

Interview with Chantal Elisabeth Ariëns



“I want to be touched by the images I’m making – otherwise why make them?”

Bildhalle Gallery has talked to Chantal Elisabeth Ariëns about her approach to photography, her working methods, her background as a dancer, and what movement means to her today.

Chantal, what distinguishes your personal work and why did you choose to work with the photopolymer etching technique? I used to work digitally for clients, but in my personal work, I felt the strong need to change my way of working; I wanted to work with my hands, I wanted to get rid of concept and I wanted to work from the inside. In the beginning, I didn't have a very clear idea of the direction I wanted to take but every time I came up with a concept, I wanted to let go of it again immediately. So, I started with movement because that was what I knew. When you pose, it's difficult to bring out emotions, but when you move freely, it happens automatically. I began a close collaboration with a dancer friend who became like a muse for me. I realized that this was exactly what I had been looking for. This way of working really suited me and I could use my background as a dancer. The theme of movement goes together well with the printing technique I chose. The photopolymer etching technique requires me to work with my hands and to move, too. I love the tactility, the structure, the scent. It's an intense and slow technique which brings me to a quieter part of myself and makes me more aware of how gratifying craftsmanship can be. I love seeing little details and imperfections emerge that make each print unique. I embrace it when there's some blurriness – I find it more interesting if there's room for the viewer to think about possible ways of interpreting these ambiguities.

Your father was a photographer. In what way did growing up in that environment influence you?

My father started taking photographs at a young age and continued to do so alongside his regular job for a long time. When I was four, he gifted me my first camera - a plastic toy camera that used real film. I took my first portraits of my parents with it. Maybe it was this gift that sparked my curiosity about the world around me and the desire to capture it.

My father was a very creative man in many ways; he not only photographed his surroundings but also created montages and made prints himself in our darkroom at home. He encouraged my

sister and me to make our own prints as well. But it wasn't until much later – especially now that I'm looking through every single photograph he left behind after his passing – that I realized that he, too, used photography to express his innermost feelings. I've discovered images he made during my mother's illness – photographs incredibly rich in layers; self-portraits taken at decaying factory sites and dreamlike, confronting montages that deeply moved me. Today I've come to understand that I had grown up surrounded by these forms of creative expression and had simply accepted it as the most natural thing in the world.

A tragic but formative experience for you personally and the way you work today was the passing of your sister...

Yes, life changes when people who are very close to you pass away. For me, that was the moment when I realized that I wanted to live and work in a more "natural" way. I say this in hindsight now, but it took me a few years to fully realize and integrate this, it was a slow internal process. As part of coming to terms with this loss, I traveled a lot, often to Buddhist countries. I photographed birds, landscapes, clouds and started to work with Marijn; I made images that had nothing to do with the assignments I was working on. And one day I put these images together and I realized that this was the story of what I had been through after losing my sister, and that this would be my new path.

You're inspired by dance, movement and human emotions... are there any other subjects, art forms or artists that inspire you?

It's not specifically dance that inspires me, but movement – both in a literal and emotional sense, and how one influences the other. And I want to move you as a viewer, too. I'm convinced that the environment in which you grow up, the things you experience, and what interests you all play a role in what you will eventually create. I'm inspired by many artists and art forms such as theatre, music and sculpture, but most of all, I am inspired by life itself. By emotions, by light and shadows, by a soft breath of air that caresses the skin... I feel a strong need to create from within, almost from a subconscious level, beginning from emptiness rather than specific ideas. —————>

You've stopped doing commercial work and focused on your personal work instead. You're very clear that you are not a fashion photographer. However, you've been asked again and again by important fashion magazines and art directors to work with them and you ended up doing some collaborations. You don't see yourself as a fashion photographer, though. Could you elaborate on this?

I was asked by an art director from Paris who had seen my work and thought it would be interesting to combine my technique and the emotions I instill in my images with fashion and see what happens. At first, I said no. I wasn't interested in fashion photography. But finally I said, okay, let's give it a try. A couple of weeks later I learned that I was going to shoot the new Chanel collection, and I was like "oh my God!" But I still maintained that I wanted absolute freedom and I worked together very closely with the art director in order to bring my ideas to life.

When you do free work, you like to work with no clear plan and let the shoot develop organically. But how do you approach such a shoot where you're working with expensive clothes and other people's expectations?

I don't like to work in a studio. I like to work in old places that provide a certain atmosphere to start with. So, for this first shoot, we chose to work in a small, old swimming pool in Paris and decorated it with fabrics. On the day of the shoot itself, I still enjoy letting myself be surprised on the spot how the different models or dancers move – that's a very individual thing and even in a planned

shoot, I tell them to let go of pose, to just move – and they enjoy that very much. It's in that instant that emotions come out. I want to be touched by the images I'm making myself – otherwise why make them?

What is important to you outside of your work? How do you like to spend your free time?

I enjoy wandering through the city, visiting exhibitions and spending time with loved ones, cook, meditate and read a good book. I also have a longing to spend time in nature - in the green and by the sea.

What are you working on at the moment and what's up next for you?

At the moment I'm working on several personal as well as collaborative projects. One current project is based on elements from Greek mythology; I'm creating images that evoke a sense of transition towards a dreamlike world. For another recent project, I photographed two models in a completely vulnerable, intuitive way, all nudes, focusing on connection and compassion.

In terms of collaborations, I've been working with fashion designer Olivier Theyskens, stylist Lune Kuypers and a group of models and dancers over the past two years. At this moment I'm creating a book together with Olivier. And last but not least, I'm looking forward to another "Artist in Residence" time, to experiment with some new printmaking techniques in order to "keep on moving". ■



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