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Photographer David Benjamin Sherry's Book of Three Ecstatic Years

by alex gartenfeld 08/26/09

28-year-old photographer David Benjamin Sherry creates enthusiastic, eccentric photographs that transform the landscape, his friends, and himself into a sometimes psychedelic, sometimes punk, always rich and rather glamorous fantasy of youth in paradise. His first book, *It's Time* (Damiani), collects 48 photographs taken since 2006, when Sherry entered the Yale MFA program, and represents the artist's body of art photography to date through exotic locales, and posed yet intimate moments. In the book we see Death Valley rendered spearmint and mirrored over a horizontal axis, such that the center of the picture appears like a vagina; elsewhere the artist is painted gold like an Oscar Award, set against a wave of cliffs straight with the color palate of a Jodorowsky film. In the book's title photograph (2007), a dashing skinhead is shot from below, the trees and the sky visible behind him. The color is bleached out, so the photograph looks like a photocopy from a zine (particularly those by Toronto punk-chapbook publishers GB Jones and Bruce Labruce). Another bifurcation: this one is at two-thirds the height of the portrait, so that the sky both opens and closes, and the point of view becomes entirely disorienting.



The cover of the *It's Time* is a photograph of a cotton-candy Mt. Adams, Washington, pasted atop the cloth binding. It's an immediate tip-off to Sherry's dual interests in effervescent naturalism, and the material processes of photography. In interviews, Sherry consistently emphasizes that he doesn't digitally manipulate his work, which seems a moot point in an age where digital is the norm. But Sherry cares about analog photography, and his prints require extensive research, and a whole lot of patience, both on-site and in the dark room, to achieve. Describing an interest in process that defies cold formalism, Sherry says, "If I am romantic of the past for one thing, it would have to be the handwork, feel, emotional content, labor-intensive and traditional printing of photography." If photoshopping a picture relies on the assumption that a picture is a normalized fiction, Sherry's method holds out hope for an abnormal reality, even permitting, however melancholically, that the moment didn't occur quite as dramatically as it was recorded: "It's all about giving life to a still moment and trying to re-capture that energy through color, trial and error, and surprise."

But if Photoshop's effect on the documentary function of photography is a moot point then so, supposedly, is kitsch as a method of altering a viewer's understanding of an art object. And here's

where Sherry's art photography as represented in *It's Time* (as opposed to his expert but relatively refined editorial photography) takes off by expecting nothing less than our complete acceptance of photography's enduring magic. Vivid colors and sexual fantasies aside, when Sherry photograph of his friend as a jewel-like nymph legs splayed in the forest looking like a porcelain nymph, he names it no less than "Rainserephita," a reference to Balzac's mythical symbol for sensuality. The background is so impossibly lush and stacked up with waterfalls and foliage as to invite comparisons to Thomas Kinkade. Elsewhere, a black and white portrait of the model Lenz Johnston, captured with the friendly intimacy of a Gap ad, is grandly called "And Then There Was Lenz." In spite of those comparisons, you never doubt the sincerity of Sherry's imagery or his exchange with the sitter—and the composition is stronger. It's Sherry's willingness to use heterogeneous, boldly referential, and out-of-vogue styles while embarking on an ostensibly romantic and autobiographical project that so experiments with the elements of contemporary photography. *It's Time* pictures a world beyond taste; a world that adventurously integrates itself into fashionable corners; and a world worth taking a long look at.

As a bonus: This past Spring, Sherry traveled through Utah. here are images from that trip, which the artist describes in typical form as, "a remarkable trip that had unexpected psychic revelations for my photographs and self."

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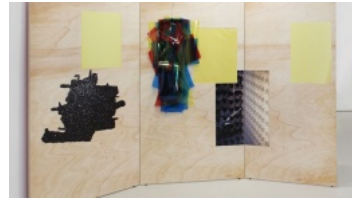
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