

# Shadows and Their Secrets

## The Photography of Barbara Jaffe

**Most photographers work toward creating a positive print.  
Barbara Jaffe explores the other side of the mirror in her negative prints.**

*by Mary Ann Lynch*

Since 1879, when William Henry Fox Talbot invented the negative-positive process for making photographs, photographers have used the negative as the matrix for a positive print. In the negative, qualities are reversed—light becoming dark and dark becoming light. In the positive print, normal tonal values are restored.

In some cases, however, the positive print is not the end point. From photography's earliest days, the intrigue of negative imagery has drawn serious artists to experiment in this shadowy world. New York City-based photographer Barbara Jaffe is among the few who have done more than experiment and move on. Since 1987, she has investigated the way light works in the negative, in her series *Dark Sun: Light from the Negative*.

Photographic negative imagery can be produced with or without a camera. Jaffe chooses to expand the traditional process that relies upon camera and film. Working exclusively in black and white and primarily in four by five format, she photographs her subjects—people in environments, mostly indoor; and florals—and produces a film negative. From this she will ultimately create as her finished product a 30x40-inch negative photographic print.

Negative imagery offers Jaffe an entree into exploring her larger world view. In our February 2004 interview, she offered this context for her work: "I have a core belief, that the eye does not tell the whole story, that things are not what we

see on the surface. When I look at my glass coffee table, although it appears solid, I am often aware that it is made up of little molecules. I always felt everything has a kind of shadow life. The negative is a way of seeing into the shadow."

### Into the shadow

At some point in their careers, most photographers have probably experimented with making a negative print, often when a negative has failed to produce a passable positive image. For Jaffe, however, each creative decision is made with the ultimate negative print in mind. "My photographs are really about ideas. I sketch out an idea and find the right person for it. Then I select props and background, compose, and light for the negative. Someone once took one of my prints for publication and by accident reproduced it as a positive. It lost its magic. It did not in any way represent what I was thinking."

When the intended print is a negative image, the ability to previsualize the way light will function in the exposure is especially critical, and difficult. From the start of the photographic process one must doubly alter their perception and thinking. In addition to identifying the way in which an object is revealed by light, one must mentally reverse the lights, the darks, and the densities to decide how to produce a final image with the intended impact.

Jaffe has honed her perceptual abilities to the

point that she now automatically sees in the negative when she works. Her images position the viewer in the world of dualities. It is a world both recognizably real and yet metaphysical: "I enjoy crossing this threshold and being in simultaneous realms of existence. In this glowing darkness, shadows and their secrets seem to be revealed. You are both looking at something representational and seeing its secret life. Like the other side of the mirror. There is revelation there."

### **Dark Sun: Light from the Negative**

Each of the "Dark Sun" images challenges our perceptions and invites us to rethink what, and how, we see. Light is reflected off a print, but shines through a negative. Details that are suppressed in prints are enhanced in the negative image, creating new gestalts and associations. Over the years Jaffe has developed a keen sense for creating in this reverse world. A Jaffe image proclaims its existence on its own terms, not as a variant of some positive image. It delineates its own bold new turf.

In *Dark Sun #18*, a woman studies a winged insect. Every element we see, the photographer selected for its associations and for the way it would appear in the negative. The woman in this image is by profession a therapist. "For a long time I wanted to make a photograph of someone examining a large insect. I thought she would be right for this idea. For the background I used a fabric that I saw in her home and then brought to the studio. We also went through her clothing and jewelry collection for the blouse and the ear rings. Everything was very carefully chosen to create the final image," Jaffe said.

For the viewing device the woman holds off to the left, Jaffe bought one with a black handle, "so it would be white and glow in her hand." The resulting composition is static, and yet alive with motion, from the fluidity of the drape of the woman's blouse to the figures falling through space on the walls. Precisely chosen, positioned,



*Dark Sun #18*

and lit, the components of this staged tableau interact in a rich and vibrant medley. Once all the elements for this photograph were in place, Jaffe made about 20 exposures.

*Dark Sun #24* took three sessions of five or six hours each. In this photograph, a man holding a pen studies the writing on a piece of paper. In the second shoot, Jaffe discovered the page was not at the angle she wanted. When she photographed again, her model, an author himself, "did this wonderful thing. He bent the pages, so it looks as if the words are falling off the page at the bottom." Seeing the effects of the bent page in the final, "he had this postmodern riff about the text leaving the author." His salient comment identifies a level of meaning beyond the literal, a characteristic of complex works of art in any medium.

Jaffe's works invite prolonged viewing and careful "reading." She tested several different fountain pens before she found the right one, which would reproduce in the density and tonal



*Dark Sun #24*

quality she wanted. Even the words in her images are multi-referential. She selected the painting—by Gauguin—and each book on the shelf, for a reason. And she penned the script on the pages the man is holding. The words are from *In the Age of Light*, a 1930s Man Ray essay about reasons for making art.

Jaffe herself entered the world of serious photography around 1970. I asked what later led her to leave the world of the positive for its shadow side. “I had been working in color photography for some years and was at a stage where I needed to play with photography and return to black and white. I was in the darkroom and had made some work prints of a couple kissing. I purposely made a negative print, a very crude one. Certain areas, especially the highlights in strategic parts of the bodies, were all blocked up. There was something about this print that made the couple very erotically charged. I wanted to discover why the image was more exciting to me as a negative than as a positive.”

## A self-luminous world

Jaffe can be counted among a cadre of photographers who have created memorable works in what she has termed, “a duplicate, but opposite world...one which is self-luminous, radiating, rather than reflecting light.” (Barbara Jaffe, artist’s statement.) A number of these artists worked in cameraless imagery. Fox Talbot was the first to place objects on photographic paper and expose the paper to light, creating what he termed “shadow pictures.” From then on, terminology shifted with the practitioner.

Laslo Moholy-Nagy, one of the pioneering innovators of the 1920s, introduced the term “photogram” and described such pictures as “the key to photography.” In the same era, Christian Schaad of Germany made “Schadographs” (1918), his term for cameraless prints, while Man Ray named his “Rayographs.” All these artists shared a keen interest in the play of light on photosensitive surfaces. Other popular techniques include experimentation with development, fogging, solarization (introduced by Man Ray), and montaging positive and negative images in the same piece.

As for those using camera and film to create negative imagery, Jaffe is in the company of American photographers including Jerry Uelsmann, Paul Caponigro, Robert Heinecken, Eric Renner, and Nancy Spencer. Prominent at the present time—for their large-scale negative images made with homemade pinhole camera obscuras—are German-born Vera Lutter and Cuban-born Abelardo Morell.

Jaffe, who heads the photography program at Hofstra University, acknowledges those who have inspired her journey: “There is a 1975 volume of Man Ray photographs. My copy is so looked at that the spine is broken and pages are falling out. I loved his sense of freedom with the medium. Fox Talbot was also important, but what Man Ray did was infuse negative imagery with the psychological and spiritual. I wanted to

take it further.”

“Take it further,” she has, into what is essentially a directorial mode. Jaffe weaves her subjects, their backgrounds, and the attendant “family of objects” into a heightened emotional space, where relationships are charged with otherworldly overtones. Whatever her subject, Jaffe makes the viewer into an observer of a very private, secret moment. The florals are beautiful yet animated and wild, even threatening in their negative state. “In this otherwise invisible realm, material things become less solid, and the photograph can be seen as an x-ray of the spirit.” (Jaffe, artist’s statement.)

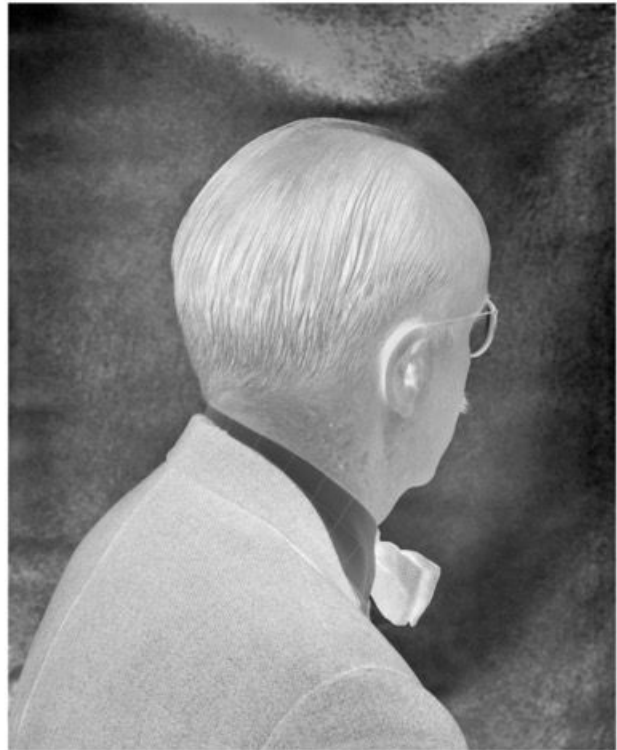
Equally important is the narrative thrust of Jaffe’s “Dark Sun” works, whether minimalist (#3, page 18; #20, table of contents,) or dense with objects (#9, page 19; and #(18 and #24). All exist in a reality poignantly like our own—and yet not. As Jaffe says, it is “duplicate, but opposite.” We are left to wonder not only about the scene we are seeing, but also about what transpired before, and what will come next.

### **At home in the universe**

“I often say there are two ways to approach photography. You take a picture. You create a picture,” Jaffe told me. Like most, she began by taking pictures, but from early on, she was leaning toward the second mode. Born in Brooklyn in the 1940s, she got her first camera when she was four, and later the proverbial Brownie. “When I was 10 or 11, I had one of those paint by numbers pictures of kittens in a basket playing with yarn. I took my little cat, put her in a basket, got a ball of yarn, re-created the scene in front of the painting, and with my Brownie photographed the double image.” The director in her was emerging.

And then there were “the hundreds and hundreds of photographs” she loved poring over as a child. Some were of her father’s family. “He had come from Russia and the photographs of his

family he had left behind became very important to me. Those ghostly images were my only contact with his relatives.” But it was looking at her mother’s meticulously kept leather-bound albums from the 1920s and 30s that had the greatest impact. “The photographs had wonderfully scalloped edges with dates and names underneath. I scanned them for secrets, trying to find out who my mother really was. In the process I discovered the power of photographs to reveal what lies beneath the surface.”



*Dark Sun #3 (1988)*

During Jaffe’s teenage years in Queens she found the local camera club. This gave her entree to a darkroom for the first time: “There were all these older guys who talked about F-stops and getting up to photograph the sunrise. My Brownie didn’t have F-stops, but what did interest me was the darkroom, where for the first time in my life I saw a print coming up in the developer. That was a key moment.”

After majoring in English in college at CW Post, she taught English for the New York City Board of Education, but photography drew her.



“I subscribed to photography magazines when I was in my early twenties, but I never thought that as a woman I could become a photographer.” Like many of her generation, Jaffe was influenced by the explosion in photography after the Family of Man exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. By her late twenties, with little money but a lot of passion, she had dropped out of teaching to become a photographer.



*Dark Sun #9 (1990)*

How did she make a living then? “With great difficulty. Every chance I got I was photographing with my secondhand 35mm Pentax. I did any job I could with a camera. I also had some exhibitions and got reviews and had work published. Eventually I started teaching at the New School.” It was around this time that she photographed a dark-skinned couple nude in front of a white background, very Avedon-like. “I thought I was interested in their character and personality. But when I got the pictures back I realized I was interested in their form, the way their dark bodies kind of floated in that white

space.”

She showed the work to Lisette Model, who lived across the street from her. “Model loved my work. That was very encouraging to me.” Soon Jaffe was carving her life into thirds—teaching at various places, doing commercial photography, and doing fine art work. Eventually she earned a Master’s degree in Media Studies at the New School and in 1995 joined the Hofstra photography department full-time.

Throughout the years of finding her direction in photography, and continuing today, photographer Joel Stempfled has been her closest friend and mentor. In fact, they have spoken nearly every day for the past 30 years. “When Joel was on his Guggenheim he would call me from every phone both in America. We’d have two- and three-hour conversations about art and life and philosophy. I was doing still lifes in my home studio (a.k.a. my living room) and he was out in the world describing what he was seeing. He would say things like, ‘There is the most extraordinary tornado coming this way,’” she said.

And what was Jaffe describing to him in those years? “Abstraction. I was interested in light abstraction. Or I would talk about whatever ideas I was coming to in photography. We were both defining ourselves then. We were both in our thirties and in that act of discovery of photography and ourselves.” This kind of friendship is common among photographers of their era, whose growth took place primarily outside academia. It was a time when galleries were few and museum shows of contemporary photography rare. Since then, Stempfled has become one of America’s most well known documentary photographers, with classic books such as *American Prospects*, recently reissued.

Meanwhile, Jaffe has produced several major bodies of work, including *Family Album* (1970-75); *In the Light of Memory* (1976-77); *The Electronic Age* (1979-83); *Flora* (1986-91); *Botanica* (1998-99); and *Dark Sun* (1987-ongo-

ing). Works from these have appeared in many exhibitions and are in public and private collections including the Museum of Modern Art, NY; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Brooklyn Museum; Musee de l'Elysee, Lausanne, Switzerland; the Helmut Gemsheim Collection; and the Henry Buhl Collection.

She is presently at work on a book dummy for *Dark Sun*, but she is not yet ready to stop creating for the series. *Dark Sun* marked her sea change, with the photograph she made of Alan Coleman, which became *Dark Sun #1* (table of contents). "I got in close to his face. He closed his eyes. When I saw the negative, with the light seeming to come from within, exuding from his pores, I knew I was onto a new body of work. I was finding my place in the universe again."

**Technical Notes:** Barbara Jaffe has been shooting 4x5 since 1979, along the way receiving grants from the Polaroid Corporation and Eastman Kodak. She uses an old Cambo 4x5 camera, made by Calumet, with a 210mm Sironar lens. Strobe lights are used on all indoor shoots. Film is black and white, T-Max 100. Print size is 30x40 inches and editions are limited. Until recently, after making the initial negative, she made a film positive and from that, the final negative print on photographic paper. Currently, she scans the film negative into a computer and Photoshops it. Then she proceeds to the final print, which is done in the Light Jet process. Final prints are color chromogenic (Type C) prints, on color Fuji Crystal Archive photographic paper.

*All photographs are copyright 2004 and were supplied by the photographer. Barbara Jaffe lives in New York City. Contact her at [BJ@barbarajaffe.com](mailto:BJ@barbarajaffe.com) or visit her at [www.barbarajaffe.com](http://www.barbarajaffe.com).*

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