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What's new, Florence Montmare? Interview by Nadine Dinter

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This summer, I had the pleasure of meeting **Florence Montmare** on the train to the Rencontres d'Arles. Uncertain whether she would be attending the festival, we ended up sharing a bench and started talking. I was immediately captivated by her unique background, extraordinary lifestyle, and of course, her remarkable body of work. Needless to say, we ended up visiting various openings and events during the festival. We also got to delve into her recent America Series. Given my prior collaboration with the Richard Avedon Foundation

and my familiarity with his In the American West series, I was curious to learn what had inspired Florence to embark on her own road trip and create this impactful photo series. Join us on this journey, and enjoy the insights she shared about what's new.

Nadine Dinter: Your new book is called America Series. What does America mean to you?

Florence Montmare: America is a very complex place. The country was founded by people searching for a better life and opportunities, but also by taking land from the indigenous people and centuries of slavery.

When I grew up in Sweden, we were fed images from American television and films. It seemed to be an inspiring place: Hollywood, glamour, celebrities... but also a rough and gritty place. There were those classic Western movies, war films and the image of the US being a superpower, and stepping into international conflicts and taking charge.

I understand the American dream to be the opportunity to reinvent yourself and become more of your authentic self. There's room to become whoever you want to be. You can even change your name when you immigrate here.

My vision of America has changed a bit since I crossed the country, seeing how much hardship there is, and how there's a big gap between economic classes. It's a culture of hard-working people, and, in a way, each state is its own country.

How did this cross-country journey come about?

FM: The idea came many years ago in my childhood home with my best friend, Carolina. As we listened to different records, I remember saying out loud that I wanted to travel across America. That moment might have been inspired by seeing the film *Thelma and Louise* and David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. The idea of a big road trip adventure stayed with me as something I always wanted to do.

Then, decades later, in 2020–2021, I was working as the cultural attaché for the Swedish Consulate General in New York. It was an intense period because of the pandemic, and we were driving demanding projects like the Nobel Prize and human rights issues, such as the Right Livelihood Award. It was the first time since I became a photographer in my 20s that I didn't work with a camera every day. I really missed it and needed to go back to being an artist. After my year's contract was up in July 2021, I visited some friends on the Oregon coast. After dinner, I picked up the camera and went for a walk on the beach. I don't know

what drew me, but I just went up to this stranger and asked if I could take his picture. I had no idea what I was going to do with it at the time, but these would be the first images of America Series.

Shortly after returning to New York City, my husband and I decided to spend the winter in Southern California. We needed to transport my equipment and ourselves to California. Finally, I could do the road trip I'd dreamed about since I was a girl. With climate change on my mind, it felt appropriate to try to do it in an electric vehicle.

Inspired by the iconic series by Richard Avedon (“In the American West”) and Robert Frank (“The Americans”), you have photographed modern life, people, and landscapes from a female perspective. What motivated this choice?

FM: Mainly, men have been acknowledged for their “going West” series. Dorothea Lange was one of the few women recognized for her photographs of America during the Depression era of farm workers and their lives out West. I felt it was time for a woman’s view to be represented.

Another source of inspiration was my discovery of my grandmother’s second cousin, Marta Berglund (1892–1973). Based in the medieval city of Visby on the island of Gotland, Sweden, she was one of the most prolific portrait photographers in the early 1900s.

I thought about how these sources and influences had affected my artistic vision. How would I carry out a photo survey project of that scope today?

Your journey took place between fall 2021 and spring 2022, right in the middle of the pandemic. What difficulties, challenges, or even advantages did you encounter due to the circumstances?

FM: Being in New York during the pandemic was difficult to say the least, and by the fall of 2021, we were all so fatigued. The isolation made life smaller, and I craved to explore new territories – to hit the road and experience something completely different.

There was a hesitancy of how I could approach people; people were still wearing masks. My challenge was to stay safe and not get sick, which would have made it impossible to continue the journey and the project.

Also, working through my shyness, which is something I’ve always had. The sense of isolation throughout the pandemic may have also created an opportunity in that people had a need to speak, to be heard and seen. People opened up and expressed anxiety about the future. The economic recession led to housing– and job security being put at risk. Some

people were really suffering, struggling with drug abuse and mental issues, and the social isolation made it all worse. In the midst of this precarious situation, I encountered civil courage, bravery, strength, and unity over and over again.

Why did you shoot your series in black and white? Did you feel that shooting in color would have distanced the series from the historical works of Avedon and Frank?

FM: Those pictures have already been made in a different era, so I wasn't concerned with simulating a likeness of their images – but to convey a timelessness, to think about “today as history” – a collective archive of images.

My relative, Marta, worked with glass plate negatives, and I was thinking about how these images could be in dialogue with her images. My earliest work was black and white, using Tri-X film, and most of my work is sparse in color. I was interested in the notion of contrast – symbolic of the contrasts in this country. I have encountered a lot of black-and-white views here, and want to reflect America as I saw it, and I saw this project in black and white.

What was the most surprising and what was the most challenging encounter you had while working on your project?

FM: We pulled up to a hotel late one night in Arizona, and a group of people were standing around the parking lot. As we loaded all the equipment out of our car, a young man from the group showed particular interest and struck up a conversation with us. It turned out that they were on a journey across America, competing against other electronic vehicles (EVs) for a television reality show. The producers had attempted to get an EV model from Ford, but it was unavailable. As it turned out, I was driving that same car, so that was a surprise!

Another time, I decided to follow a car, and it pulled into a Walmart parking lot next to the EV charging station. I approached the driver, and we started talking. For over two years, Don had lived with his family in a motel after being evicted by his landlord. He had worked as a mental health care worker and witnessed a patient who tried to hang herself. A couple of weeks later, a 19-year-old boy hung himself. After the second incident, Don plunged into a depression and was diagnosed with PTSD. “After that, I kind of lost it,” he told me, and that he couldn't keep it together any longer. His story hit me hard.

In Pennsylvania, I saw a woman sitting next to the road alone in her wheelchair. She was sitting in silence across from a white wooden country church, staring at it from across the street. I thought there was something so beautiful and serene about the scene, something

contemplative. I walked up to her and presented myself. Out of her silence came a scream. She cursed me out: “Get the fuck out of my way, lady – I’m not in the mood!” Her aggression was startling and made me jump. I quickly apologized, got into the car, and drove off.

Does your background as an immigrant artist enhance your ability to approach subjects with a more objective and insightful perspective?

FM: It is funny how the Swedish word “objektiv” means lens.

The school I went to in New York, the International Center of Photography, came out of a documentary tradition. To be honest, I’ve never felt comfortable with documentary practices claiming objectivity. I don’t think there’s anything objective about photography. It’s all subjective. It reflects who you are, where you come from, and your point of view. And as an immigrant, I’m inside and outside at the same time. I belong, yet I feel alienated and foreign, not only in America but in many places. I come from Europe originally and encountered different cultures growing up – from Vienna to Stockholm and the island of Crete in Greece. When we immigrated to Sweden from Vienna, I received a social security number that marked me as an immigrant all throughout my school years, even though I am half Swedish.

Artists are outsiders, perhaps, looking in, offering a different perspective. Robert Frank was also an immigrant and was quite criticized for his perspective of America.

When I arrived in America, I thought I understood it and that I somehow belonged in this melting pot. With time, I discovered fundamental differences in culture – such as the Puritan religious influences – and I have met people with vastly different views on democracy, human rights, women’s rights, equality, abortion, and gun laws. There are many different perspectives and belief systems in this country, which also makes it dynamic and exciting. I am curious about what you can learn from it all. Culture is relative, and our glasses are tinted differently. We see things through our different lenses.

Do you keep in touch with people you met and photographed during your road trip?

FM: I have kept in touch with a few people I met through this trip. When Hawaii was hit by the fires, I reached out to check in on how a lady I had met in Las Vegas and her family were doing. I am hoping to reconnect more throughout the release of the book.

How does the “America Series” relate to your previous body of work?

FM: Scenes from an Island and America Series each explore themes of landscape and transience. Both are quite cinematic with nature as the mise-en-scène, almost like a stage has been vacated, with a stillness hovering.

In Scenes from an Island, the figures that wander through the frame are almost like placeholders. They are interior landscapes with the attention set to the horizon, perhaps a reference to psychological balance. In America Series, the landscapes are both natural and urban, human-made settings “sans figures,” which are lifted out into a parallel narrative.

In Scenes from an Island, I developed seven different chapters/scenes for an exhibition at Fotografiska New York (2020–2021). In Refuge, I worked with migrants and explored notions of homecoming, and how we move through the frame, with people transitioning in and out like placeholders.

There is a diaristic quality to my work, in pieces like Illuminations, Lullabies, Space Untitled, Solipsist, and Juxtapositions on Vinyl. In some of my first projects, I used myself as a subject. In Void and Apartment 1A, I explored the randomness of people sharing an apartment, a personal diaristic project that came out of ICP, all shot in Tri-X film, so black and white. Images of women, coming in out of the frame of the apartment — a cataloging of people, repetition and chance.

And what’s currently in the making? We heard something about a personal project about one of your ancestors...

FM: I will continue developing America Series into a mobile exhibition and a film, called M[o]therland. I collaborated with my mentor Robert Blake on that title.

Scenes from an Island will be my next book, with images made while I was a resident at the Ingmar Bergman Estate, on the island of Fårö between 2015 and 2019.

In my diaries from that time, I wrote: “The island kept calling me back, over and over again.” My work from the island is a way for me to connect to my roots, and during this time, I encountered Marta’s world of images by chance, later to realize she was a blood relative. MARTA is currently being turned into a film, which I am directing and co-producing.

I also hope to finish up the film Hemkomst / As You Are About to Move, which I started directing and producing in 2017 together with choreographer Joakim Stephenson, designer Marie Bergman, Sara Sjöö, and Hugo Therkelson. It is a performance piece with refugees, islanders, and premiere dancers from the Royal Opera in Stockholm.

What’s your advice to the new generation of photographers?

FM: As a young photographer today, you are entering a completely different world than I did in the early 2000s. AI, photo scanners, so much digital manipulation...as opposed to cameras with shutters. The field is changing drastically, challenging the discussions about how reality is represented.

I've spent a lot of time in both analogue and digital, and the transition to digital definitely changed my creative process. With the arrival of smartphones and constant media distraction... let's face it: our eyes are for sale. My advice would be to disconnect from your phones and pause. Allow yourself to be inspired by painting, music, film, and literature.

Carry a camera as often as you can, and take time to digest what you're seeing. Diving into the insights you may receive when you go deeper into your practice may touch someone else. The more curious you are about the medium, the more fun you will have. Allow yourself to play!

Find a mentor. Before starting production, I consulted my mentors Sam Samore and Robert Blake, receiving their blessings.

In art school, you will learn that everything has already been done. So invent your own rhetoric and engage in projects that really touch your heart. Photography is such a personal craft, so get acquainted with your own world of images, dig where you stand, and tell the stories where you feel an emotional response. You might even become aware of your gaze – who is really looking?

Find a way to connect your spirit to this practice and see where that will lead you. Your vision matters. You're not like everyone else. There's no "everyone else." Everyone is everyone else. But your vision is your own.

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For more information, check out www.florencemontmare.com and the artist's IG account @florencemontmare