

JERRY SPAGNOLI



www.jerryspagnoli.com

Jerry Spagnoli (b. 1956) investigates concepts of photographic objectivity and how a photograph's success is typically based on whether or not viewers find the details of a subject intriguing. In 1994/1995 Spagnoli began making daguerreotypes, a process he considers to be an optical device, as opposed to a print, because of its ability to produce an uncanny illusion of depth with excellent clarity. This allows viewers to sense they are looking into the subject itself, thus "momentarily persuading them that they are looking at something real." The mirror-like surface of his daguerreotypes mesmerizes viewers with a staggering amount of detail while engaging intimate participation by incorporating the viewer into each scene, such as the destruction of the World Trade Center, thus increasing the image's uncanny psychological potency. Spagnoli elaborates, "This demonstrates photography's claim to objectivity, while concurrently presenting indicators embedded within the image that contradict this apparent truthfulness—shallow depth of field, motion blurs, and technical artifacts—making it an ideal expression of an objective and subjective image construction of the world."

Spagnoli further underscores his examination into the boundaries of photographic visualization with his photomicrographs of tiny figures, captured at considerable distance with an extreme telephoto lens, rephotographed under a microscope, and then enlarged and printed. As in montage, Spagnoli's methodology decontextualizes and reframes documentary-style photographs, blurring our notion of what constitutes photographic realism. The film's grain structure

reduces the photograph's assumed readability, abstracting and unfastening the untitled images from their time/space moorings, thus leaving them wide open for interpretation. The resulting visual fragments allow viewers to grasp how little information is needed in order to extract meaning through the photographic record. It also exposes the fallacy of objectivity by disclosing how our minds manufacture significance out of disorder in an attempt to make sense of the world.



© Jerry Spagnoli. *Smoke*, from the series *American Dreaming*, 1991. Variable dimensions. Gelatin silver print.

Robert Hirsch *interviews* Jerry Spagnoli*Why do you do what you do?*

I like to shoot on the street. I enjoy the spontaneity, and for lack of a better word, the mystery of it. For instance, you go out and shoot for a year in situations where you have no control over what you might encounter, and then when you look at the body of work there is an obvious narrative to it. It isn't because I am selecting images to fit this narrative. My initial selection is based entirely on which images are the best for formal reasons, but when I review them as a group there is an obvious theme. I think this is because of the way our attention works. The world presents us with

innumerable impressions, especially on the street, and of course we can't possibly take them all in, so we are always unconsciously editing. We notice what we are looking for, consciously or unconsciously. It's probably an ancient biological adaptation that photography allows you to turn to aesthetic purposes. It reveals to you what is going on in your mind while you are otherwise going about your day-to-day activities.

My early images were presented straight, no cropping, just the whole scene as presented to the camera. But I found that the audience was not picking up on the themes. The images looked too much like the world, unfiltered. I realized the photographer doesn't really define the narrative, but rather it's the viewer. About 1990 I started to take these street shots



© Jerry Spagnoli. *High Noon*, 1990. Variable dimensions. Gelatin silver print.

(*American Dreaming*, 2012), and I would strip out everything except the little thing that interested me. I removed the context and left just the most provocative element. So, with a picture of a hand you look more at the gesture than the fact that it's a picture of a hand. My intention was to create a situation where the audience would draw out of themselves the context and in a way make the work their own. In these projects that depict the world of common experience in ways that are idiosyncratic, I'm pointing to the idea that our experience of the world is subjective and personal. We get into habits and take for granted that we have an objective view of things, and of course that's wrong and in some cases dangerous. The world isn't an objective place that stands apart from people's experience of it. It's important that you appreciate your own idiosyncrasies and how that affects your relationship with the world. Additionally, it's important to respect the fact that everybody else has their own point of view. Each of my projects has a different story, but ultimately at the base that's what I'm up to.

What role does time play in your work?

Well, there's the grammar school explanation where you say, "Daguerreotypes have a very long exposure and if you take a picture of a parade the people will disappear." That's one aspect of it. That's probably the only aspect of it, if you take it at face value. But I think that by using methods that come from different historical periods there's a collapsing of the space-time continuum. When you take a daguerreotype of an event like Obama's first Presidential inauguration or the destruction of the World Trade Center, it puts these events into a larger continuum. Rather than being these momentary, contemporary situations, the implication of historical continuity is built into the medium that's used to represent them. When you shoot an event with whatever the current contemporary medium of photography is, you are stamping a date on the image. People will recognize the material, and the image is simply a utilitarian representation of

the situation. But if you use a historical process, that easy superficiality is subverted and a connection to the past is established. That perspective provides more of a sense of your place in historical time. That's why I wanted to shoot the inauguration that way, because I wanted an artifact from this particular moment in time, this kind of millennial transition which would also suggest a connection with the images of Lincoln's inauguration that we are all familiar with.

Why is process important to your work?

If you go back and read the photography manuals from the nineteenth century, you will see that they discuss making photographs using different lenses, with particular attention to the distortions that the medium produces. People back then had what could be described as natural, organic vision. After photography, the world looked like photographs. When we look at the world we see the world through the filter of photography. We are desensitized to the effect of filtering the world through this artificial appendage, to the point when you take a photograph of something, you think it really looks like the world. And that's very naïve. A photograph is a highly mediated representation. It's funny when people get overwrought about photojournalistic images and argue about whether they've been manipulated. Just taking the picture is a huge act of manipulation! I try to use methodologies that interrupt the casual representation of the world that everyone is habituated to.

Of course all of these methodologies have in themselves a narrative component that informs the stories that I'm telling. In *Situations Seen From a Considerable Distance* (1996) I used a microscope to blow up small portions of a negative to point out there is no possibility of objectivity, it's all subjective, and particularly how you read it. I use the microscope for the practical reason that it is the only way to produce the images I want, but it functions narratively because of its position culturally, as the final arbiter of objectivity. I'm alluding to what scientists have experienced as they

examine things closer and closer and then find that they know less and less. They're thrown back on their own resources to come up with an explanation for what they're looking at because the world will not yield any more information. Even scientists have to be fantastical and narrative and subjective about what it is that they're describing. That's an important part of that series, just pointing in that direction. The project is very scientific. I use the best lenses to capture the images and to reproduce the images. I attempt to conform to the highest standards of scientific objectivity and documentary photography, but you end up with an image that has very little relationship to an objective depiction of what was in front of the camera. That's how using a particular method is actually the point of the project. Obviously there are other things

going on, but the underlying idea is that objectivity is a questionable posture. It isn't just railing against the tragedy of no possibility of objectivity. Our subjectivity is one of the most interesting aspects of our experience of the world, and in fact it returns control to the individual and personalizes your existence. You make your world in all sorts of very real ways, and what passes for "The World" is really just the combination of all of the personal worlds of everybody everywhere.



© Jerry Spagnoli. *Untitled*, 2004.
6½ × 8½ inches. Daguerreotype.