

BURY ME IN SNOW



THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF JESSICA LANGE

JESSICA LANGE. "MINNESOTA," (1992-2008). GELATIN SILVER PRINT ON BARYTÉ MATT PAPER. 16 X 20 INCHES.
COPYRIGHT JESSICA LANGE AND COURTESY ROSEGALLERY, LOS ANGELES.



JESSICA LANGE. "MEXICO," (1992-2008). GELATIN SILVER PRINT ON BARYTÉ MATT PAPER. 16 X 20 INCHES. COPYRIGHT
JESSICA LANGE AND COURTESY ROSEGALLERY, LOS ANGELES.



JESSICA LANGE. "MINNESOTA," (1992-2008). GELATIN SILVER PRINT ON BARYTÉ MATT PAPER. 16 X 20 INCHES.
COPYRIGHT JESSICA LANGE AND COURTESY ROSEGALLERY, LOS ANGELES.

WRITTEN BY WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

A gay fanboy going to great lengths to interview his favorite actor is by now a trite story, but I hope this one is different. For years, I had been transfixed by Jessica Lange, not only as the actor who won two Academy Awards, five Golden Globes, three Emmys, and a Tony, but also as a photographer. Her black and white photos, taken on a Leica camera and printed on silver gelatin, display a deep knowledge of art history, and reference photographers that even a Ph.D. candidate in art history like myself, was ignorant of.

When I heard that Anne Morin—curator of diChroma Photography in Spain—had put together *Jessica Lange: Unseen*—a show of Lange's photography at the Camerimage International Film Festival in Bydgoszcz, Poland, I applied for a new credit card and bought a plane ticket the next day. The following is an edited transcript of our conversation.

How can we understand these photographs as being an endeavor based on your skill as a photographer and your knowledge of art history?

We are always drawn to certain artists. In the world of photography, I've always loved Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans, Manuel Bravo, Josef Koudelka, Bruce Davidson, Robert Frank—these photographers are observers. I have always surrounded myself with their photographs; wherever I've lived, they've lived with me on the walls of my house. I'm constantly, even on a

subliminal level, being influenced by them.

And I've drawn from some of them on a technical level—I noticed very early on that Cartier-Bresson always printed full negatives. There is always the negative line. So, that was the decision I made at some point—that I wouldn't crop, that I wouldn't adjust the negative in any way, that this was just what it was. Or, Koudelka with his very high contrast, grainy prints—I loved that as well. So that's another thing I adopted, but the eye you can't copy. It was Robert Frank who said, "The impulse to take a photo is an emotional reaction," and I think that's really what it is—you see something and you're drawn to it. Your camera comes up; you focus and you try to capture that image somehow. I do think it's emotional, and the photographs that I have collected, and the ones that I most appreciate, move me somehow. It's not about composition and it's not about abstraction. It's about a moment.

When Mary Ellen Mark wrote about your work she theorized it more along the lines of documentary, and it's interesting that the people you're citing are largely associated with documentary photography.

Yeah, more or less, although I wouldn't say that except for a few, say, Koudelka's work with the Gypsies, or Bruce Davidson's *Brooklyn Gang* (1959)—that are unified pieces. Otherwise, I think with Cartier-Bresson or Bravo, it's just observation, really—photographing what's in front of you—not

necessarily approaching it as a documentarian. They're not trying to explain something. They're not trying to represent something. It's an experience more than anything. The only real documentary that holds together as a piece from my work is the Mayan Festival that I shot in the Chiapas. For those photographs, I did go down for two weeks, shot that every day for five, six days, and tried to represent it, that particular kind of ritual, fiesta. But otherwise I don't work that way.

There is a Siegfried Kracauer quote, "In a photograph a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow." I'm thinking about the layering in your photographs, the materiality of the prints, so maybe the larger question is: where are you in this snow of the photograph?

I'm reminded of the photographer Brigitte Lacombe, who has photographed me many times over the years. When I first started taking pictures, I asked her if she'd come look at them because I wasn't working as a photographer or anything. I remember her looking through them and she stopped at one point and said, "Why are you still so lonely?"

Oh, wow.

Well, that's what she sees in them. Yeah, this kind of loneliness, and I thought, well that's probably right. So, maybe that's what is under the snow—a sense of loneliness.