces, seemingly lamplit; a serene midnight traffic jam with the moon hung in the back corner; and bodies engulfed in oil. There is a striking starkness to these images, their stripped-down austerity. While many of the images are populated with people, the black background is ultimately the central focus. Placed behind a layer of reflective glass, the images force viewers into an intensive search. Against the dark black background, the images became iconographic, a mediated dream state, uninterrupted and open to viewer interpretation. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the faces reflected in the glass, personalizing each work for each individual viewer.

The pieces and the viewers' reflections became almost sculptural in twain: both an intervention and projection, convergence.

When speaking about the open-ended narrative of her images, Willis ends up on the topic of artist statements, and art historians. "Is it really so important to have the artist behind you saying this is how to view this, this is what this means?" She asks.

Originating as an attempt to unshackle subjectivity from the formality of Bourgeoisie European etiquette, Surrealism endeavored to produce democratic representations of new ways to approach or encounter the unknown. Surrealist writings and imagery advanced the process of how to articulate the limits of what was—and what wasn't—representable, by opening a door to the unconscious. With years of critique and acclimatization, the works of its forefathers, such as Dali and Rene Magritte, have slowly made their way into the vocabulary of popular culture, bridging a gap between didactic academia and democratic social narrative.

Elena Willis works within a new manifestation of this vocabulary, occupying a space slightly adjacent to historic Surrealism. Her early work dealt more directly with dream imagery, articulated through a relationship with nature. These situations appeared constructed, yet with a minimum of intervention. A couple swimming in a pond, a forest, a group of people standing about, all depict the complex relationship of people communing with nature, constructed yet undirected, as if alienated by their own expectations and fantasies.

Willis's current exhibition covers a number of situations depicting a strange allegory of the present. "Most importantly" Willis describes, "I want to convey that regardless of whatever the principle subject matter is in my images, there is always something much larger and more powerful around us. I think that the blackness and nature opens the possibility and space to feel that mystery".

Elena's piece, "Ensuring uniformity" depicts that mystery clearly. Waiting in a traffic jam, or participating in the daily chain of commuters is, on the surface, an invariably banal situation. But stripped of context, against a black background,



Elena Willis, *A Side Effect*



Elena Willis, *In a Beautiful Place*

it's the underpinning why and how through which Willis frames her images so well. Looking at the enveloping blackness, there is an ominous sense of limbo or peril. The cars form a bumper-to-bumper row through the black space as if they are trapped behind some kind road block. Traffic is not uncommon but upon interrogation, the image is left with a sense that there is something of a metaphysical or spiritual nature at play. Looking for a reasoning, the viewer is left with only the moon and bored stasis of the car's occupants. No justification, just the moon, a distant street light and the pervasive silence of the unknown.

"Someone once wrote that photography is inevitably a documentation of the world around us, regardless of the process involved in any photographic creation," she says. "I agree with this idea. Whether it's traditional documentary photography or a *mise-en-scène* created by the photographer, you're telling a story, through your eyes, and in the end, every and any photograph is subject to the viewer's interpretation."

On the surface, the transition from Willis' complex images of nature, to the stark, isolated images that pervade her current work, may seem drastic. A further investigation reveals that the transition is quite visceral, a natural movement: the same picture, but a movement to the opposite side. "The nature and black images have a lot in common," she explains. In her early work, reflections of the human subconscious were explored within the realm of nature; people were visually undermined by the immensity and strength of their environment. "Although the 'nature' work has that extra dimension, what the black images and the nature work have in common," she says, "is the sense of infinity, mystery and calmness that I look for in my work." Both the black-night backgrounds and the nature backgrounds also serve as a clear, interruption-free canvas to present the main subject matter.

Throughout her imagery, a vein of democratic commune is laid out—Willis's images provide directive, but are open to interpretation; a depiction of the immensity of things, and a reminder of their smallness, a reflection of the self. With that in mind, who is her ideal viewer? "Anyone who's interested." 🐾