



Steel Stillman, "Judy Linn on Bohemia, Suburbia, and Composing a Memorable Photograph" *Art in America* (February 2020).

JUDY LINN



JUDY LINN IS A REAL PHOTOGRAPHER, not – to use that dubious epithet – an “artist who uses photography.” She engages the world with an uncomplicated camera, shoots what she sees, and prints her images straight. Best known for the pictures she took of Patti Smith, Robert Mapplethorpe, and other New York bohemians between 1969 and 1976, when they were all just kids, she has since produced a body of work that is greatly varied, subtle, and complex.

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Judy Linn: *Esopus Flood*,
2006, inkjet print, 24 by
20 inches.

At first glance, her unassuming black-and-white and color images of people, places, and things in urban, suburban, and rural settings, might seem like Instagrammable one-liners, ringing small changes on familiar photographic tropes, but look again. That bucolic black-and-white landscape shot, showing a lake surrounded by cultivated fields and rolling hills, actually depicts a flood, and the tree at its center, looking like an island, is up to its canopy in water. The diversity of Linn's subject matter – she almost

always carries a camera and there's no telling what she'll shoot – may result from her childhood in the '50s. "I was brought up on television and believed the incongruous sequential image before I found words," she once said, a remark that anticipates her viewers' conviction that what unifies her work is the pleasure, image after image, of following her eye to its deadpan disclosures.

Linn was born in 1947 in Detroit and grew up in its suburbs, where her father was a pathologist and



Above, *Patti Robert Bed*
Chelsea, ca. 1970s, inkjet
print, 20 by 24 inches.

Right, *213*, 1972, inkjet
print, 30 by 24 inches.

her mother, a textile historian. At sixteen, she spent two boarding-school years in Massachusetts, before enrolling at Pratt Institute in New York, where she studied with the lyrical documentary photographer Philip Perkis, earning her BFA in 1969. For the next twenty-five years, except for brief stints in Michigan, Linn lived in New York, first on Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn, and then, from 1971 on, in Little Italy. In 1972–73, she worked for seven months as a photographer for the free *Detroit Area Weekly News*, and in the '80s she freelanced for the *Village Voice*. She began exhibiting her work in 1971 and has been included in over a hundred group shows in the United States and Europe in the years since, including the Whitney Biennial in 1995; "Strange Messenger: The Art of Patti Smith," which debuted at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in 2002 and appeared at a total of seven international venues; and "Who Shot Rock & Roll: A Photographic History, 1955 to the Present," organized at the Brooklyn Museum in 2009 for a four-year tour, mostly within the US. Among her more than twenty-five solo exhibitions are seven with the famed cutting-edge gallery Feature, Inc., in New York, and recent showings at Haus am Kleistpark (2015) in Berlin and the Cue Art Foundation (2018) and MBnb (2019), both in New York. Her book *Patti Smith 1969–1976* was published in 2011 by Abrams Image.

Linn has taught for much of her career, first at Pratt, and then at other New York-area art schools. She's been at Vassar for twenty-one years and now lives forty-five minutes northwest of Poughkeepsie, in Stone Ridge, N.Y., where she built a modest wood-shingled house in 1991. We spoke there last fall in her studio, a sunny space that occupies the entire second floor, amid piles of loose prints and open archival boxes. She was in the process of selecting images for a solo show now on view at Parker Gallery in Los Angeles.

STEEL STILLMAN How did you meet Patti Smith?

JUDY LINN She and Robert [Mapplethorpe] lived around the corner during my last year at Pratt. My

boyfriend at the time, [painter] Peter Barnowsky, knew Robert from ROTC, and we went over to look at his drawings. Patti answered the door but stayed in the kitchen stirring spaghetti sauce. She and I soon discovered that we both liked thrift-store clothes and movies like Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* and Jacques Rivette's *La Religieuse*, and we became friends. We'd get together and draw – her drawings were way better than mine – and play dress up. I imagined that I was a fashion photographer and Patti loved being photographed. When we met, I had a beautiful Bolex Super 8, and our original idea was to make a movie together. We shot some film one day, but I quickly realized that filmmaking was too emotionally removed and went back to shooting stills. Nonetheless that Super 8 footage set the tone for the much later book.

STILLMAN Is it true that after graduating from Pratt you worked for *Time* magazine?

LINN Yes. For a short while I had a low-level position on what was called the traffic desk, handling the contact sheets and negatives that would come in from assignments. One day a contact sheet of Garry Winogrand's came in that was just great. He'd been hired at the last minute to shoot a portrait of [Greek actress] Melina Mercouri in a hotel room. Usually contact sheets for jobs like this would be boring – the same shot thirty-six times with maybe a little head or eye movement for variation – but Winogrand's was an inspiration. He did everything but hang off the chandelier to get a picture.

STILLMAN In the summer of 1972, you left New York





for seven months to work as a photographer for the *Detroit Area Weekly News*. Some of your finest early photographs date from this period, like 213 [1972], which shows three preteen boys standing on the first-, second-, and third-place podiums for a track-and-field event, looking like Norman Rockwell characters come to life.

LINN Having been away from the Detroit suburbs for nearly a decade, to go back with a camera and permission to shoot assignments any way I wanted was a real treat. The tryout was a George Wallace rally—he was running for president from a wheelchair, after an attempt on his life—and the place was crawling with

cops. I loved it. The newspaper was a “shopper,” a free paper with local stories and advertisements. There were seven or eight editions, tailored to different towns, and I would shoot separate front pages. It was a great job. There was no art-school indecision about what to photograph. It was a lady in a grocery store or a mushroom farmer or those three kids at an all-Detroit Field Day. I shot way more than I ever used and gave the paper what it needed. There was little response from the readers, but there were no complaints.

STILLMAN How did you start freelancing for the *Village Voice*?

LINN I began when Fred McDarrah, the photographer and *Voice* photo editor, got me credentials to cover the 1980 Republican convention in Detroit. Over the next several years, especially after the writer Hilton Als took over as photo editor, I would contribute things to the *Voice* periodically, like images of female wrestlers or scenes from the Day Without Art, an annual AIDS event. For the latter, it happened that I’d just had an exhibition of my photographs at 55 Mercer Street Gallery; so, when taking the show down, I left the glass that had been protecting my pictures up and shot a photograph of the reflections. You could see that there was supposed to be art there, but that it was missing.

STILLMAN You also began shooting fashion shows in the ‘80s. In the black-and-white *Leg* [1990], a woman’s leg—seen from the thigh down, her foot flaunting a furry white stiletto—pokes out between dark curtains.



Above, *Leg*, 1990, inkjet print, 23½ by 16 inches.

Left, *Mushroom Farmer*, 1972, inkjet print, 24 by 30 inches.

Below, *Elizabeth Street*, ca. 1970s, inkjet print, 20 by 24 inches.





LINN My mother died in 1980 and for a while I was a wreck. I couldn't work. I remember seeing a great picture on the street and standing paralyzed, camera in hand, unable to shoot it. It was of two white-haired women in the rain holding umbrellas, one red, one green, and the light filtering through made their hair match their umbrellas. I began shooting fashion shows and New Wave clubs, both of which were easy to get into, to get unstuck. The leg coming through the curtain is from the beginning of an André Walker for Williwear show that I covered for Hilton. I was closer to the action than I meant to be, using a longer-lensed camera than usual because my regular one was broken. It was one of those situations where everything felt a little wrong, but something good resulted.

STILLMAN In this same period, you were also shooting out on the street, in both color and black-and-white. Why would you choose one or the other?

LINN I'd gotten a job teaching color photography at Pratt, and, because I knew nothing about it, I started shooting a lot of color film. I enjoyed taking pictures outside, but living on Elizabeth Street, near where John Gotti had his social club, I was careful. Sometimes I photographed out my window, although I missed stuff there, as well. For instance, there was a butcher shop downstairs, with huge, open-topped

Burning Car, 1986, inkjet print, 10½ by 16 inches.

bone and offal trucks coming and going; they were disgusting to look down on, but I regret not getting a picture of one.

STILLMAN How did you meet Helen Levitt, the great street photographer and filmmaker?

LINN I got to know Helen through the photographer Elaine Mayes. I rarely showed Helen my work—she was too opinionated, and I didn't want her to mess with me in that way—but we'd go out shooting together, and because she got good pictures the first time, we went out a lot. She'd bring along peanut butter and jelly sandwiches because she wouldn't want to stop to eat. One time, we were walking along and there was this really filthy, messed-up old man coming toward us and Helen said, "Take his picture." And I said, "I don't want to." She said, "Take his picture." So I took his picture, and he screamed at me. Her point was: "Don't be so uptight. You're going to survive."

STILLMAN You once said that Levitt spent her artistic life "learning how to do what you don't know she is doing." What did you mean?

LINN She was a great poker player and knew how to lead people on. With good cards especially, and with her green visor and slight smile, she could be wonderfully opaque, luring her quarry to put ever more



money on the table. In the same way, when out shooting, she was acting, getting what she wanted without letting on what she really wanted.

STILLMAN Your picture *Burning Car* [1986], in which glass and flames erupt out of a burning parked Cadillac, was taken when you were out with her, right?

LINN Yes, but I don't really remember shooting it. It was just another excursion to Spanish Harlem when gasoline was suddenly really expensive, and people were torching their cars to collect on their insurance.

STILLMAN What's the relationship between shooting and editing?

LINN You have to be two different people. For the photographer, responding to the itch to take a picture is crucial. You should never say no. I visited some friends yesterday and there were a couple of terrific photographs of them that I didn't take because it would have made them miserable for a few minutes. But I should've taken them. The editor, on the other hand, has to come at the resulting images completely cold. It helps to let some time pass. You can't play the cards you have if you're still pining for the ones you wanted.

STILLMAN Though you shoot a wide range of subjects, there are certain image categories that recur. One, perhaps informed by your suburban upbringing, focuses on single-family dwellings. A good example might be *Shingles* [1998], a color photograph where two exterior walls meet—one sheathed in white clapboard, the other in rough-cut unpainted wood shingles—on what must have been a porch or breezeway. There's something vaguely surreal about it, because these walls share a common ceiling and floor, as though they were actually inside a room.

LINN That shot was a detail of a newly built, unoccupied spec house in Owosso, Michigan. It took me more

Above left, *Shingles*, 1998, inkjet print, 30 by 24 inches.

Above right, *Tilted House*, 2002, inkjet print, 16 by 23½ inches.

Right, *Army Boy*, 1999, inkjet print, 30 by 24 inches.



than a dozen years to get a good print of it. When I first tried, I had it done by a lab for a show at Feature, but I wasn't happy with the result. When I picked it up, I was with a friend who said it looked fine, and wimpishly, I accepted it. From then on, however, I did all my own printing.

STILLMAN One of the things I like about that photo is that you didn't straighten the walls out. They're not neatly aligned with the picture's edges.

LINN Yes, they're kind of screwy. Now that it's possible to fix everything with the computer, I have to resist compulsively straightening photographs out. Sometimes it helps, but it can also ruin an image.

STILLMAN *Tilted House* [2002] is another evidently askew photograph of a tract house, this one appearing to teeter drunkenly on uneven ground. Is its tilt a digital effect?

LINN No, it really looked that way. People are always building grand suburban houses up here on old farmland. That was a case where the house looked a bit naked, with no bushes or trees in sight. *Tilted House* really jumped out when I first saw it on a contact sheet. It was like the builder had screwed up the plumb line and made the house dance.

STILLMAN Another recurring subject for you is children. In *Army* [1999], a ten- or twelve-year-old boy sights down a machine gun, which has a rocket launcher attached, while grinning soldiers in battle garb, one sporting a gas mask, leer behind him.



Dendur, 2001, inkjet print, 24 by 20 inches.

LINN That was taken during Fleet Week in New York, when Navy ships come to town and the public is invited aboard. There were kids running around everywhere, handling guns and playacting, and I was shooting a lot. Somehow that one just worked. It's almost a propaganda photograph. I like the fact that the boy has a camera around his neck—a budding photographer—and that the approving people behind him look totally insane.

STILLMAN You also shoot a lot in museums and other art settings. *Dendur* [2001] is a mostly gray monochrome image, taken in the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. We see a big Egyptian sculptural figure, and next to it sits a yellow plastic pail with the word EGYPTIAN printed on it, seemingly placed there to catch a leak from the ceiling.

LINN I've been fascinated by figurative sculpture since I was a kid. I'd imagine what it would be like to be frozen in a single pose forever, which is, I guess, what a photograph does. I took this picture because a small

Linn and Levitt

Linn often went on picture-taking excursions with now legendary New York street photographer Helen Levitt (1913–2009), known for the subtle humor of many of her images. The older artist, who seemed to have a gift for willing people into memorable compositions, mentored Linn in fearlessness and persistence of approach.



Helen Levitt:
New York, 1983,
gelatin silver
print, 7 by 10 3/4
inches.



New York, 1972,
C-print, 10 by 15
inches.



New York, ca.
1990s,
C-print, 15 by
10 inches.

© Helen Levitt Film Documents LLC. Courtesy Thomas Zander Gallery.

child came over and looked in the bucket. It was like a cartoon. Here's this fabulous sculpture, and what does the kid do? He looks in the bucket. But just then someone walked into the frame and screwed it all up. For sixteen years I didn't print this version because I was so miserable about the one that got away. I've thought about going back to the first image and photoshopping out the other person, but that almost never works. If the image isn't right in the first place, tinkering rarely saves it. Maybe it's more interesting without the kid.

STILLMAN And then there are landscapes. Some of my favorites feature reflections in mud puddles. But there's also *Bud Can* [2012], which shows an empty Budweiser can jammed on a dead branch with an out-of-focus tree trunk visible in the background. I didn't notice it at first, but the tree trunk is like a body, and the branch is an arm offering refreshment to viewers. This Bud's for us.

LINN I began shooting digital quite late and this was the first non-analog picture I liked. It was a wet day and I was picking up trash left by hunters in the woods behind my house. I'd forgotten the trash bag, so I just impaled the can on a branch, which felt really good. I took a few pictures, some closer, some further away. In the one that worked, I liked how the bark was out of focus and that the trunk was large enough to fill the frame. I believe that photography is basically surreal, that its invention invented surrealism — although of course there were precursors like Hieronymus Bosch. Photography is a mechanical eye, but it has a persona. It translates the world in ways that become a conversation.

STILLMAN *Bud Can* nods to Pop art and to the broader theme of popular culture, which shows up also in your photograph of perky Teletubbies in a grim McDonald's drive-through and in your grand, deadpan image of a Walmart store [*Walmart*, 2017]. The latter one has the look and feel of an Ed Ruscha painting. The Walmart sign and sky are bright and optimistic, while the building itself is windowless and bleak.

LINN When I moved upstate in the early '90s, I had no idea what to shoot, but eventually I began seeing things in everyday life. I'm an American. I shop. I like going to Walmart. You might think that photograph shows the back or side of the store, but it's actually right out front in the middle. The two main doors are beyond the frame on the left and right. Part of the shot's irony for me is that it was taken in February, the gloomiest of months. I love the little puddles seeping from the bottom of that miserable, unforgiving building. There's just that one tiny, blank door with no handle or anything. And then that bright, happy Walmart sign, with its sunny smile of consumerism, welcoming you into its maw.

STILLMAN You seem to take pleasure in photographing things you also find miserable or depressing.

LINN Walmart is a depressing but fascinating place. I know it's bad and that the people who work there aren't paid enough and worse. But being a photog-



rapher also allows me to love it. Years ago, I had an assignment from the *Voice* to photograph in a creepy pick-up bar, and I had a great time taking pictures there. Photography gives me a way to engage with worlds I would normally be reluctant to look into.

STILLMAN There is remarkable diversity in the subjects you shoot. Unlike photographers who zero in on narrowly focused themes, you cast your net broadly. Is that choice a matter of sensibility or style?

LINN Maybe both. I'm easily bored, so I've never wanted to make the same picture over and over again. Last summer, at a painting show by an artist whose subject matter is exhilaratingly all over the place, a friend commented that that kind of omnivorosity reminded him of his female students' work. He didn't mean it this way, but my first inclination was to hear his response as a judgment: female equals bad. But then I began to wonder whether today's quest for the other, for valuing multiple possibilities and points of view, might indicate that we are now entering a period of more "female" ways of looking at things.

Bud Can, 2012, inkjet print, 22 by 16½ inches.

I learned what style is one day in the '80s, when Helen Levitt and I were shooting in Harlem at the end of a New York marathon. It was raining, and I was shooting in color, which was dumb because there wasn't enough light for it. I was trying desperately to make something happen but coming up with nothing. So, I told Helen about this group of girls I'd seen with great-looking broken umbrellas and she went back up the block and got a good picture. The reason she did was because she was just showing what was there, while I was trying to make something happen. Style is not what you shoot, but how clearly you depict what is there.

STILLMAN In your text for the Cue Art Foundation catalogue, you said something curious: "What I think I do is not what you see." What do you do? What do we see?

LINN I'm not sure I can say what I do, but what I meant is that there are two different positions – the photographer's and the viewer's – and they usually don't agree. If I'm lucky, what I think is in a photograph and what someone else finds there are com-

Walmart, 2017, inkjet print, 19¼ by 28¼ inches.

pletely different. That's not a bad thing, it's just the nature of the medium. Some years ago, [filmmaker] Errol Morris wrote an excellent op-ed piece in the *New York Times* in which he said that photographs may not tell the truth, but they always make you think about something. And what that something is, is what the photograph is about. The power of a photograph can rewrite your assumptions about history or whatever you think the truth is. Put your money on the table, the photograph always wins. ●

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CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Judy Linn's solo exhibition "**For Ruth Roman,**" at Parker Gallery, Los Angeles, through Feb. 29.



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