

Dark Forests of the Mind

Joan Kaufman's dreamlike world

BY J. Lynn Fraser

Revealing angst and subliminal worlds Joan Kaufman's photography presents contemporary Brothers Grimm-like fairy tales. In her compact worlds futility, anxiety, and uncertainty circle like wolves.

Kaufman's work is the distillation of her formal studies, research, and the influence of well-known artists such as Rebecca Horn, Deborah Turbeville as well as Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison. Similarly to both Horn and the ParkeHarrisons' work Kaufman depicts forlorn figures earnestly pursuing acts of epic futility. These images share leitmotifs: Icarus-like wings, suspended figures, complex mechanisms, and entrapment.

Image 3.5/3.1 of Kaufman's *Suspended* series (2008–2009) presents a vulnerable Icarus/Angel figure harnessed to a 'medical' device. The viewer only sees the figure's arm resting on a watery, reflective surface. The figure's fate is unclear as is the device's purpose. Kaufman invites us to complete her narratives with our own stories — revealing much about our inner selves.

Her fascination with the figure began in the 1980s while she studied sculpture at the University of Manitoba. In her final year she worked with fibre, an appreciation for which is still seen in her images. Kaufman also studied with Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz at the Banff School. Abakanowicz's work, characterized by sculptures of alienated 'figures', is a theme evident in Kaufman's images and video work.

"I often take a single isolated individual in a solitary act. He is dislocated from the outside world, but he also reflects it," Kaufman comments. Her work focuses on individuals who "strive for the impossible ... because we are all trying so hard even when faced with great obstacles."

Relocating to Toronto in 1989 brought new influences to Kaufman's work. At the Toronto School of Photography she studied with Simon Glass, learning black and white photography techniques.

This medium is an amalgam of Kaufman's influences depicting both physical and psychological textures in her images. Bleak landscapes and looming images of impending invasion delineate her *Paper Shadows* series (2007–2008). In the *Flotation Devices* and *Sure Signs* series transitional states of being are a theme. Here figures are suspended over water or beams of light. They are held, eternally, in acts of anticipation. The smoky shadows and stippled light recall photographer Deborah Turbeville's work.

Kaufman's black and white photography is created with 120 film in a medium format that allows her to "play with light and shadow." In terms of technique Kaufman comments "I only know what I need to know to accomplish the effect." Some of her images are created within her studio while others come from, for example, Ireland's Loch Salt or the Roman baths in Bath, England. Kaufman also uses "harvested images" and digital techniques to create her pieces.

Caravaggio's dramatic colour use and compositions influence Kaufman's colour photography. "Colour almost feels like black and white," Kaufman notes because of her limited palette. Her change to colour photography was prompted by a desire to push new "boundaries." The *Hotel Insomnia* and *Suspended* series are both populated by characters suffused with intense emotion participating in irrational acts. The images' off kilter poses and chiaroscuro effects recall the turmoil and angles of paintings like *Crowning with Thorns* or *David and Goliath*. Caravaggio commented on his society's foibles and Kaufman comments on hers.

Viewing Kaufman's images means being immersed in highly artificial worlds that reflect the fairy tales we tell ourselves in the dark forests of our minds.

Joan Kaufman's website:
www.joankaufman.com