

LEAH OATES INTERVIEWS MEGAN CUMP

Leah Oates: How did you become an artist?

Megan Cump: From a very young age I was always making things—I drew constantly and concocted ephemeral assemblages from things that I found in the garden. My mother was a biologist and her love of the natural world was palpable. Despite his career in business, my father nurtured an interest in Prairie School architecture. I focused on fine art, art history, and gender studies at Macalester College. While studying there, I was given the opportunity to spend a semester steeped in art history, archaeology, and studio art classes in Florence. I later found my way to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for an MFA, and not so long after that I attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Drawing, the site of my very first "forest" photos.

LO: Your early exposure to the natural has obviously left its mark on your work. What is your process like?

MC: In my work there is a yearning for the wild—for a physical and intellectual terra incognita of sorts. Mythic transformation, the uncanny, and the unknown interest me. Presently, I am photographing the forest at night and thinking about how it has often been used as a metaphor for the unconscious or underworld. I am fascinated by allegorical stories and epic poems that describe journeys into unfamiliar realms, with shape-shifting creatures and returns from beyond.

My process involves research, writing, scouting for locations, shooting, and the editing

and printing of photographs. Chance and serendipity play a role in my recent series—I introduce additional light to the exposed negatives before development. These intentional "light-leaks" simultaneously destroy existing imagery on the film and create it anew, metamorphosing the darkness into fiery landscapes.

LO: You photograph yourself naked as well as candid shots of animals in nature. How do you select locations and how do you take these shots?

MC: I am drawn to rugged landscapes, I spend time hiking and wandering, sometimes I follow the "desire lines" that animals have hoofed into the forest floor, and I always follow my gut. I shoot with 35mm and medium format cameras, but recently I have been using infrared and trap cameras, which detect heat or movement and then trigger the camera's shutter. This equipment was developed to snare pictures of shy or nocturnal animals for research. I repurpose it to create enigmatic photos in which borders shift, blurring the lines between human and animal, fact and fiction, ultimately adapting this scientific technology towards more poetic ends.

LO: What are your thoughts on contemporary photography?

MC: I am happy to see an increased interest in photographic works that emphasize the handmade, revisit old processes, as well as newer experimental approaches that draw on photography's physical and alchemical heritage—a welcome respite from the omnipresent digitization that seems to have permeated photography and culture at large.

LO: What are your upcoming projects in 2012?

MC: I feel as if I have just gotten to the critical part of this series, so I am headed back into the night. □



Megan Cump, *Sleepwalker*, 2011. C-print, 16 x 20 in. Courtesy of the artist.

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into the forest floor and always follow my gut.*